

THE GREEN ALPHABET:DECIPHERING THE BOTANICAL SYNTAX OF SELECT MALAYALAM CINEMA AND LYRICS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the vital intersection of Environmental Humanities, Cinema Studies, and Linguistics to explore the "Vegetal Soul" of Kerala's cultural output. In Kerala's unique geography, plants are not passive scenery but central components of regional identity, and the region's literature and cinema function as a "living archive" of its biodiversity. The paper traces a transition within Malayalam cinema and lyrics from treating flora as decorative backdrops to recognizing them as active participants possessing "Vegetal Agency." Through the lenses of Phytocriticism and Ecolinguistics and Michael Marder's philosophy of non-conscious intentionality, the study spans a longitudinal arc from the domestic gardens of the 1950s to the hyper-real psychological textures of contemporary film. Central is the tension between the "Coloniality of Botany", the industrial monocultures of Rubber and Eucalyptus plantations and the indigenous "Polyculture" of the Kavu (Sacred Grove). Through readings of Aranyakam, Ennu Swantham Janakikutty, Oru Cherupunchiri, Churuli, Aadachayi and selected film lyrics, the study identifies a crisis of "Botanical Amnesia": as specific species names succumb to "semantic bleaching," the cognitive tools needed to protect the natural world are eroded. The preservation of Kerala's botanical vocabulary is presented as a vital act of linguistic and ecological conservation. Keywords: Phytocriticism, Haritha Cinema, Botanical Amnesia, Ecolinguistics, Malayalam Lyrics, Vegetal Agency.

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INTRODUCTION

Malayalam has always spoken in flowers. The couplet Omana thinkal kidavo / nalla komala thamara poovo ; "O tender crescent moon, O soft and lovely lotus blossom" is not merely a lullaby. This is, in many ways, a declaration of the language's most intimate syntax. When the thamara — the lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera* — appears in Malayalam verse, it does not arrive as mere ornament. It enters as a specific botanical presence, trailing its centuries of theological meaning, its habit of opening only at dawn, its quiet insistence on rising from murky water toward light. For the better part of a century, Malayalam film lyrics sustained this botanical syntax with extraordinary sophistication.

The great lyricists of Malayalam cinema's golden age were, before anything else, poets who knew the plants. G. Sankara Kurup, P. Bhaskaran, Vayalar Rama Varma, O. N. V. Kurup, Bichu Thirumala, Sreekumaran Thampi, and Kaithapram Damodaran Namboothiri did not reach lazily for the word poo — flower — when they needed nature to speak. They reached instead for mullappoo, the jasmine (*Jasminum sambac*) with its small white insistence; for parijatham (*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis*), which falls at night and perfumes the morning ground; for chembakam (*Magnolia champaca*), tall and temple-bound; for chembarathi (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), bright as a prayer; for konna (*Cassia fistula*), which turns Kerala golden every Vishu; for pala (*Alstonia scholaris*), whose fragrance arrives before you see the tree; for the roadside humility of thumba (*Leucas aspera*); for the quiet blue of kannanthali (*Exacum tetragonum*); for

kaayampoo (*Memecylon umbellatum*) clustering in violet; and for ilanji (*Mimusops elengi*), whose scent carries across an entire evening.

Two questions drive this study, and together they shape everything that follows. The first is constructive: drawing on Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013),

it reads the botanical syntax of classical Malayalam film and lyrics as performing what Marder calls non-objectifying attention to vegetal life — a mode of encounter that honors plants' particular modes of being, their temporality, their fragrance, their ecological situatedness, without assimilating them to human categories of beauty or longing (Marder 10-13). It borrows the linguistic concept of semantic bleaching to track something that has quietly been happening to Malayalam song lyrics over the decades — the slow erosion of that precise botanical vocabulary is the second inquiry. When they bleach — when kaithapoo is reduced from the specific sensory-ecological-mythological complex of pandanus odorifier to a generic signifier of femininity, or when poo in contemporary lyrics functions as an all-purpose romantic intensifier; that memory bleaches too.

Section 1: Marder's Plant-Thinking — Vegetal Life and Lyrical Attention

Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (Columbia UP, 2013) is the most sustained philosophical rehabilitation of plants in recent Western thought. Tracing the history of the philosophical repression of vegetal life from Aristotle's nutritive soul to Hegel's indifferent nature, Marder argues that plants exhibit their own forms of intentionality, temporality, freedom, wisdom, and memory, differing from their animal and human counterparts not in degree but in kind, and demanding philosophical frameworks adequate to their difference (Marder 1-15). Throughout Western philosophy and science, plants have been approached as objects, symbols to be decoded, backdrops to be appreciated aesthetically, resources to be instrumentalized. Non-objectifying attention requires philosophical humility: a willingness to let the plant be what it is, to attend to its particular temporality, its specific fragrance, its ecological embeddedness. This is the philosophical analogue of what a precise phytonym does in language: it names without reducing, attends without appropriating.

When ONV Kurup names not simply a flower but indupushpam, the flower of the moon; he performs what Marder would call a moment of non-objectifying attention in language: the flower is honored in its specificity, its name bearing the weight of its ecological and cultural being. When Vayalar Rama Varma insists on pala and not simply maram (tree) or poo (flower), he makes a philosophical commitment: the *Alstonia scholaris*, with its nocturnal fragrance, its association with the yakshi, its particular place in Kerala's ecology, cannot be replaced without destroying the meaning the song is attempting to make. Konna (*Cassia fistula*) blooms specifically at Vishu; thumba (*Leucas aspera*) flowers during Onam; parijatham blooms at night and sheds its petals by morning, its name already encoding the melancholy of beautiful things that cannot last. Marder's concept of vegetal memory adds a third dimension: against memory as mental representation, plants exhibit a somatic, non-imagistic memory written in bodies, growth patterns, and chemical responses (Marder 104-109). This botanical memory is irreplaceable and it is precisely what semantic bleaching erodes.

Section 2: Ecocritical Rhizomes — Phytocriticism, Semantic Theory, and the Lyrical Plant

The rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari, which consists of an underground stem system that spreads laterally without a fixed focal point, that "has no beginning or end" but always a "middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo," serves as an adequate model for the kind of thinking that botanical syntax requires (Deleuze and Guattari 25, 29). What makes this figure so generative for reading botanical language is not its strangeness but its accuracy: it describes

how plants actually move through meaning. The dominant tendency in literary interpretation has long been arborescent — rooted, vertical, hierarchical. Rhizomatic thinking, by contrast, attends to the lateral connections, unexpected adjacencies, and multiple de-centered meanings that emerge when one follows the phytonym through its actual uses in songs, ritual, folklore, medicine, and seasonal celebration.

John Charles Ryan's phytocriticism provides this orientation with a specific methodology for cultural texts. Ryan defines phytocriticism as "an ecocritical practice that foregrounds vegetal life, plant subjectivities, and the cultural dimensions of human-plant relations" (Ryan 3). A phytocritical reading of Malayalam film lyrics asks not what the flower symbolizes conventionally, but what this specific flower, this species, with these ecological properties, blooming in this season, makes possible in the lyric that no other flower could achieve. The phytocritical reading always asks: what do we lose when the particular species is called the flower in general?

The third criterion for the discussion here is a term called Semantic bleaching. This process is the bending of the meanings of a term to become ill-defined and broad from frequent use (Traugott and Dasher 94–97; Brinton and Traugott 71–74). Applied to phytonyms, it describes the erosion of botanical specificity as plant names are detached from their ecological referents and redeployed as affective intensifiers or generic romantic markers. It breaks down use of a word to lose its meaning when a word is used to mean something other than its original ecological or biological context. In traditional lyrics, mullappoo is a reference to a small flower of *Jasminum sambac*, which is associated with the humid Kerala evenings and bridal garlands and the threshold of homes and temples of Kerala. The phytonym, as A. V. Superanskaya's pioneering work has rightly established, is not a mere word, but a cultural and ecological record: it carries the accumulated history. When phytonyms bleach in song, this map fades: a progressive retreat from the specific to the generic, from the ecological to the symbolic, from the plant as being to the plant as backdrop.

Section 3: The Golden Age of Botanical Lyricism — ONV, Vayalar, Bhaskaran, and Bichu Thirumala.

In the era of 1960's to 1990's Malayalam movie songs' golden age trace a good number of botanical lyrics. A succession of extraordinary poet-lyricists produced work in which specific phytonyms named flowers and plants with full ecological particularity served not as decorative ornament but as primary vehicles of meaning, philosophical depth, and cultural memory, practicing, in their own medium and cultural resources, something remarkably close to what Marder calls non-objectifying attention to vegetal life.

O. N. V. Kurup (1931–2016), winner of the Jnanpith Award and the Sahitya Akademi Award, explicitly refused to distinguish between his film work and his literary poetry, a refusal that speaks to the philosophical seriousness with which he approached the lyric. His nature imagery is not decorative but constitutive: plants, birds, rivers, and skies are not backdrop but agent, not symbol but subject. P. Soman notes that ONV's poetry takes "a bird's eye-view of the diversity of approaches beginning with earth-as-mother, to 'words' as signifiers of Kerala's nature and culture" (Soman qtd. in Kurup et al. 47). The song *Indupushpam Choodi Nilkkum* from *Vaishali* (1988), for which ONV received the National Award for Best Lyrics, exemplifies his method: *Indu* (moon) combined with *pushpam* (flower) creates a compound that is at once a name for a specific flower type and a cosmic metaphor, the flower that carries the moon's light and participates in the lunar temporality of bloom and fade. ONV's *Kaattupookkal* "wild flowers" announces a phytonymic philosophy: not cultivated flowers, but *kaattu* (wild, of the forest) + *pookkal* (flowers, plural), flowers growing outside human cultivation, a form of vegetal freedom

in the fullest Marderian sense. His environmental elegy *Bhoomikkoru Charamageetham* — "An Obituary for the Earth" mourns specific ecological losses in specific landscapes, performing what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence" by making it visible through botanical specificity: naming what is being lost, plant by plant, river by river (Nixon 2).

If ONV's botanical lyricism is rooted in the earth, Vayalar Rama Varma's (1928–1975) is haunted by the supernatural ecology of Kerala, the world in which plants are thresholds between the human and the otherworldly. Vayalar's most characteristic botanical signature is the pala tree — *Alstonia scholaris*, known in English as the devil tree whose presence in his yakshi songs is one of the most precise and irreplaceable phytonymic deployments in Malayalam film music. The pala's small white flowers release a fragrance of extraordinary intensity at night described in Malayalam folklore consistently as maddening, overwhelming, disorienting. Yakshis are said to haunt pala trees specifically because the tree's fragrance creates the dissociative, intoxicated state in which the yakshi can exercise her power over a solitary traveler (Old Malayalam Cinema). The phytonym carries the supernatural meaning with it; the supernatural emerges from the plant's own ecological properties, Marder's non-objectifying attention operating at the level of supernatural ecology.

P. Bhaskaran (1924–2007) was among the first major lyricists to understand Kerala's specific botanical geography as a lyrical resource. The AIDEM describes him as having "an intimate native grasp of the geography, the topography, the botanical cornucopia, the cultural arabesque, of Kerala," with lyrics "permeated with the mild fragrances of wild flowers" (The AIDEM). His song *Kaayalarikath Valyerinjappol Valakilukkiya Sundari* from *Neelakkuyil* (1954) establishes the characteristic mode of his botanical lyricism: the landscape of Kerala — the kayal (backwater), the surrounding vegetation, the particular light and water of the region is not backdrop but constitutive element.

Bichu Thirumala (1945–2020) represents golden-age botanical lyricism at its most Onam-inflected and consciously Kerala-ecological. His lyrical imagination was shaped decisively by the seasonal festival calendar of Kerala particularly Onam, whose central visual and botanical symbol is the pookkalam: the elaborate flower-carpet made from carefully gathered wildflowers, requiring intimate knowledge of which flowers bloom in the chingam month (August–September), which can be gathered from which habitats, and how different species can be combined for color and effect.

Section 4: Semantic Bleaching in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema Lyrics

The contrast between the botanical syntax of the golden age and the lyrical vocabulary of much contemporary Malayalam film music is stark. Beginning in the late 1990s and accelerating through the 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s, the specific phytonyms that had been the grammatical foundation of Malayalam film song gave way to a generalized and increasingly generic floral vocabulary. In their place came simpler, vaguer words: *poo*, *pookkal*, *pushpam*. A rich vocabulary was being swapped for a generic one. Linguists have a term for this: semantic bleaching. . The general trajectory constitutes a textbook case of semantic bleaching at work in a specific linguistic-cultural domain.

Phytonyms function differently from common nouns because they carry a specific referent with a complex bundle of properties: botanical identity, ecological behavior, seasonal timing, cultural associations, mythological meanings, sensory profiles (Superanskaya qtd. in Konovalova 67). But when *mullappoo* gets used again and again in ordinary love songs with no attention to any of this, those layers of meaning slowly peel away. The same thing has happened to *thamara*, *chembarathi*, *parijatham*, and *konna* — each one reduced from a living botanical presence to a decorative label. . This bundle of meanings is grounded in the actual plant's ecological properties

and the centuries of human-plant cohabitation deposited around the plant's name. The depletion of this semantic bundle is well-described by Traugott and Dasher's model: when a word is repeatedly used in contexts where only a subset of its meanings is relevant, those irrelevant meanings begin to fade (Traugott and Dasher 94-97). Repeated use of mullappoo in generic romantic contexts progressively detaches the word from its specific botanical referent. This phenomenon extends across the full range of classical phytonyms, *thamara*, *chembarathi*, *parijatham*, *konna*, each increasingly deployed as a calendar or emotional marker rather than as a botanical presence with ecological and cultural specificity.

This shift reflects a deeper cultural change: as Kerala has urbanized, as the specific plants of its agricultural and forest ecology have become less directly present in daily life, and as English-medium education has replaced Malayalam botanical vocabulary with the generic category "flower," the ecological literacy that once made specific phytonyms immediately intelligible to mass audiences has eroded. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle: decreased ecological contact renders phytonyms less accessible; lyricists replace them with generic vocabulary; as generic vocabulary replaces specific phytonyms, the cultural transmission of botanical knowledge through song is interrupted; and as that transmission is interrupted, ecological contact with specific plants further decreases, producing not merely a linguistic change but a genuine ecological cultural impoverishment.

The arc of this shift can be mapped chronologically: in 1960–1980, *thulasi* anchored the domestic garden, equating feminine purity and ancestral sanctity; from 1980–1990, the mystical wild dominated through *pala* and *kavu*; a place the *Pala* marks the precise threshold where the civilized village ends and the *Kavu* (Sacred Grove) begins. These *Kavu* are "eco-theological" spaces—ancient, undisturbed pockets of biodiversity where the wild and the divine meet. In 2000–2010, fragile ecosystems and vanishing landscapes appeared nostalgically. Modern "Phytocentric" narratives like *Churuli* and *Bougainvillea* utilize high-definition textures—moss, ferns, and thorns to mirror internal trauma and fractured psychological states. But the picture is not entirely bleak. Lyricist Kaithapram has held onto botanical precision as a quiet act of resistance. His *Ambilipoovattam Ponnuruli* from *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* places *ambilipoo* against the golden arc of the moon — a specific flower in a specific ecological and cosmic relationship. The films of contemporary ecological cinema; *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024), *Ekō* (2025), *Aadachayi* (2025) *churuli*; maintain greater botanical specificity than commercial romantic films, suggesting that ecological cinema functions as a preservation mechanism for phytonymic vocabulary even as generic floral vocabulary dominates elsewhere. As someone once put it: "In the old days, a flower in a song was a prop for the heroine's hair. Today, the flower is the heroine's internal monologue—fragile, blooming, or withered by the environment."

Section 5: Films as Lyrical Environments — Phytonyms in Cinematic Ecology

The Malayalam films that constitute *haritha* cinema (green cinema) or Kerala's ecological film tradition are not simply films about nature; they are films whose entire sonic and lyrical architecture is built around the specific botanical worlds of Kerala. To read them as visual texts alone attending only to images of forests, rivers, and paddy fields is to miss the dimension in which they are most ecologically sophisticated: their lyrics, in which specific phytonyms constitute a parallel ecology, a semiotic landscape that interacts with and deepens the visual landscape onscreen. The films examined here; *Aranyakam* (1988), *Oru Cheru Punchiri* (2000), *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (1992), *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024), *Ekō* (2025), and *Aadachayi* (2025) are read as sonic environments in which botanical names circulate, accumulate meaning, and undergo the processes of attention and bleaching that the preceding sections have theorized. *Aranyakam* (1988), directed by Hariharan from M. T. Vasudevan Nair's screenplay takes

its title from the Sanskrit *aranya* ; forest, the space beyond cultivation. The film's world is one in which the ecological world of the Western Ghats presses against the human drama, shaping its possibilities and limits. ONV Kurup's lyrics deploy botanical vocabulary with characteristic precision, treating the forest not as generic "nature" but as a specific botanical ecosystem ; a world of particular trees, particular streams, particular light-qualities at particular times of day. The songs function as a lyrical ecology parallel to the visual ecology of the film: specific phytonyms anchor the film's emotional world in a particular botanical landscape, preventing the forest from becoming a generic romantic backdrop. *Oru Cheru Punchiri* (2000), with its gentle, elegiac exploration of an aging couple's relationship with their garden, offers botanical cinema at its most philosophical. The film's slow, observational pace is itself a form of vegetal temporality: it moves at the speed of a garden, not a thriller. The songs reflect this pace, botanical songs in the deepest sense whose entire temporal structure is shaped by the kind of time that plants inhabit, representing the classical phytonymic tradition at its most mature and philosophically grounded. *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (1992), with Kaithapram as both music director and lyricist, offers the most explicit meditation on the relationship between botanical naming and emotional memory in Malayalam film music. The film's central character inhabits a world in which the specific plants of his environment are continuous with his emotional life; Kaithapram's lyrics map this botanical-emotional ecology with precision, positioning the human drama within a specific astronomical-botanical moment — *ambilipoovattam ponnuruli* the moon-flower in its golden orbit, simultaneously cosmic and botanical, emotional and ecological. The contemporary films of Dinjith Ayyathan , *Kishkindha Kaandam* (2024) and *Ekō* (2025) represent the most ambitious recent attempt to bring ecological cinema into dialogue with contemporary Malayalam culture. *Kishkindha Kaandam*'s setting a wild, overgrown garden at the heart of an urban residential space is both a literal botanical environment and a figure for the persistence of the vegetal world against urban erasure. *Ekō* (2025) constructs its entire lyrical world around the specific ecosystem of a particular Western Ghats forest; its lyrics function as environmental documentation as well as aesthetic experience, naming specific species in specific habitats in ways that carry the weight of the environmental crisis within the lyric's beauty. This is what this article means by phytonymic revival: not a nostalgic return to the classical tradition, but a renewed commitment to botanical specificity as an ethical and ecological act, a refusal to allow the phytonym to bleach into the generic poo.

Aadachayi (2025), set in Kerala's mangrove and coastal ecology, deploys a botanical vocabulary specific to coastal and aquatic ecosystems mangrove plants, coastal grasses, salt-tolerant vegetation rarely heard in Malayalam film music, which has traditionally centered on the hill-country and garden ecology of the interior, representing an expansion of the phytonymic repertoire toward a coastal Kerala the classical tradition largely overlooked.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the botanical syntax of Malayalam film and lyrics the practice of naming specific flowers and plants with ecological precision constitutes a philosophically significant tradition that deserves to be read not merely as poetic ornament but as a form of linguistic vegetal attention, a lyrical practice that at its finest performs what Michael Marder calls the non-objectifying recognition of plant being. The great phytonymic lyricists of the golden age — ONV Kurup, Vayalar Rama Varma, P. Bhaskaran, Bichu Thirumala, Sreekumaran Thampi, and Kaithapram — were ecological poets in the fullest sense: writers who understood the grammar of Kerala's botanical world and who deployed mullappoo, parijatham, chembarathi, sheema konna, kaithapoo, pala, thumba, and kanikonna, kannanthali, pullanji, pavizhamalli, sankupushpam, neelolpalam, chembakam, kaatukurinji, vakapoo, ilanji, ezhilampala and many more with a precision that honored the specific being of specific plants rather than dissolving

them into generic romantic backdrops.

The central theoretical contribution is the application of semantic bleaching theory to phytonyms in song: the trajectory from classical botanical precision to the generic floral vocabulary of much contemporary Malayalam film music is not merely an aesthetic change but an ecological one — a progressive erosion of the linguistic structures through which a community maintains its attentiveness to its botanical world. When mullappoo becomes merely "feminine purity" and thamara merely "tenderness," these are events in the history of a community's relationship with its environment, marking the withdrawal of an ecological intimacy; the capacity to be in relationship with a specific plant as a specific being now available only as heritage, nostalgia, and the deliberate aesthetic choice of filmmakers and lyricists who consciously position themselves in dialogue with a tradition they cannot take for granted.

The films examined in Section Five; from the classical haritha cinema of the 1980s and 1990s to the contemporary ecological cinema of Dinjith Ayyathan, suggest that the Malayalam film tradition retains the resources for phytonymic revival: the deliberate renewal of botanical precision is a genuine counter-movement against the bleaching tendency, one that deserves critical attention. The stakes extend beyond film studies and linguistics: as Kerala faces rapid urbanization, climate change, and the erosion of its extraordinary biodiversity in the Western Ghats, the capacity to name plants specifically is not a trivial cultural luxury but a form of ecological practice, a way of keeping the botanical world present and particular in the cultural imagination even as it recedes from everyday life.

Marder argues that non-objectifying attention to plants is the first ethical demand of plant-thinking: the willingness to encounter the plant in its specificity without immediately reducing it to a human category (Marder 10-13). In the domain of language and song, this ethical demand takes the form of the specific phytonym: the commitment to say pullanji and not merely poo, to say parijatham and not merely malar, to say pala and not merely maram. To attend to phytonymic syntax in song is to practice, in the domain of cultural criticism, the same non-objectifying attention that Marder demands at the level of philosophy: to honor the specific being of specific plants, to resist their reduction to generic categories, and to insist that the particular matters — that the kaayampoo is not the same as the poo, and that the difference is not merely aesthetic, but ecological, philosophical, and ethical.

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