

## CINEMATIC RETELLINGS OF MYTHS AND FOLKLORE : FROM STEREOTYPES TO CRITICAL REIMAGININGS

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### ABSTRACT

The relationship between literature and cinema in India has long been mediated through myths, folklore, and oral traditions that transcend textual boundaries. From Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*, the first Indian feature film, to contemporary epics like *Baahubali* and *Kantara*, filmmakers have consistently drawn upon the vast reservoir of Indian mythologies and folk narratives to craft stories that resonate across generations. These cinematic retellings do not merely reproduce textual sources like, Mahabharata, or regional ballads; rather, they reimagine them within shifting socio-political, cultural, and aesthetic contexts. This paper explores how Indian cinema negotiates the transition from page to screen by adapting, revising, and reinterpreting myths and folklore. It examines how mythological films reinforce moral, nationalist ideals, and how they reinterpret engaging with folklore and regional identities. By tracing this trajectory, the study highlights that cinematic retellings of legends and myths not only bridge literature and film but also demonstrate the enduring power of myth to shape collective imagination in a rapidly transforming world.

**Keywords:** *Myths, folklore, cinematic retellings, cultural memory, postmodernism, adaptation, genre hybridity, identity.*

### INTRODUCTION

Myths and folklore have always functioned as powerful cultural archives, preserving collective memory, social values, and ideological structures. In the Indian context, these narratives have travelled fluidly across oral traditions, literary texts, performative art forms, and, more recently, cinema. Far from being static inheritances, myths continuously evolve, shaped by the socio-political contexts in which they are retold. Cinema, with its mass appeal and visual authority, has emerged as a particularly influential medium in reinterpreting these narratives, transforming inherited stories into sites of negotiation, resistance, and cultural critique. Myth and folklore have long been central to Malayalam cinema, drawing from Kerala's rich oral traditions and epics. Traditionally, these narratives have been rendered in rigid binaries: heroes are glorified, villains vilified, and female figures are either idealized or demonized. In mid-20th century films like *Thacholi Othenan* (1964) and *Yakshi* (1968), myths were reproduced as moral fables, reflecting social conservatism rather than interrogating cultural politics. Cinema's visual realism and emotional impact upon the audience further intensify this authority, allowing inherited narratives to appear self-evident and unquestionable. As a result, early mythological films frequently reproduced stereotypes under the guise of tradition.

However, since the late 1980s, Malayalam cinema has increasingly reworked myths, treating it not as fixed moral truth but as cultural text. What distinguishes recent engagements with myth, however, is a conscious departure from reverence toward interrogation. Filmmakers no longer ask

how faithfully myths can be preserved, but rather how it can be re-read to address questions of injustice, marginalization, and agency in the present. This paper explores how Malayalam cinema negotiates the transition from page to screen by adapting, revising, and reinterpreting myths and folklore and also demonstrates the enduring power of myth to shape collective imagination in a rapidly transforming world. This paper examines two films—*Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (1989) and *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* (2025)—to trace this shift from stereotype to critical reinterpretation.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research methodology grounded in textual analysis, comparative film studies, and cultural theory to examine cinematic retellings of myths and folklore in Malayalam cinema. The paper treats cinema not merely as an adaptation of pre-existing narratives, but as a cultural text that actively negotiates history, ideology, and power. The research follows a comparative case study approach, focusing on the two Malayalam films from distinct historical moments. The analysis is informed by postmodern and cultural theories of myth and narration. A. K. Ramanujan's concept of narrative plurality and "winner's history" provides a framework for understanding how myths privilege certain voices while marginalizing others. Homi K. Bhabha's ideas on cultural reinterpretation and hybridity help contextualize the reworking of myths within contemporary socio-political realities.

Malayalam cinema has moved from reproducing stereotypical portrayals of myth/folklore to reframing them as sites of cultural critique. Through humanizing villains (*Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha*) and reclaiming demonized femininity (*Lokah*), these films exemplify how myths and folklore can be continuously reinterpreted to engage with contemporary debates on history, identity, and justice.

### 1. *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (1989): Humanizing the Villain

The 'Vadakkanpattu' ballads valorize Aromal Chekavar as the classic hero while branding Chandu as a traitor. This reflects what A.K. Ramanujan (1991) calls the "winner's narrative" in folklore, where cultural memory privileges victors. Hariharan's *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* challenges this structure by re-telling events from Chandu's perspective. Instead of a one-dimensional villain, Chandu emerges as a tragic figure caught between caste prejudice, betrayal, and fate (Pillai, 2005). The film does not merely retell folklore from Chandu's perspective; it restructures cultural memory by shifting narrative focalization. By granting Chandu interiority; his doubts, humiliation, and moral conflict the film foregrounds what folklore traditionally excludes: the emotional and ethical cost of hero-making. This suggests that folklore operates through selective remembrance, privileging collective pride over individual suffering. The film shifts the narrative perspective to Chandu. While the film does not overtly preach caste critique, caste operates as a silent organizing principle in Chandu's marginalization. His skill as a warrior is acknowledged, yet social legitimacy is denied. This exposes how folklore naturalizes caste hierarchies by embedding them into heroic lineages rather than explicitly naming them. Instead of treachery, Chandu is shown as an outsider shaped by caste prejudice and systemic injustice. He is depicted as a skilled warrior but denied respect, constantly mistrusted, and pushed into betrayal as much by circumstance as by choice. The duel with Aromal is presented as a tragic inevitability rather than malicious treason. Here the stereotype is broken: the then villain is now a victim of social circumstances. Through this narrative the film tried to establish a cinematic mode where folklore is interrogated rather than preserved uncritically. The "villain"

becomes a tragic hero and the folklore's black-and-white morality is replaced by shades of gray. The film put forward a question; Whose story gets preserved in ballads, and whose voice is erased?

## 2. *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* (2025): Feminist Superheroic Yakshi

The Yakshi in Kerala folklore—documented in *Aithihyamala* (Namboothiri, 1909/2006)—is traditionally portrayed as a seductive female spirit, dangerous to men, often reflecting patriarchal anxieties around women's sexuality (Devika, 2007). Earlier films such as *Yakshi* (1968) reinforced this eroticized, demonized image. By contrast, *Lokah* reimagines Chandra/Neeli as an immortal guardian figure, more superheroine than seductress. This reversal transforms misogynistic folklore into a feminist narrative of justice. As Warner (1994) argues, myths can be reworked to “speak back” against the cultural systems that created them. *Lokah* exemplifies this by turning the fearful Yakshi into a morally complex protector. The stereotype of demonized femininity is broken to an empowered female agency. This merges local folklore with global superhero aesthetics, embedding feminist critique. Traditional Yakshi narratives frame women as objects of male fear and desire. *Lokah* reverses this by granting Chandra narrative and visual agency. The camera aligns with her perspective, transforming the Yakshi from a spectacle to a subject. This shift destabilizes the male gaze that historically eroticized and demonized her. By blending folklore with superhero conventions, *Lokah* avoids treating myth as a closed, regional past. Instead, it positions folklore within a global narrative economy. This hybridity signals that local myths can be reimagined without losing cultural specificity. Unlike folklore spirits trapped in repetitive vengeance, Chandra's longevity becomes an ethical memory rather than obsessive haunting.

In Malayalam cinema, the reinterpretation of myths and folklore reveals a significant shift from conventional portrayals toward more layered, critical, and often subversive retellings. Traditional narratives, rooted in ballads, myths, and the *Aithihyamala*, functioned as static heritage, reinforcing fixed binaries of good versus evil and serving primarily to moralize and preserve tradition. *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* (1989) marked a radical departure from this mode by reimagining Chandu, long vilified in folk ballads, as a tragic hero rather than a one-dimensional traitor. More recently, *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* (2025) reclaims the demonized figure of the Yakshi, a recurring symbol of female monstrosity in Kerala's oral tradition, and transforms her into a feminist superhero.

## CONCLUSION

Malayalam cinema's reinterpretation of folklore illustrates a broader cultural trajectory: myths are no longer treated as unquestionable truths but as malleable narratives. *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* destabilized the hero/villain binary by humanizing Chandu and *Lokah* reclaimed the Yakshi, transforming misogynistic folklore into feminist superhero narrative. Earlier films like *Thacholi Othenan* (1964) and *Kadathanattu Makkam* (1978) which drew directly from Vadakkanpattu ballads, these films served as cultural preservation of Kerala's oral epics, but did so in a linear, didactic, and spectacular style. Supernatural folklore also entered cinema, with films like *Yakshi* (1968). The Yakshi of those days was eroticized as both temptress and monster, symbolizing patriarchal fear of female desire. The major concept was entertainment through horror spectacle, reinforcing stereotypes of dangerous femininity. *Oru Vadakkan Veeragadha* was the first major cinematic attempt to deconstruct folklore by giving it another perspective. *Lokah* taps into the hybridity of Kerala myths and global superhero aesthetics, yet rooted in local cultural imagination.

This shift reflects folklore's dynamic nature: as Ramanujan (1991) observed, "there is no single version of a story, only a plurality of tellings". Malayalam cinema has embraced this plurality, turning folklore into a site of resistance, identity formation, and cultural critique. Together, these films illustrate a progression from folklore's conventional didacticism toward cinematic reinterpretations that critique inherited biases and reimagine marginalized figures through more inclusive, resistant lenses.

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