



Research Article

Amorous Encounters in Eco-theological Spaces: An Exploration of Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

This study explores the complex and evolving portrayal of intimacy in Malayalam cinema, particularly through the lens of eco-theological settings and remote locations. Examining films from the 1970s to the present day, the analysis highlights how these narratives have employed problematic tropes to introduce eroticized content, often framing it within sacred spaces or remote landscapes to achieve a sense of forbidden allure and potentially mitigate audience disapproval. This paper contends that the eco-theological spaces depicted in Malayalam cinema are not neutral but laden with socio-cultural and gendered meanings. Examining intimacy within these spaces provides a unique vantage point for understanding how cinematic representations reinforce prevailing power structures, especially concerning gender dynamics. It prompts a deeper exploration of how ecological practices and spiritual beliefs intersect with notions of femininity and masculinity.

Keywords: *Kavu*, eco-theological spaces, sexuality, Malayalam cinema, gender, body.

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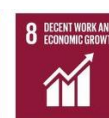
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Introduction

The formidable forces of colonialism, capitalism, and globalization have exerted profound influences on the indigenous populations of the global south, redefining hierarchies and, in some instances, diminishing spiritual and cultural worlds. The newly enforced hierarchical and 'civilized' belief systems, often associated with 'sanitized' religions, proved inadequate in addressing the intricate ecological fabric of the everyday lives of the people. Contrary to prevailing beliefs, many indigenous belief systems and mystic philosophies have not become extinct; instead, they have undergone transformations, adapting to new forms and sometimes living silent or secret lives. The imperative to comprehend these changes lies in the fact that these philosophical and spiritual systems were deeply rooted in the emotional, psychological, and ecological spaces inhabited by the indigenous communities.

The advent of globalized media platforms has brought about an unprecedented exhibition of indigenous belief systems and mystic worlds, paralleling the controversial practices of institutions like the British Museum. In the realm of cinema, both indigenous and foreign productions have capitalized on the idea of showcasing the spiritual world of indigenous people within their mythological spaces (Joseph, 2013, p.31). However, the lens through which these portrayals unfold is inherently colonial, positioning viewers in a dominant stance and reducing ecological spaces and belief systems to mere 'uncivilized' spectacles akin to a "freak show!"

The colonial morality and Victorian sensibilities often critiqued the portrayal of the intimate and the erotic. In the context of India, representations of sexuality were common in religious spaces. Thus, indigenous belief systems and their representations became a major subject of scrutiny for the colonial lens. This aristocratic sensibility affected later understandings and discourses within India (Padte, 2018, p.4). The case of Kerala was no different (Menon, 1997, pp.291-292). This British discomfort later penetrated Indian understanding, and sexual representations thus became an 'exotic' case.

These shifts in perception profoundly impacted how indigenous cultures and their spiritual practices were portrayed, particularly in cinema. The colonial gaze not only exoticized but also often distorted these representations, emphasizing the 'otherness' and supposed primitiveness of indigenous belief systems. Consequently, the cinematic depiction of ecological spaces and ritual performances in Malayalam cinema became entangled with colonial narratives and perspectives, perpetuating stereotypes and undermining the richness and complexity of indigenous cultures. An intersectional analysis becomes imperative to unravel the complexities embedded in these representations.

This essay endeavours to delve into the complex interplay between ecological spaces, spiritual performances, and the cinematic representation of these dynamics in the Malayalam film industry, offering a deeper understanding of how these elements shape and are shaped by the cultural landscape of Kerala. We aim to unravel the intricate connection between ecological spaces and the intimate performances that unfold within them through a nuanced exploration of select Malayalam films. This study is pertinent as Malayalam cinema, which has a broad audience, including diasporas worldwide, is a significant player in the South Indian film landscape.

Crafting the 'exotic'

Kerala, a small state in the southern tip of India, provides a unique backdrop for our exploration. Carved out in 1956 during the linguistic division of post-independence territories, the state comprises of Malayalam-speaking regions and boasts rich ecological and spiritual diversity. The Western Ghats, coursing through the state, make it a hotspot of diverse flora and fauna, enveloped in lush greenery that serves as a canvas for countless mythical stories, lores, legends, and belief systems. Kerala's ritual performances, such as *Theyyam*, *Thira*, *Padayani*, *Thumbi thullal*, *Mudiyett*, *Gandharvan pattu* etc are deeply rooted in ecological practices.

Despite its small size, Kerala exhibits a rich tapestry of belief systems and rituals inspired by nature. Folk arts and folklore draw inspiration from the environment, evident in ecological dances that celebrate the interconnectedness of humanity and nature. The state hosts a plethora of silenced gods, such as *Kali*, *Kuli*, *Potten*, and *Chathan*, each embodying unique myths and often existing on the periphery of mainstream religious narratives (Sakthidharan, 2019, pp.10-11). Such spiritual and local imaginings were often critiqued and ridiculed by colonial writers (Thurston, 1909, p.36; and Logan, 1887, p.145) and even by later writer who did not but budge from the colonial lens (Dalrymple, 2009, pp.29-53).

Post-Independence, the villages of Kerala found themselves encapsulated in a pervasive narrative that portrayed them as repositories of innocence and naivety in the overwhelming nationalist writings (Poorakkali, 2018, pp. 162-163). This characterization was not only evident in literature and cinematic productions of the time but also seeped into the burgeoning tourism industry, persisting to this day (Kerala tourism, Village Life Experience, n.d.). The villages of Kerala, with their lush greenery and idyllic settings, became emblematic of an "exotic piece" ready for exhibition (Kerala tourism, Village Life, n.d.). However, beneath the surface of this seemingly picturesque portrayal lurked a problematic idiom—one that perpetuated the myth of the "uncivilized" or archaic villager existing in a state of irrationality (Sreekumar & Menon, 2023, pp.28-29).

This narrative conveniently positioned the spectator in a purportedly 'civilized' stance, creating a dichotomy between the observer and the observed. The assumption underlying this portrayal, whether implicit or explicit, subtly presupposes that the Kerala villages and their inhabitants are untouched by 'logic' or 'scientific virtue' simultaneously romanticizing and marginalizing the rural communities of Kerala, in the context of Malayalam cinema, a critical examination of the performance of intimacy within eco-theological spaces. The term "eco-theological space" is employed in this discourse to denote environments that intertwine ecological elements with spiritual or religious dimensions. These spaces are not merely physical landscapes but are imbued with symbolic, cultural, and ritualistic significances, often serving as conduits for the expression of indigenous belief systems and cultural practices (Kallolickal, 2023, p.104).

The contemporary relevance of evaluating intimacy within eco-theological spaces in Malayalam cinema lies in the evolving socio-cultural landscape and the ongoing discourse surrounding representation, identity, and ecological consciousness. As global awareness of environmental issues intensifies, there is an increasing demand for nuanced portrayals that not only acknowledge the interconnectedness of humanity and nature but also challenge traditional stereotypes and colonial narratives perpetuated in cinematic depictions of indigenous cultures. By focusing on the expression of hypersexuality within these eco-theological spaces, this analysis delves into the

intersectionality of gender and spirituality. Gender-based critique becomes a lens through which to explore power dynamics, representation, and the negotiation of identity within these spaces (Rajendran, 2014). The examination of intimate performances within eco-theological contexts allows for an exploration of how gender roles, expectations, and power structures manifest within indigenous belief systems and ritual practices. It is crucial to unravel the complexities of these performances as they intersect with ecological spaces, challenging preconceived notions and colonial perspectives that may have seeped into the cinematic narrative.

Reeling Rituals

Films, as powerful cultural artefacts, play a crucial role in constructing narratives and reinforcing stereotypes. In the creation of cinematic spaces informed by colonial epistemology, women emerge as a significant measuring or indicative tool. Cinematic narratives often perpetuate the myth of oppressed, helpless women ensnared within the confines of traditional villages (Rajasree, 2018, p.115). The portrayal of 'women's plight' in these films tends to frame them as either reluctantly embracing the role of a Devi (goddess) in the traditional grove against their will to live with their loved one (the possibility of women's desires is limited to finding a man). This representation positions women in a dilemma, seemingly devoid of agency and awaiting rescue from the 'dark belief systems' of the age-old village by the 'civilised' hero, who assumes the role of a metaphorical prince coming to aid the damsel in distress. The recurring motif of the woman waiting for a heroic saviour contributes to a narrative that reinforces a patriarchal view (Pillai, 2013, pp.140-141), where the hero is positioned as the liberator (ignoring the fact that he in the process shall destroy the green cover) and the village as a space steeped in archaic darkness. This portrayal not only perpetuates gender stereotypes but also casts the traditional rituals and belief systems, rooted in ecological practices, as oppressive and in need of cleansing (Sreekumar & Menon, 2023, p.33).

This study is grounded in a theoretical framework synthesising feminist intersectionality and gender analysis. Drawing from feminist intersectionality, the research adopts a lens that recognizes the interconnected and interdependent nature of social categories, emphasizing how various axes of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, intersect to shape individuals' experiences and societal structures. Within this framework, the analysis focuses on dissecting the power dynamics, roles, and expectations associated with masculinity and femininity-specific expressions within the context of Indigenous belief systems and ritual practices depicted in Malayalam cinema. By employing a gender-based critique, the study aims to unravel the ways in which representations of explorations of sexuality within eco-theological spaces contribute to or challenge existing gender norms, both within the broader societal narrative. The methodology employed in this research involves a qualitative analysis of select Malayalam films that prominently feature eco-theological spaces and intimate performances. A purposive sampling technique is utilized to ensure the inclusion of films that offer diverse representations of indigenous cultures, belief systems, and ecological practices. The analysis is guided by a close reading of film narratives, visual elements, and contextual cues, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the nuances embedded in the depiction of intimate performances within these spaces.

The select films — *Gandharvakshethram* (1972), *Ratinirvedam* (1978), *Adharvam* (1989), *Anandhabadram* (2005), and *Chayilyam* (2012)— serve as windows into the complex interplay between ecological spaces, indigenous performances, and the portrayal of women within the Malayalam film industry. The cinematic depiction often frames these ecological spaces, where nature thrives in its original beauty, as requiring purification. This depiction suggests a dichotomy between the pristine beauty of nature and the perceived darkness of indigenous belief systems, reinforcing the idea that traditional practices need to be cleansed for progress to occur. In examining these films, our study will delve into the ways in which cinema constructs and perpetuates these narratives. By scrutinizing the representation of ecological spaces, indigenous performances, and the agency (or lack thereof) given to women, we aim to unravel the underlying power dynamics that contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Movies belonging to different decades or generations have been selected in order to analyse how the imagining of eco-spiritual spaces and the ingrained depiction of passion have transcended the cinematic spaces of Kerala.

Physical Bodies and Metaphysical Love

The 1972 film *Gandharvakshethram* unfolds against a backdrop of transformative changes— political, economic, and the disintegration of traditional feudal structures. This movie encapsulates the transition from agrarian-based families to the emergence of salaried employment (Panikkar, 1995), signifying a shift in the power dynamics from matriarchal autonomy to the ascendancy of salaried patriarchs (also see Muhammedali, 2017, pp.18-31). This period of transformation has been a recurring theme in both academic and artistic works (Jeffrey, 1976; Varma, 1893; Arunima, 2003; Menon, 1890), reflecting on the decline of traditional family structures and the concomitant rise of new societal norms.

At the heart of *Gandharvakshethram* is Lakshmi, portrayed by Sharada, who undergoes a coming-of-age journey amidst the seismic shifts in her surroundings. Raised by her grandmother, amidst a rich oral tradition of stories, Lakshmi's worldview is steeped in the mythical realms of *Nagaraja*, *Yakshi*, and *Gandharvan*ⁱ. These narratives serve as a backdrop for an exploration of her own desires and sensuality.

According to familial lore, young virgin girls in Lakshmi's family are destined to be seduced by the melodious songs of the Gandharvan inhabiting the sacred grove (*kavu*). The Gandharvan is considered the actual husband of these women, although they are wedded to Namboodiri *Sambandakaran*ⁱⁱⁱ as per tradition. For Lakshmi, these mythical and spiritual spaces act as crucibles where her desires and longings are shaped and expressed. These spaces provide her with a vocabulary to articulate her sexual understandings, fostering a unique lens through which she interprets her own infatuations and fantasies.

Lakshmi's desires are not merely personal but intertwined with the broader narrative of societal expectations and the questioning of polyamory and matriliney. The elaborate rituals, such as the Gandharvanpattu even amidst financial hardships, continuous warnings against dressing up, or advice to self-censor her movements, highlight the community's attempt to safeguard Lakshmi from 'potential harm' from the "advent of desire."

Despite constant warnings and monitoring of her actions, the Gandharvan (Prem Nazir) remains a potent force in Lakshmi's life. Notably, she ventures into the heavily forested *Gandharvankavu*, driven by the songs sung to her through the window. Here, she engages in a physical relationship, the nature of which blurs the lines between consent and coercion. The observer is left uncertain whether the encounter was consensual or a result of the power dynamics present, especially considering the later revelation that the Gandharvan was, in fact, Gopalan, a Dalit man restricted by societal laws from direct interaction with Lakshmi. The lack of awareness of this man's identity further complicates the analysis, leaving room for ambiguity. Lakshmi's lack of agency, constrained by feudal laws and legends, especially with regard to confronting a man, muddles the understanding of the encounter, further questioning the background upon which the consent of the act is shaped. Further complicating the case is the fact that when she wakes up, she finds herself alone in front of the *Gandharvakshethram*, abandoned. However, Lakshmi, intoxicated by the experience, recounts the extent of her Gandharvan's sensual skills to her maid Kunjikutti (K P A C Lalitha), revealing a level of mesmerisation. Her apparent enjoyment, coupled with her later dream of possessing the child of the Gandharvan, raises questions about agency, desire, and societal expectations. Lakshmi's expression of love is entangled in societal restrictions, leaving her in a state of confusion and vulnerability.

Lakshmi's encounters with the Gandharvan propels a sudden urgency to get her an alliance via the *sambandam* system. However, her brother, the English-educated Vasudevan (KP Ummer), ensconced in a salaried position in Bombay, vehemently opposes this decision. His aspiration for Lakshmi is rooted in the standards of colonial modernity, urging her marriage to a well-qualified, employed man while transcending the subcaste hierarchies. As per Vasudevan's intentions, Lakshmi is wedded to Satheesan (Madhu), a Chakkala Nair with youthful charm, financial stability, and Bombay-based employment, who is an acquaintance of Vasudevan. This union marks the rupture of Lakshmi's relationship with the Gandharvan, the mystical being who had occupied her dreams and desires. As Lakshmi embarks on a journey to Bombay with her husband and brother, she endeavours to embody the modern wife envisioned by Satheesan, navigating cultural clashes and internal conflicts. This is tune to the social realities of early twentieth-century Kerala (Ali, 2022, pp.26-50 and Vinayan & Raj, 2019, pp.399-411).

The narrative takes a compelling turn with the premature birth of their son, instigating doubts about paternity in Satheesan's mind. Lakshmi, in a startling confession, attributes the child's origin to the celestial being. Satheesan, grappling with confusion, seeks medical consultation, leading to the diagnosis of Lakshmi being mentally unstable. This juncture prompts reflection on the recurring trope in Malayalam cinema, where women who express explicit desires are often branded as mad (Nair, 2023, pp.22-23). Lakshmi becomes emblematic of this portrayal, challenging societal norms and paying the price of non-conformity. Notably, Satheesan's disdain for the child does not extend to Lakshmi, unveiling a nuanced dimension to his character.

Dramatic events unfold, culminating in the demise of the child, a turning point that triggers a realization for Lakshmi. The celestial being she had believed to be the father was, in fact, a mere mortal from her neighbourhood driven by desire/lust. This revelation shatters the mystique surrounding her lover and instils a profound disinterest in Lakshmi, even as Gopalan, the actual father, seeks a connection. Satheesan, undergoing a transformative realization, revisits his previous animosity towards the child. He extends forgiveness to both Gopalan and Lakshmi,

standing by her side to offer solace in the face of the profound grief stemming from the loss of their son—a son he had initially detested.

The lens of forgiveness is quite problematic and harmful gendered narratives through an intersectional oversight (Khandekar, 2024, pp.10-13). The film condones the act of stalking by framing the repeated songs and eventual encounter between Lakshmi and Gopalan as romantic, ignoring the inherent power imbalance due to his caste and her social conditioning. Furthermore, Lakshmi's agency is undermined by attributing her choices solely to her naivety about Gopalan's identity, essentially erasing her desires and complexities. Satheesan's eventual forgiveness of Gopalan and Lakshmi stems from his personal transformation, not an acknowledgement of the complexities of caste, power dynamics, or the impact on Lakshmi. This selective forgiveness centres the male narrative, overlooking the gendered implications of the situation and reinforcing the harmful notion that a man's forgiveness absolves another man's actions, regardless of the consequences for the woman involved.

By overlooking the intersectional aspects of caste and power, the film fails to critically engage with the complexities of consent, desire, and forgiveness. The sympathetic portrayal towards the climax treats Gopalan, a subaltern unlucky man suffering heavily from the pain of lost love, a marginalized figure who receives forgiveness and understanding, but Lakshmi's plight and narrative are disregarded. This highlights the film's failure to critically engage with the complexities of gender and caste dynamics (Manju, 2019, p.244). Moreover, the empathetic treatment towards Gopalan aligns with the stereotypical portrayal of Prem Nazir's on-screen persona (Johny, 2020, pp.24-33). By leaning into this trope, the film reinforces the harmful notion that men, even those with questionable actions, can be redeemed, while women are relegated to passive roles, and their agency and experiences diminish (Chandrasekhar, 2020, p.132).

The 'Forbidden' Maze Of Desire

The 1978 drama *Rathinirvedam*, directed by Bharatan, explores the complex journey of adolescence via the persona of Pappu. The movie, based on the novel with the same title by P. Padmarajan (Padmarajan, 2017), examines the intricacies of developing desires and social expectations. The movie's journey is emphasised by his quest for knowledge, unbridled desires, curiosity, and internal turmoil.

The interesting spatial dynamics here are the fact that Pappu's approaches to Rathi happen inside a *Sarppakavu* (sacred grove). The *Sarppakavu* serves as a symbolic space where the dynamics between Pappu and Rathi unfold. Traditionally associated with mysticism, this shrine transforms into a stage for the exploration of adolescent desires.

With plenty of time on his hands, young Pappu, an adolescent, is waiting on his school results to get into college. Rathi, the girl next door, is twenty-plus years old and has been a *chechi* (older sister) for him since he was a young boy. Pappu has developed a desire for Rathi these days. She brushes off his initial advances as boyish pranks, not realising the stirrings of his passion. However, Rathi is soon provoked by Pappu's advances. As an elder sister figure, she is both disturbed and overweighed by societal expectations (Rajasree, 2018, p.141). Despite irritation, Rathi's maternal

care for Pappu often compels her to take a mature and empathetic stand towards him. Despite scolding him, Rathi avoids subjecting Pappu to scandal or family wrath.

The intriguing spatial dynamics in this scenario is that Pappu's advances to Rathi occur inside the *Sarppakavu*, which serves as the backdrop and becomes a symbolic space where the power dynamics between the characters are played out. The shrine, traditionally associated with mysticism, transforms into a stage for the exploration of adolescent desires. Pappu's attempts to engage with Rathi within this space represent a negotiation of power as he seeks to navigate the boundaries of societal norms.

The night before Pappu leaves for college, Rathi meets him at midnight in the *Sarppakavu*. However, Pappu takes a step and explores the passion that has been brewing inside him for a long time. Ridden with societal responsibilities and gender roles, Rathi initially tries to forbid Pappu's advances; however, she too is soon carried away by the excitement of the first sexual encounter. Though she enjoys the moments of passion, she immediately feels guilty for her actions. It is important at this juncture to point out that Rathi had often blamed herself for "not being enough cautious" and putting herself in a difficult situation with regard to the changing dynamics of her relationship with Pappu. Her choice to give in to Pappu's desires proved to be deadly. Disturbed by what had occurred, Rathi staggers to her feet but gets bitten by a snake. Returning to her home, she suffers in seclusion to avoid creating an uproar, and the wait ends up costing her life. Even if there has been a significant reattribution of the spatial constructs in the 2011 remake of the film, *Kavu's* position has remained crucial.

This dynamic positions Rathi as both an object of desire and a figure of authority, creating an inherent power imbalance. Rathi's initial dismissal of Pappu's advances reflects the societal expectation of women to maintain chastity and emotional control (Sasi, 2012, p.112). However, her eventual reciprocation, fuelled by the "excitement of the first sexual encounter," exposes the complexities of female desire within a patriarchal system that often restricts and pathologizes it. The *Sarppakavu*, traditionally associated with mysticism, transcends its literal function to become a symbolic space where societal norms and personal desires collide. By transgressing the boundaries of this sacred space with his advances, Pappu asserts his agency, albeit within the limitations imposed by his age and social standing. The *Sarppakavu*, however, within the patriarchal society, does not offer Rathi the same agency. Despite her initial resistance and subsequent guilt, she is ultimately positioned as the bearer of the consequences, succumbing to societal pressures and ultimately losing her life.

Tribal Bodies, Desire, and Spatial Dynamics

The 1989 movie *Adharvam* serves as a complex case study wherein the cinematic representation of tribal characters intersects with issues of gender, power, and spatial dynamics. The film, named after the fourth Veda, despite its seemingly ritualistic focus, inadvertently becomes a vehicle for the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and power imbalances. This critical analysis encourages a deeper exploration of how cinematic narratives can inadvertently contribute to the marginalization and misrepresentation of subaltern voices, prompting a necessary dialogue on the ethics of representation within the cinematic landscape.

Renowned astrologer Thevalli Namboodiri discovers that black magic and tantric rituals performed by his childhood friend, Mekkadan Namboodiri, are causing problems in their village. Despite Thevalli's attempts to reason with Mekkadan, he is dismissed and told that Mekkadan's illegitimate son, Anantha Padmanabhan, will become his disciple in dark arts. Concerned, Thevalli decides to teach both his legitimate son, Vishnu, and Anantha the three Vedas to make them both successful.

Anantha, becomes proficient in Vedic studies and Tantric painting and falls in love with the daughter of Putthedan Namboodiri, an esteemed Brahmin who despises Anantha. Meanwhile, Vishnu, the second son, pursues studies in the city and develops affection for a woman named Usha. During an astrological prediction, Thevalli requests Anantha's opinion in front of gathered Namboodiris. However, Putthedan insults Anantha due to his caste, leading Anantha to abruptly leave. Mekkadan, expressing sympathy, invites Anantha to continue studying the Atharvaveda. Later, Putthedan discovers Anantha with his daughter, violently separates them, beats Anantha, and sets his house on fire. Anantha's elderly mother dies in the flames. Enraged, Anantha seeks revenge, turns to dark arts, and offers to study under Mekkadan, engaging in malevolent magic. Mekkadan passes away, but Anantha continues his penance, wreaking havoc in his hometown. He subdues the tribesmen with his magic, using Ponni, the tribal leader's daughter, for advanced Abhichara Karma. Thevalli implores his younger son, Vishnu, to persuade Anantha to stop. When Vishnu and friends approach Anantha's house, the tribal people refuse assistance, and Anantha warns Vishnu not to interfere.

Ananthan leaves his house to tend to an injured tribal chief. In his absence, Vishnu and friends enter, invoking counter-tantric measures. Ignoring warnings, they remove magical protection, leading to a friend's death and a destructive storm and Ponni is killed in the storm. Ananthan arrives at the mansion and discovers that the beings he had enslaved are now seeking vengeance. Ananthan directs Vishnu to seek the blessings of the Devi Idol located in the basement of his house. He then leads all the powers to a distant location. Acknowledging his mistake, Ananthan sacrifices himself to the Goddess. The vengeful entities proceed to demolish the entire mansion and the forest. However, Vishnu and Usha, who have sought refuge at the feet of the Goddess, miraculously escape unharmed.

The movie presents a problematic case of cinematic representation through its intersection of gender, power, and tribal marginalization (Parayil, 2014, p.71). Anantha, the ostracized son, embodies the "other," associated with dark magic and lacking the purity associated with upper-caste Brahmins. His pursuit of the upper-caste woman and subsequent descent into the dark arts are framed as transgressions, perpetuating harmful narratives. Furthermore, the film employs a saviour complex. Vishnu, the upper-caste son, is positioned as the one who can "save" Anantha and the village, silencing multidimensional actors and voices and erasing their agency. The tribal woman, Ponni, is reduced to a pawn in Anantha's magical endeavours, stripped of her autonomy and ultimately sacrificed.

The character of Ponni requires further analysis. The cinematic portrayal of the subaltern body, specifically within the context of tribal representation, unveils a narrative deeply entwined with Brahmanical orthodoxy. The casting of Vijayalakshmi Vadlapati (better known by her screen name Silk Smitha) in the role of Ponni raises significant questions regarding the portrayal of the tribal

body. Was it a conscious attempt to capitalize on established erotic images for commercial purposes, or did it reflect a deeper, more insidious pattern of representing indigenous communities in a stereotypical and demeaning manner? The decision to cast an actress renowned for her sensuous and bold portrayals suggests a deliberate choice to infuse a tribal character confined to the 'darkness' of nature with a certain eroticism. This conscious decision seems to align with a cinematic tradition that has historically objectified and hypersexualized women (Mini, 2019, p.57). It implies a deliberate attempt to sexualize the tribal body, perpetuating stereotypes that cast tribal women as 'exotic objects of desire' rather than as individuals with agency, culture, and complexity, reinforcing colonialist and patriarchal narratives (Radhakrishnan, 2010, p.205). This portrayal not only objectifies the character but also perpetuates the notion that the tribal body is inherently sensual and available for voyeuristic consumption.

Ponni's character serves as a critical entry point for examining the complex dynamics at play. The film depicts a tribal locality intentionally secluded from the outer world, emphasizing the exoticization of tribal spaces, and marking them as mysterious enclaves. Within this constructed narrative, Ponni, as a tribal woman, willingly participates in a ritualistic act—posing nude for the hero's exorcist rituals. This portrayal raises unsettling questions about the commodification of the tribal body for ritualistic purposes, underscoring the film's deep-seated colonialist undertones.

The dynamics between Ponni and the hero introduces a layered gender narrative. Ponni, articulating desire for the hero, is positioned as the one with emotional depth. In contrast, the hero is stripped of reciprocal emotional or physical desires, glorified to a sattvic figure solely preoccupied with the ritualistic dimensions of the narrative. This unidirectional representation reinforces traditional gender norms, casting the hero as an emotionless practitioner of ritual, while Ponni is relegated to a position of desire, thereby reinforcing deeply ingrained patriarchal paradigms.

The spatial dimension, the hero's migration from an urban space to a secret enclave in the rainforest, signifies a romanticized quest for authenticity and spiritual enlightenment. This movement, framed as a necessary step for personal attainment, perpetuates the exoticization of tribal spaces, reinforcing the trope of indigenous environments as untouched paradises awaiting external exploration.

Ponni, belonging to the forest, is portrayed as naive and innocent, a characterization that aligns with colonialist narratives casting indigenous communities as primitive and unsophisticated. However, the film takes a more insidious turn by marking her physical desires as 'wrong' within the constructed narrative, perpetuating the trope of the hypersexualized and deviant tribal woman. This narrative decision underscores the film's contribution to the broader discourse of Othering indigenous communities, subtly reinforcing the need for external intervention and guidance.

Ecological-spiritual symbolism in *Anandhabadram*

The 2005 Malayalam film *Anandabhadram*, rooted in Sunil Parameshwaran's eponymous novel, navigates the tensions between modernity and traditional rituals, employing ecological settings to underscore broader colonialist narratives and socio-cultural dynamics. This analysis seeks to

delve deeply into the film's symbolic treatment of ecological spaces, particularly traditional groves or *kavu*, as sites of ritualistic practices and repositories of perceived threats to societal peace.

The narrative unfolds as Anandan, hailing from the modern city of San Francisco, finds himself entrapped in a remote village steeped in ancient traditions. The ecological-spiritual spaces within the village, notably the traditional groves, become the canvas upon which age-old rituals are enacted. These rituals, portrayed as deeply rooted in dark magic and archaic worship systems, propel the villagers to seek Anandan's assistance in emancipating themselves from the perceived malevolent force embodied by the dark magician, Dhigambaran.

Ritualistic practices within the film are not mere plot devices; they form the crux of the narrative, unravelling a complex web of relationships, desires, and threats. The traditional groves, adorned with sacred symbols, are portrayed as both sacred and profane (Gupta, 2003, p.44). The ecological-spiritual spaces in *Anandabhadram* function as potent symbols –sacred and secret. Colonialist tropes are subtly interwoven into the narrative, framing the traditional groves as enigmatic realms harbouring threats to societal peace. The film thereby reinforces stereotypes that portray indigenous practices as primitive and inherently perilous, particularly to the vulnerable, represented primarily by the female characters.

Anandan's role as the saviour figure too aligns with colonial narratives, wherein the educated outsider emerges as the beacon of enlightenment rescuing the seemingly ignorant villagers from their own traditions. The 'civilized' backdrop against the 'uncivilized' setting perpetuates the binary that positions 'modernity' as triumphant over "archaic belief systems".

The love story of Anandan and Bhadra adds another layer to the narrative, contributing to the film's exploration of purity and impurity within the context of ecological-spiritual spaces. The 'pure' love attributed to Anandan's 'civilized' background accentuates colonialist notions that relationships in urban settings are inherently superior, framing rural traditions as inferior. Conversely, Dhigambaran, the dark magician, is stereotypically depicted as driven solely by physical and lustful interests. His character adds weight to the film's portrayal of ecological spaces as breeding grounds for dark and nefarious activities, further cementing the narrative of the 'uncivilized' as a threat to societal harmony. Anandan's sudden shift in behaviour, particularly his newfound physical/sexual interest in Bhadra, when possessed by the dark magician Dhigambaran, introduces a complex layer to the narrative. This plot twist further reinforces the dichotomy between the 'civilized' and the 'uncivilized,' suggesting that the 'pure' love was only possible when influenced by the 'civilized' Anandan, while the 'uncivilized' Dhigambaran brings forth physical desire.

Gazing at the Goddess

The 2012 film *Chayilyam* (referring to the red hue used for painting the theyyam's face) directed by Manoj Kana, intricately weaves together themes of ecological theology and intersectionality within the traditional groves of North Malabar. Unlike its predecessors, this cinematic exploration belongs to the era wherein women-centric and intersectional gaze has prominence (Gopinath & Raj, 2015, p.73), shedding light on the complex interplays of love in subaltern communities and rituals.

The plot of *Chayilyam* revolves around the love of Gouri (Anumol) and Kannan (Bijoy), members of two distinct subaltern communities in Northern Kerala. The film's narrative unfolds within the rich cultural legends of the traditional groves, where myths, lores, and the sacred ritual of *Theyyam* are performed. This setting serves as a crucial backdrop for the performativity of both love and ritual. What warrants particular scrutiny is the intersection of ecological theology with the physical expression of love between Kannan and Gouri within the sacred green grove.

In a departure from earlier films, *Chayilyam* boldly places women's agency and mutual consent at the forefront, engaging with an intersectional narrative that delves into the complexities of the physical expression of love. The lush green grove serves as both a symbolic and spatial backdrop, offering a sanctuary for forbidden intimacies. Here, the gaze shifts away from the conventional male-centric perspectives, introducing a refreshing exploration of feminine agency and desire within the context of ecological spaces.

The pivotal scene featuring Kannan's preparation for the trance as the *Kathivanoor Veeran theyyam* (familiar to the audience through the 1997 movie *Kaliyattam*), particularly recognized as an embodiment of love, amplifies the significance of the sacred grove as a space transcending everyday restriction. Kannan, now deemed half god, navigates this liminal space, allowing the spatial sanctioning of physical intimacy that would be otherwise prohibited. Gowri and Kannan's clandestine interactions within the green grove underscore the film's nuanced exploration of ecological spirituality. The sacredness of the grove, intertwined with legends and rituals, grants legitimacy to their intimacy, challenging societal norms and restrictions. The spatial dimension becomes crucial; the grove serves as a site where ecological theology intersects with subaltern identities, enabling the expression of love in defiance of societal constraints.

Societal controversy compels Gouri and Kannan to elope, leading to the birth of their son. Tragedy strikes with Kannan's untimely demise, plunging Gouri into a state of isolation and trauma. This experience manifests in a disruption of Gouri's menstrual cycle. The absence of Gouri's period blood, regarded as a cultural signifier of impurity, becomes a pivotal point of cultural interpretation. Simultaneously, Gouri experiences a sudden psychic performance, interpreted by the community as a divine presence within her. This occurrence leads to the cultural expectation for Gouri to perform *Devakooth*, a theyyam traditionally reserved for women post-menopause (Narath, 2015, p.29). Yet, against Gouri's will, she is emotionally coerced into participating in this ritualistic performance.

The film, while successfully problematizing the consistent male gaze that women endure, whether in their natural state or transformed into goddesses, however, despite Gouri's consistent assertion of agency throughout the film, a subtle shift occurs towards the movie's conclusion. She is portrayed as the damsel in distress, a narrative trope that seemingly contradicts her earlier agency. Unrealistically, Gouri's rescue from the perceived darkness of ecological ritualistic spaces unfolds through her young son, equally aggrieved and traumatized. Thus reversing the narrative that the movie has constructed so far.

The Problematic Allure of Eco-Theological Eroticism

While known for its poignant narratives, Malayalam cinema has also employed problematic tropes to portray intimacy. This essay explores the trend of using eco-theological settings and remote locations to introduce physical intimacies, ostensibly making it palatable for audiences. This juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane imbues the eroticism with a sense of forbidden allure, simultaneously titillating and attempting to shield itself under the veil of the spiritual, in the process building a genre of what could be deemed as "sinless sex" (Rafi, 2021, p.81).

At the same time, the physical distance of these spaces from societal norms and scrutiny creates a sense of liberation and allows the exploration of desires deemed transgressive in traditional settings. However, this remoteness also serves to "otherize" the characters and their actions, making them appear less relevant to the audience's immediate social realities and potentially mitigating the perceived offensiveness of the portrayed intimacy. At a time when spatial discourse is re-emerging in academia (Harikrishnan, 2024), this paper has attempted to offer the idea of a "sacred-ecological intimate space" for discussion. While there have been many studies on desire, intimacy, and its varied vocabularies in Malayalam cinema, a space-specific "sacred intimacy" is new.

While the portrayal of intimacy in these films attempts to appear transgressive, it often reinforces harmful gender dynamics. Female characters are frequently positioned as objects of male desire, and their agency and choices are minimized. The focus on the "forbidden" nature of the encounters often overshadows any genuine exploration of emotional connection or female desire, reducing the narrative to a male-centric gaze.

While the analysed films highlight problematic portrayals of intimacy, power dynamics, and gender roles in Malayalam cinema, it is important to acknowledge the positive shifts over the decades deviating from merely mapping the misogynies (Pillai, 2023, pp.1-11). A closer look reveals a gradual increase in female agency and a move away from guilt-tripping narratives surrounding physical intimacy. Earlier films often depicted women as passive figures, their choices and desires dictated by societal norms and male dominance. However, contemporary Malayalam cinema showcases a growing trend of women taking control of their narratives. They are increasingly portrayed as individuals with aspirations, desires, and the ability to make choices, even if those choices challenge societal expectations. Fortunately, the employment of guilt as a narrative tool in the context of sexuality has diminished, and the rigid binaries of masculinity and femininity are slowly being challenged. While positive changes are evident, the road to complete transformation is long. Though fraught with challenges, the evolution of intimacy portrayed in Malayalam cinema offers a glimmer of hope. Continued vigilance and critical engagement are essential to ensure that Malayalam cinema continues to evolve and create narratives that are both entertaining and ethically responsible.

Notes:

ⁱ freak shows were traveling exhibitions of individuals with physical differences, displayed for public entertainment and curiosity, reflecting societal ideas of normality and "otherness." (Durbach, 2011).

ii *Nagaraja* (Snake Kings) and *Yakshi* (Nature spirits) are believed to be powerful beings residing in nature, specifically forests, rivers, and other bodies of water, in Kerala. They are often worshipped as protectors of these natural spaces and bringers of prosperity. *Gandharvans* are celestial beings associated with music and the arts.

iii *Sambandam* was a system of informal marriage or alliance in certain matrilineal communities of Kerala, especially the Nairs, where a woman could have relationships with multiple partners, often from higher-caste communities. ((Saradmoni, 1999; Kodoth, 2001)

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