

MALAYALAM CINEMA: RETELLING OF MYTH AS COMMODITY AND CULTURAL MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

Malayalam cinema has a history of portraying social realism over mythological retellings. Recent films such as *Lokah: Chapter 1* (2025) and *Bramayugam* (2024) introduce new strategies of engaging with regional myth and legends. At the skeletal level, both movies deal with screen adaptations of myth. However, they have two different modes of reshaping the cinematic narrative. *Lokah* constructs a cinematic universe and employs CGI-driven spectacle that turns myth into a consumable commodity that aligns with the ideals of global franchise models. Whereas *Bramayugam* employs a black and white visual style and a minimal soundscape. It focuses more on ideological retelling than commodification, and so has the narrative grounded in Kerala's feudal history. This study attempts to examine both the films with polar narrative styles that have led to the retelling of myth in the Malayalam cinema industry, by balancing budget, audience reception, and aesthetic experimentation. By applying Roland Barthes' framework of myth as a semiotic system, this study analyses the new phase in Malayalam cinema that shifts from the portrayal of social realism to mythological retellings with polar narrative styles. It then demonstrates how Malayalam cinema doesn't adhere to a single formula of mythological retelling, rather it systematically experiments with divergent narrative approaches.

Keywords: *Malayalam Cinema, Mythological retellings, Myth as commodity, Polar narrative experimentation.*

INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema has a long tradition of drawing on mythology, legend, and folklore for the screen. Industries such as Tamil and Telugu repeatedly produce mythological blockbusters and devotional films that blend spectacle with religious sentiment. However, Malayalam cinema has historically taken a different trajectory. Malayalam films are widely acknowledged for their emphasis on social realism, middle-class concerns, and literary adaptations. The frequency and scale of Malayalam cinema pursuing mythological retellings are comparably low when held against neighbouring film industries. Its artistic reputation has rested mainly on the narratives grounded in the everyday and the socio-political realities of Kerala. In recent years, Malayalam cinema has begun to turn towards mythological storytelling with a different spin. It diverges significantly from the formulaic approaches found elsewhere in Indian cinema. Filmmakers in Kerala appear to be experimenting with multiple narrative and aesthetic strategies rather than adhering to a singular mode of retelling. This shift brings out two possibilities. Firstly, it signals a new phase in the industry. Secondly, it challenges the assumption that myth on screen must be confined to devotional spectacle or popular epics.

Two recent films released in Malayalam, '*Lokah: Chapter 1*' (2025) and '*Bramayugam*' (2024), exemplifies experimentation of myth through their polar narrative styles. '*Lokah*' constructs a CGI-driven cinematic universe that aligns with global franchise models and transforms myth into a

consumable commodity. Whereas, *Bramayugam* adopts a black-and-white visual style and minimalist soundscape to produce an ideologically grounded retelling rooted in Kerala's folklore and feudal histories. When these films are taken together, it demonstrates how Malayalam cinema simultaneously embraces spectacle and austerity in its mythological retellings. This paper argues that the coexistence of divergent strategies reflects a systematic attempt by Malayalam cinema to expand its narrative repertoire and cultural relevance. By applying Roland Barthes' framework of myth as a semiotic system (Barthes 1957), the study examines how these films transform myth into either commodity or cultural memory. Through this it redefines the possibilities of mythological retelling in regional cinema.

Indian cinema has been widely studied for its use of mythology. Particularly in the context of Hindi devotional films and the Tamil, Telugu traditions of epic spectacle. However, Malayalam cinema's emerging mythological turn has received little scholarly attention. Existing research tends to emphasise on Malayalam films history of social realism, political commentary, and literary adaptation. The recent experiments with myth are often left out and underexplored. The contrasting approaches of '*Lokah: Chapter 1*' and '*Bramayugam*' reveals ideological divergences but most importantly, an industry wide strategy of systematic experimentation that distinguishes Malayalam cinema from its counterparts. Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by examining how contemporary Malayalam films retell myths in ways that balance budget, audience reception, and cultural significance.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Since the inception of Indian Cinema, the retelling of myth has been a defining feature of the cinema industry. The very first Indian feature film, '*Raja Harishchandra*' (1913), drew its plot directly from Hindu mythology. It set an early cinematic engagement with religious and legendary narratives. Throughout the 20th century, particularly in Tamil and Telugu cinema, mythological films flourished as spectacular productions and they reinforced cultural values and offered devotional entertainment. Intermittently Bollywood also engaged with epics such as the '*Ramayana*' and '*Mahabharata*'. This legacy firmly established mythology as both a narrative resource and a commercial strategy within Indian film industries.

Malayalam cinema in contrast, developed a markedly different trajectory. Scholars often describe its aesthetic of realism, which is rooted in middle-class domestic narratives and politically engaged storytelling. There have been occasional ventures in Malayalam cinema into mythological or devotional films such as '*Kumara Sambhavam*' (1969) or '*Seeta*' (1934). These films were exceptions rather than the norm. These films were often overshadowed by the industry's reputation for social critique and quotidian realism. Thus, mythological retellings in Malayalam cinema remained relatively sparse when compared with the majority of films produced.

The new generation filmmakers are experimenting with genre hybridity, fantasy elements, and folklore to reconfigure the possibilities of Malayalam cinema. However, systematic analyses of how myths are retold in contemporary Malayalam films remain rare. The industry's experimentation with divergent narrative strategies has not yet been critically examined. The Malayalam cinema industry can be seen to experiment from CGI-heavy spectacle designed for global consumption to austere culturally rooted retellings. This paper addresses that gap by situating Malayalam

cinema's mythological turn within Roland Barthes' framework of myth as a semiotic system. It also highlights how it oscillates between myth as commodity and myth as cultural memory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes conceptualises myth not as an ancient story, but as a semiotic system. A semiotic system refers to a way in which cultural meanings are produced and naturalised. According to Barthes, myth operates as a second-order signification. For instance, a sign (image, word, or narrative) from everyday culture becomes invested with an additional layer of meaning. It renders ideology appear more natural and unquestionable (Barthes 1972). In this sense, myth transforms history into a natural phenomenon. It converts contingent social and political constructs into self-evident truths.

When this framework is applied to cinema, it suggests that films do more than narrate stories. They create myths that resonate with the audience. Film images, genres, and narrative choices frequently serve as signifiers that can reproduce dominant ideologies and sometimes even challenge them (Stam 2000). The process of cinematic retelling becomes a site where myth is re-coded when filmmakers adapt regional legends or cultural folklore. It is either, but not limited to, a spectacle aligned with global entertainment models or a cultural memory rooted in local histories.

Therefore, the new engagement of Malayalam cinema with myth can be understood as a dual process. In films like *'Lokah: Chapter 1'*, myth functions as a commodity. It is reconfigured into a consumable spectacle that naturalises the global franchise model within the regional industry. Whereas, in *Bramayugam*, myth functions as memory. Here, the black-and-white aesthetic and minimalism recast myth as cultural critique. Hence, this paper interprets the divergent narrative strategies as competing semiotic processes by viewing Malayalam cinema's myth retellings through Barthes' lens. One view interprets how myth is commodified for mass consumption, and the other view preserves myth as an ideological and cultural archive.

Analysis: Lokah: Chapter 1

'Lokah: Chapter 1' (2025) represents a radical shift in Malayalam cinema's engagement with myth. This shift is marked by its adoption of the narrative and visual logic of the cinematic universe. Unlike earlier Malayalam films, *Lokah* positions itself within the global franchise economy, which draws parallels with Hollywood productions such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe and DC. In this sense, the film reframes myth as a commodity, capable of being expanded, sequenced, and consumed across various platforms.

From a Barthesian perspective, *'Lokah'* alters regional myth into a signifier of a global spectacle. The narrative appropriates fragments of local legends and reconstitutes them through elaborate world-building and a serialized story structure. At the same time, it makes deliberate alterations to the original myth to align with contemporary cultural and political sensibilities. For instance, the writer and dramaturgist Santhy Balachandran has noted in an interview that she envisioned Neeli, a central mythological figure, as inherently good rather than being controlled or redeemed by Kadamattathu Kathanar. In the actual legend, Neeli is subdued and transformed into a benevolent spirit by the priest. However, in the film, she is reimagined as a saviour figure who protects helpless people like her clan and other innocent people even after decades of her clan's slaughter. By

repositioning Neeli as a protagonist with autonomous moral strength, the film centralises female agency. At the same time, it also reflects the ideological currents of the contemporary audiences, who are increasingly attuned to gender politics and resistant to patriarchal dominance in narrative structures.

The film's strategy of expanding its mythological universe through intertextual character insertions is equally significant. The Introduction of Charlie as Odiyan and Michael as Chathan with minimal exposition makes their appearance feel both natural and inevitable. Importantly, all of this is achieved within a relatively modest budget of ₹30 crores. It demonstrates a careful balancing act between financial constraints and the demands of spectacle. Malayalam cinema's ability to innovate systematically with cost-effective mythic expansion underscores producing a film that satisfies local expectations of cultural rootedness while simultaneously adopting the scalability and franchise logic of global cinematic models.

The film's visual language emphasises its commodification. The film rebrands myth to a hyperreal space accessible to any audience, regardless of regional familiarity. In *Lokah*, the ideology made natural is the inevitability of globalised storytelling models. For a wider range of audience appeal, myths must be spectacular and profit-oriented to survive.

Nevertheless, this does not suggest that *Lokah* abandons regional specificity entirely. The film secures cultural legitimacy by drawing on familiar Kerala myths as its narrative skeleton. The film closes not with narrative resolution but with an array of unanswered questions that deliberately extend the mythic imagination beyond the screen. The identity of Moothan remains shrouded in mystery, as does his summoning of Chandra to Bangalore. It leaves the viewers speculating about the deeper hierarchies of power within this universe. By refusing closure, the film signals its intention to inaugurate a larger serial mythology. As Jenkins observes, transmedia storytelling thrives on "creating openings rather than endings" to sustain audience engagement across installments (2006, p. 114). The film's reception also demonstrates that the commodification of regional myths can generate resonance far beyond Kerala. Despite working with a relatively modest budget, the film managed to create a global uproar, garnering attention across diasporic and international audiences.

Analysis: Bramayugam

'Bramayugam' (2024) travels in the opposite direction as opposed to *Lokah*. The film employs a stark black-and-white aesthetic, a minimal soundscape, and a confined spatial setting to retell myth in a way that resists spectacle. *Bramayugam* contracts its setting into an intimate, atmospheric narrative that resonates with Kerala's feudal history and cultural memory. Instead of expanding myth into a consumable cinematic universe. When viewed through Barthes' semiotic framework, it can be inferred that *Bramayugam* operates by refusing the second-order signification that naturalises globalised entertainment forms. At the first level of signification, the film presents a story rooted in folklore, ritual, and localised fears. At the second level, the film re-signifies these myths as a critique of social hierarchies and power structures. Drawing attention to how feudal ideologies persist within cultural memory. Myth here is not stripped of history but re-embedded into it. The film foregrounds its historical and ideological weight by presenting myth in monochrome rather than masking it with spectacle.

The choice of black-and-white cinematography is particularly significant. It functions as a signifier of austerity, lending the myth an archival quality. This can be situated as cultural memory rather than an entertainment commodity. This aesthetic recalls Barthes' claim that myth naturalises ideology. In the case of this film, it naturalises the idea that myths belong to history, memory, and lived social experience. By doing so, Bramayugam presents myth as a lens for understanding Kerala's cultural past. Furthermore, the film's focus on limited settings and psychological tension suggests a budget-conscious approach that nonetheless achieves critical acclaim and popular reception. This balance underscores Malayalam cinema's strategy of systematic experimentation. Together, both films embody two polar narrative strategies, yet both reveal how Malayalam cinema innovates in myth retelling without adhering to a single formula.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The contrasting strategies employed in both films highlight a significant development in Malayalam cinema. The emergence of mythological retellings as a site of systematic experimentation can be observed. Where Lokah employs spectacle and franchise logic to transform myth into a consumable commodity, Bramayugam retreats to presenting myth as an ideological archive of Kerala's cultural memory. At first glance, these appear to be contradictory impulses. One is aligned with globalisation and mass consumption, while the other is with historical introspection and regional authenticity.

Yet, when considered together, these films demonstrate the capacity of Malayalam cinema to inhabit both ends of the narrative spectrum while maintaining coherence as an industry. This duality can be read through Barthes' framework of myth as a semiotic system. Where Lokah exemplifies the process by which myth is stripped of history and re-coded into global entertainment ideologies, while Bramayugam re-embeds myth into local memory, refusing the commodification that global models demand. In this sense, Malayalam cinema reveals itself not as passively imitative of larger industries but as an active innovator that is capable of testing divergent strategies that reflect both market realities and cultural commitments.

This dual approach distinguishes Malayalam cinema from other Indian industries. While Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu cinemas often follow formulaic patterns in their mythological productions, either devotional reverence or spectacle-driven blockbusters, Malayalam cinema demonstrates a conscious willingness to diversify. Malayalam filmmakers expand the narrative possibilities of myth by experimenting simultaneously with commodification and memory, with spectacle and austerity, while also negotiating constraints of budget and audience reception.

In conclusion, the retelling of myths in Malayalam cinema is a dialectic between commodity and memory. Films like Lokah: Chapter 1 and Bramayugam occupy polar positions within this dialectic. Yet both reveal a systematic experimentation that ensures Malayalam cinema's distinctiveness. As the industry moves forward, this openness to divergent strategies may well establish Malayalam cinema as a model for how regional industries can balance global aspirations with cultural specificity in the retelling of myths and legends.

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