

FROM FOLKLORE TO FRAME: KERALA'S MYTHS AND NARRATIVES IN REGIONAL CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamic relationship between Kerala's rich folkloric traditions and their cinematic representations in Malayalam regional cinema. It investigates how foundational myths, superstitions, and narrative archetypes — such as Yakshi and Odiyan — are adapted, reinterpreted, and reimaged in movies. Drawing on cultural theory and film studies, the paper examines the ways Malayalam filmmakers engage with oral storytelling, ritualistic origins, and local identity, blending tradition with modern cinematic language and aesthetics. By analyzing key films such as *Ananthabhadram* and *Odiyan* this paper attempts to reveal how regional cinema serves as a vital site for preserving, contesting, and transforming Kerala's mythic imagination. The findings highlight the role of cinema as a cultural interlocutor that both honors and innovates folklore, reinforcing narrative continuity within evolving social contexts. This paper contributes to broader discussions on folklore in contemporary media and the politics of cultural memory in South Indian regional cinema.

Keywords: *Kerala folklore, Malayalam cinema, myth adaptation, regional narratives, cultural memory, oral tradition, cinematic representation*

INTRODUCTION: FOLKLORE, MEMORY, AND MODERN MALAYALAM CINEMA

Kerala's cultural identity is inextricably bound to the depth and variety of its folklore, a vast corpus of oral narratives, supernatural legends, ritual practices, and symbolic archetypes. Folkloric figures such as Yakshi, Odiyan, and Madan are not marginal stories relegated to the realm of superstition or peasant credulity. They are manifestations of the collective unconscious, shaped by histories of gender, caste, environment, and the “shifting boundaries between the sacred and profane” (Gupta and Menon 27). As Richard Swiderski observes, “oral texts live in performance, accumulating nuance and relevance with each transmission” (Swiderski 215). In this sense, oral folklore is not simply a record of the past, but a site for the negotiation of meaning, identity, and resistance.

Malayalam cinema has emerged as a powerful modern repository and interpreter for these stories, enabling their reinvention for diverse audiences. The adaptation of oral tradition into film is a complex process. It requires the filmmaker not only to capture the spirit of the source material, but to translate its aesthetic, social, and philosophical import into a visual medium. The “cultural monsters” of Kerala's folklore, as Jalarajan Raj et al. point out, “function as metaphors for the negotiation of anxiety, difference, and social order,” taking new forms with each retelling (Jalarajan Raj et al. 140).

METHODOLOGY

This paper attempts to bring out the tug that lies dormant in the cultural realm with regard to

folklore, memory and the movie. Such a negotiation is especially acute in a region like Kerala, where rapid modernization, urban migration, environmental decline, and shifting gender and caste relations are redefining the meanings of tradition and authenticity (Dawn; Dönmez-Colin). In this context, the transition “from folklore to frame” in Malayalam cinema is not a linear process of archiving or memorializing stories, but a continual act of translation, contestation, and creative transformation. The two films at the centre of this study — *Ananthabhadram* and *Odiyan* — reveal different strategies of adaptation: gothic excess and magical realism. Together, they offer a revealing lens through which to examine how myth continues to shape and be shaped by the contemporary Malayali imagination.

The Cinematic Reimagining of Yakshi and Ritual: *Ananthabhadram*

Santosh Sivan's *Ananthabhadram* (2005), adapted from Sunil Parameswaran's novel, remains a crucial cinematic text in the Malayalam Gothic for its reanimation of the Yakshi myth and its embedding of ritual into aesthetic form. The novel, rooted in the author's grandmother's oral tales, provides the film with a narrative architecture where memory and myth are coextensive. In one evocative passage, Gayathri recalls, “*Ente muthassi paranju... yakshiyude kathakal*” (“My grandmother used to say... the stories of the Yakshi”) (Parameswaran 23). This act of remembrance reflects Richard Swiderski's claim that oral performance “validates and renews communal memory” (216), situating the Yakshi within the familial and domestic domain of storytelling, rather than as an abstract folkloric entity.

Sivan visualizes this embeddedness through a ritualized *mise-en-scène*. Digambaran, the tantric antagonist, is staged with long nails, kohl-rimmed eyes, and stylized gestures borrowed from Kathakali and Theyyam. The sacred grove (*kavu*), the *maanthrikapura* (sorcerer's cave), and the *Shivakavu* (serpent shrine) are not mere narrative sites but charged spaces where myth, ritual, and ecological sacredness converge. As Menon and Jose argue, such landscapes are “saturated with sensuality and danger, sites where myth, memory, and the body intertwine” (27). The iconography of lamps, flowers, and serpent deities in these spaces is both ornamental and ontological: “*Deepam naadinte aishwaryam aane*” (“The lamp is the glory of the land”), Gayathri insists (Parameswaran 101). Here, ritual objects emerge as anchors of memory, connecting the community to its unseen guardians.

The Yakshi herself embodies Jeffrey Cohen's notion that “monsters are the harbingers of category crisis” (6). Neither demon nor victim, she destabilizes boundaries of desire, death, and taboo. Her spectral presence at twilight, when even trees “walk in cinematic motion” (Parameswaran 57), reveals how folklore inhabits liminal temporalities. Jalarajan Raj et al. highlight how such figures articulate “the gendered politics of fear and fascination... folklore as a register of anxieties about the body, the feminine, and cultural change” (143). Sivan's chromatic palette of fiery reds and lush blues underscores this duality, aestheticizing the Yakshi as both erotic and terrifying.

Yet, *Ananthabhadram* does not resolve the tension between rational skepticism and mythic persistence. Ananthan, returning from abroad, becomes a conduit for viewers navigating the friction of belief and disbelief. As Scott Rodgers suggests, “the film's monsters are not meant to be exorcised but dialogued with — symbols of permanent cultural negotiation, connection, and change” (48). The Yakshi remains a haunting interlocutor, reminding us that folklore is never

silenced but continually re-emerges to trouble cultural memory. Dönmez-Colin's observation that the female body in Malayalam cinema is placed at "the intersection of spiritual terror and erotic fascination" is particularly apt here: the Yakshi is not resolved into one pole but is amplified as an enduring site of trauma, desire, and reflection. In this sense, the film's gothic aesthetics become acts of cultural retrieval—retrieval not of closure but of unresolved haunting that compels dialogue across generations.

Caste, Ecology, and Shape-Shifting: *Odiyan*

With *Odiyan* (2018), director V. A. Shrikumar Menon and actor Mohanlal revive one of Kerala's most enigmatic and socially charged legends: the Odiyan, a shape-shifting magician embedded in North Malabar's folk imagination. Odiyan lore, as Thomas and Thomas observe, historically "functioned as a locus for both caste anxiety and dreams of subversive, liminal agency in the village order" (593). To the dominant castes, the Odiyan was a figure of terror, embodying the latent threat of the marginalized striking back under the cover of night. At the same time, to subaltern groups, Odiyan stories could be reclaimed as registers of resistance, a way of unsettling entrenched hierarchies. The film's protagonist, Manikyan, embodies this ambivalence: he is feared as a practitioner of black magic, yet he is also vulnerable to the economic, social, and ecological transformations that render his skills obsolete. As Sen argues, the Odiyan thus becomes "a repository of the memory of marginality, resistance, and complaint" (91).

The narrative's temporal sweep—from a pre-modern village economy to a late-capitalist Kerala of concrete and commodification—foregrounds this historical rupture. In the earlier sections of the film, the village is rife with gossip, half-truths, and the palpable tension of oral knowledge: cattle vanish, mysterious deaths occur, and children grow up with whispered warnings about shadowy figures. This structure echoes Richard Swiderski's point that oral performance "validates and renews communal memory" (216), making folklore a lived experience rather than static tradition. Yet as the film progresses, the mystical atmosphere dissipates. When Manikyan returns to a transformed Kerala decades later, the villagers' fears have been replaced by nostalgia, and the Odiyan has become less a monster than a relic. Rodgers notes that the film is "less an affirmation of the old order than a meditation on its passing, and the sense of loss that comes with the fading of magical knowledge and subaltern voice" (56).

This elegiac tone is reinforced through the film's ecological imagery. The Odiyan's powers, which rely on blending seamlessly into the landscape, are framed against an environment itself under threat. As Gupta and Menon suggest, rural landscapes in *Odiyan* are "haunted by the absence of what once was," underscoring ecological as well as cultural erosion (29). Manikyan's shape-shifting—into animals, shadows, or spectral presences—is symbolic of a symbiotic relation with the land that modern Kerala has eroded. His body becomes an archive of ecological intimacy, a way of inhabiting space that resists commodification. The camera lingers on barren fields, drained ponds, and roads cutting across what were once Odiyan haunts, contrasting the vitality of myth with the sterility of modern development. The figure of the Odiyan thus becomes an environmental allegory, a reminder of modes of survival and imagination extinguished by capitalist modernity.

At the same time, the film dramatizes the contradictions of folklore adaptation in a commercial medium. As Jalarajan Raj et al. argue, "adaptive folklore is both incomplete and provocative, inciting

debate and the possibility of renegotiation in popular culture" (148). In this sense, *Odiyan* stages a paradox: while it re-centers a marginalized mythic figure within a mainstream blockbuster format, it also flattens his complexity into the recognizable tropes of the heroic male lead. The Odiyan's radical potential to unsettle caste structures is muted when translated into Mohanlal's star persona, which reframes him as a tragic hero of lost love and personal redemption. The folkloric Odiyan, feared for his uncanny tactics and association with outcaste communities, is absorbed into a cinematic idiom that privileges individual charisma over collective marginality. Yet, as Rodgers contends, this very tension points to cinema's "greatest feat"—to return myth to everyday life "as a problem, an inheritance, and an inspiration" (57). The Odiyan on screen thus compels audiences to grapple with questions of memory, erasure, and survival, even if the answers are partial or contradictory.

Moreover, the film highlights the fraught intersections of caste and ecology. Odiyan practices—concealment in darkness, mastery over fear, shape-shifting—were historically connected to communities denied social visibility and relegated to the peripheries of caste society. The ecological spaces that nurtured Odiyan lore—dense groves, water tanks, shadowy fields—were often liminal zones themselves, places of both livelihood and stigma. By situating Manikyan's survival in these interstitial spaces, the film dramatizes the lived negotiations of caste marginality with environment. As Thomas and Thomas note, Malayalam cinema often "reconstitutes cultural stereotypes" even as it claims to subvert them (593). *Odiyan* exemplifies this process, where a subaltern myth is both resurrected and domesticated, simultaneously unsettling and reinscribing the caste imagination of Kerala.

In the end, *Odiyan* functions as a cinematic elegy. It mourns the loss of a world where myth animated the landscape and where marginal figures carried cultural agency, even if in distorted form. Yet it also gestures toward the continuing necessity of such figures. By reanimating the Odiyan, the film insists that folklore is not dead but in transition, adapting to new cultural economies while retaining its power to unsettle. In this way, *Odiyan* underscores what Dawn's study of Malayalam folklore cinema calls the "unending dialogue between memory, myth, and modernity" (Dawn). The Odiyan becomes a figure not only of shape-shifting in the literal sense but of cultural transformation itself, embodying Kerala's ongoing negotiations with caste, ecology, and the politics of remembrance.

CONCLUSION

The explorations of *Ananthabhadram* and *Odiyan* together demonstrate the resilience and adaptive vitality of Kerala's folklore in the cinematic imagination. These films refuse to present folklore as a frozen relic of the past; rather, they activate it as a living archive of uncertainty, negotiation, and cultural debate. In Cohen's terms, "monsters, spirits, and storytellers [function] as thresholds—challenges to the fixities of social order and cultural narrative" (7). Both the Yakshi and the Odiyan occupy this liminal threshold: the Yakshi unsettles boundaries of desire and gendered power, while the Odiyan complicates caste hierarchies and ecological belonging. Their cinematic presence underscores that folklore is not merely entertainment but a site of social struggle, cultural memory, and speculative renewal.

The strategies of representation differ—Santosh Sivan's *Ananthabhadram* leans toward a gothic

aesthetic, ritual-inflected spectacle, and the erotic charge of mythic femininity, while Shrikumar Menon's *Odiyan* emphasizes nostalgia, ecological erosion, and the tragic pathos of marginality. Yet despite these differences, both films are united in their refusal to resolve myth into comfortable closure. They insist instead on the persistence of the uncanny, leaving audiences with figures who demand dialogue rather than exorcism. This persistence affirms Dönmez-Colin's observation that Malayalam cinema is "a living theater of contradictions—at once invested in the past and pregnant with the politics of the present" (Dönmez-Colin). By revitalizing folkloric archetypes, these films render visible the cultural work of negotiating between memory and modernity, tradition and transformation.

Just as importantly, these films serve as counter-archives. Against the tendency of cultural heritage industries to sanitize folklore into touristic spectacle or nationalist nostalgia, *Ananthabhadram* and *Odiyan* foreground the very dimensions that unsettle collective memory. The *Yakshi* embodies unresolved questions of female desire, danger, and ritual embodiment, while the *Odiyan* becomes a reminder of caste marginality and ecological interdependence in the face of erasure. In this sense, the films echo Jalarajan Raj et al.'s assertion that "folklore in film becomes most powerful not when it confirms cultural memory but when it disrupts it, making space for alternative voices and speculative futures" (150).

Regional cinema thus emerges as a crucial mediator between continuity and rupture. By drawing upon oral traditions, ritual aesthetics, and marginalized cosmologies, films like *Ananthabhadram* and *Odiyan* ensure that myths endure not as closed symbols but as sites of struggle and transformation. They stage folklore as a conversation with the present, where unresolved tensions—between gender and patriarchy, caste and subalternity, ecology and commodification—can be brought into view. Rodgers reminds us that "monsters and marvels are not exiled to the storybook; they walk with us, demand acknowledgement, and invite us to imagine better worlds" (61). The *Yakshi* and the *Odiyan*, reimagined through cinema, embody precisely this invitation: to engage folklore not as nostalgia but as provocation, not as closure but as possibility.

Ultimately, the journey from "folklore to frame" is neither a backward glance nor a simple celebration of cultural "roots." It is, instead, an act of cultural labor—creative, political, and poetic—that keeps alive the tensions and aspirations embedded in Kerala's myths. As Gupta and Menon argue, myths endure because they remain "sites of struggle, negotiation, and hope" (31). By embracing this imaginative labor, Malayalam cinema performs more than adaptation: it sustains storytelling itself as a living practice, one that continually reshapes community, memory, and the horizons of what might yet be imagined.

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