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DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTHIC IMAGINARY: MALAYALAM CINEMA'S FOLKLORIC REVIVAL AS CULTURAL RESISTANCE AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

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Abstract: This paper explores the emergent folkloric revival in contemporary Malayalam cinema through a decolonial lens, examining how films such as *Brahmayugam* (2024), *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* (2025), *ARM* (2024), *Aavasavyuham* (2022), and *Nine* (2019) function as sites of epistemological resistance against hegemonic metanarratives and cultural homogenization. Unlike traditional readings of cinematic texts, this research theorizes what we term *vernacular futurisms*, wherein traditional and indigenous epistemologies are utilized through cinematic frameworks to imagine alternative futures rooted in pre-colonial landscapes. The study aims to critically blend decolonial theory, new materialist approaches, ecocritical, and indigenous film studies to constitute a radical departure from both the social realist traditions of commercial Malayalam cinema and India's mainstream mythological cinema. Rather than merely reviving folklore for nostalgic celebration, these works enact an *epistemic disobedience* by delinking Western rationalist frameworks and employing folkloric epistemologies to critique the contemporary ecological, social, and spiritual chaos of the modern world. This reading investigates multiple critical interventions. Films like *Brahmayugam* and *Nine* employ what we theorize as *haunted postcolonialism*, wherein supernatural folkloric elements uncover the persistent traumas of caste discrimination and colonial violence, giving rise to *ghostly matters* that constitute nonlinear historical narratives. Films such as *ARM* and *Lokah* demonstrate *temporal indigeneity*, utilizing cyclical narrative structures that reflect oral storytelling traditions and challenge Western linearity. *Aavasavyuham* employs *ecological storytelling*, wherein mythic metamorphosis intersects with environmental degradation to create what we term *amphibian consciousness*, a narrative strategy that challenges anthropocentric notions of existence. As a corollary to this inquiry emerges the ecofeminist idea of women–nature solidarity: the grandmother figure acts as a custodian of ecological and cultural memory, embodying resistance and resilience in safeguarding both treasure and tradition. The paper argues that these films collectively constitute an *archive of the future*, creating a *vernacular cosmopolitanism* that contributes significantly to the decolonial turn in contemporary academic and cinematic discourse.

Keywords: *Malayalam cinema, folklore studies, mythic consciousness, cultural memory, vernacular futurisms, ecological narratives, cinematic indigeneity*

Contemporary global cinema witnesses what can be termed a "folkloric renaissance," yet the modern Malayalam cinema's portrayal of indigenous narratives distinguishes itself through what Mignolo identifies as "epistemic disobedience"—a conscious delinking of the Western geopolitical knowledge systems (273). The cinematic landscape of Kerala, commonly known as Mollywood, features a wide range of important sites for exploring the region's complex history, especially concerning colonialism and postcolonial developments.

The decolonial opens up a way of thinking that delinks from the chronologies of new epistemes or new paradigms (modern, postmodern, altermodern, Newtonian science, quantum theory, theory of relativity, etc.). Epistemes and paradigms are not alien to decolonial thinking, they cannot be, but they are no longer the point of reference and of epistemic legitimacy.(Mignolo 274).

The present academic research endeavors on the representation of folklore in Indian cinema falls behind mainly due to two reasons. The primary reason is the nationalist essentialism wherein the folklore are treated as origins of cultural heritage of the country and the other lies in the massive commercialization dismissing its political valency. As Smith argues, "Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (5).

The contemporary Malayalam folklore cinemas acts as sites of epistemological resistance often embodying what can be termed as vernacular futurisms, wherein indigenous cosmologies are utilized in cinematic framework to reimagine an alternate universe which is not defined by Western metanarratives. The films under study involve multiple theoretical interventions such as haunted postcolonialism exhibited through colonial caste traumas, temporal indigeneity rejecting Western linear temporality and ecosophic cinema deconstructing anthropocentric worldviews. This study blends decolonial theory, postcolonial film studies, and indigenous knowledge systems to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The paper is an attempt to analyse Malayalam cinema as engaging in what Bhabha terms "cultural translation": "It is the 'inter' - the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti- nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (38-39).

Conventional folklore film scholarship as explained by Koven's foundational work, analyses films through Western genre theory. Film, according to him, can be considered a form of folklore, in other words, "a mass-mediated folklore" (179). However, this theoretical framework in essence validates Western narrative structures and treats folklore as mere content for the plot rather than a knowledge system in itself. An adaptation according to Hutcheon is a derivation. "[it] is a derivation that is not derivative—a work

that is second without being secondary" (9). However, these scholarships come short to study the oral nature of folklore which resists fixity and exists through perennial transformation.

We must, as Shohat and Stam argue, "unthink" Eurocentrism in the mass media analysis. The successful remapping through an anti-Eurocentric perspective is set upon something called “polycentric multiculturalism” (48). Buden defines multiculturalism as:

As it is well known, multiculturalism is based on the concept of the uniqueness and originality of cultural formations. It assumes that there is an essential connection between culture and racial, sexual or ethnic origin. From this perspective multiculturalism challenges the very idea of universality, for it sees every universal concept as culturally relative. There is no universal culture, but a plurality of different cultures either tolerantly recognizing or violently excluding each other. For multiculturalists our world is nothing but a sort of cluster of different identities that we will never be able to sublate.

Malayalam folklore films enact what Spivak theorizes as "strategic essentialism":"A strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (205). The movies under study positions folklore not as sources of indigenous origin but as political strategy for cultural sovereignty.

Vernacular futurism involves the utilization of pre-colonial epistemologies to imagine alternate modern capitalist and ecological sustainable futures. As Escobar points out: “ontological design as a means to think about, and contribute to, the transition from the hegemony of modernity's one-world ontology to a pluriverse of socionatural configurations; in this context, designs for the pluriverse becomes a tool for reimagining and reconstructing local worlds” (4).

These films create what Cusicanqui terms "ch'ixi" consciousness:

> The word ch’ixi has many connotations: it is a color that is the product of juxtaposition, in small points or spots, of opposed or contrasting colors: black and white, red and green, and so on. It is this heather gray that comes from the imperceptible mixing of black and white, which are confused by perception, without ever being completely mixed. The notion of ch’ixi, like many others (allqa, ayni), reflects the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time. It is the logic of the included third. A ch’ixi color gray is white but is not white at the same time; it is both white and its opposite, black. (105).

This allows the simultaneous recreation of a future that is an amalgam of locality and universality without synthesis or hierarchy.

Speculative indigeneity speculates engagement of folklore for world-building rather than historical representation. Speculative indigeneity is: speculating with estrangement in the form of the supernatural, apocalyptic or dystopic, serves as a mechanism to delineate

decolonial stories of presence and survival. These stories, while constantly referring to the past, also include motion towards possible better futures, countering Western notions of Indigenous peoples as static and futureless (Eguíbar).

This challenges Western rationalist assumptions about cinematic veracity. As de la Cadena argues: “What if the relations we treat as beliefs are not beliefs but rather are the world itself, or put differently, what if they are worlds—perhaps radically different worlds from those enacted as nature?" (5).

Gordon's "ghostly matters" provides framework for understanding how Malayalam folk-horror film genres make visible what colonial modernity depicted invisible:

"Haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life" (2). The supernatural elements in these film genres envisages what LaCapra identifies as "structural trauma", a never-ending systemic violence rather than an individual entity.

> Everyone is subject to structural trauma. But, with respect to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial. “Victim” is not a psychological category. It is, in variable ways, a social, political, and ethical category (79).

Brahmayugam, a 2024 Indian Malayalam-language period folk horror film written and directed by Rahul Sadasivan centres on concepts of caste and power wherein the ‘ghostly matters’ refuses what we might term 'colonial amnesia’. The film unfurls the plot with Thevan, a Paanan (a lower caste folk singer) who encounters an ancient mansion controlled by a vicious chaathan (demon). The chaathan embodies the hegemonical brahmanical power structures, while Thevan represents subaltern consciousness which is at constant conflict with the hegemonical structures.

Black-and-white cinematography creates what Kristeva theorizes as "abject" spaces:

> The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. (1-2).

This visual semiotic exploration through the black-and-white cinematography positions the audience in liminal space between reality and supernatural, exposing the arbitrariness of normalised social hierarchies. The film exposes what Mignolo calls "the colonial matrix of power"(16) which is controlled and contained by complex power structures of management which in turn maintains the colonial differences by building on it. The chaathan’s magical power parallels the Brahmanical social power wherein both maintain

hierarchies through mystification. Folklore thus became the means and language to articulate the experiences excluded by national history.

The movie begins with the seemingly cordial Potti educating the meek Thevan on who a real Brahmin is – using a prominent dialogue that it is actions alone, and not birth, which makes one a Brahmin. Towards the end, it becomes clear that while both actions and caste are sufficient to be an oppressor, it is the raw power that wields a greater authority to oppress.The cook fights for the ring of power to exert his right as the surviving, albeit illegitimate, heir. He wishes to not just break free from bondage but also claims rightful ownership of the *mana* and continues the pattern by enslaving the *chathan*. (Suresh)

Warwick's concept of caste gothic can be seen critically conceptualized as "the postcolonial Gothic" (89) offers a means by which to explore the continuing trauma of colonization. Brahmayugam extends this to caste structures, creating a system of what we term as 'epistemic horror', fear created while facing subversive knowledge systems that challenge the dominant metanarratives.

Contemporary Malayalam films like *ARM(Ajayante Randam Moshanam)* and *Nine* can be rendered as case studies illustrating the postcolonial "return of the mythic". Rather than viewing folklore and ancestral tales as nostalgic escapes, both films deliberately centered ancestral narratives. They challenge the linear timeline of Western rationalism, which stems from colonial modernity, and instead emphasize non-linear, cyclical, and mythic notions of time.

(*Ajayante Randam Moshanam) ARM* (2024) film, directed by Jithin Laal, is structured as "a tale across three different periods", deliberately disrupting the linearity of colonial history.This non-linear, generational relapse becomes the formal expression of temporal indigeneity, asserting that the past is not an end but a living force that continues to shape and compose the logic of the present. The film's core lies in the mythic idol, the Chiyothi Vilak (lamp), which is endowed with supernatural powers (*The Hindu*). The narrative begins during the Portuguese period of Kerala, a time when colonial contact disrupted local economies, belief systems, and power hierarchies. As the idol was enshrined in a temple, where the custodian of the lamp named Kelu from a lower caste demanded that the sacred idol be made accessible to all , but the upper caste elites opposed this egalitarian vision, leading to caste violence and exclusion (*Hindustan Times*). These tensions revealed how caste oppression was further codified through colonial structures of power and governance.

This film traces the inherited wound of Kelu through successive generations. The third descendant, Ajayan, a naive man, inherits both the burden and the blame for his ancestors' suppressed offence: the theft and concealment of the idol. From childhood, Ajayan faced mistreatment by local elites and colonial officials. The inheritance of guilt forms the crux of the film's social critique, revealing how religion and colonisation intertwine to create what Avery F. Gorden discusses about haunted temporality. In the book *Ghostly Matters*,

Gorden writes, “That life is complicated is a theoretical statement that guides efforts to treat race, class, and gender dynamics and consciousness as more dense and delicate than those categorical terms often imply” (5). Gorden’s insight elucidates the complexity of Ajayan’s plight: caste oppression and colonial exploitation do not function as distant categories but as interwoven forces producing a haunting continuum. Ajayan’s life becomes a layered testimony to the persistence of ancestral trauma; the past replays endlessly, refusing closure. This is the haunting that structures Kerala’s postcolonial consciousness: the ghost of injustice that inhabits every generation.

The stolen idol and the resulting blame highlight how religious institutions and symbols are entangled with social hierarchies, inherited guilt, and shame. This entanglement constructs a haunted temporality, where in Kelu’s past act reverberates across time, haunting his descendants through colonial and postcolonial epochs.

The narrative structure reinforces this cyclical temporality through its framing device, a grandmother telling the bedtime story to a child about the artefact, immediately establishing the female figure as the keeper of the essential, powerful lore. The grandmother(Manikyam)'s guardianship of the idol across generations symbolizes resistance to masculine exploitation of nature and spiritual power. Entrusted by her husband to protect the idol, Manikyam represents the intersection of womanhood and nature, both nurturing and custodial forces that preserve ancestral balance against the corrupted patriarchy and colonization. The idol itself, forged from a meteor that crashed in Haripuram, carries a cosmic origin story, symbolising healing and immortality properties. This celestial mythology connects the earthly struggle of caste and colonialism to a larger, universal temporality. The cyclical lives of Kunjikelu, Maniyan, and Ajayan echo each other, depicting recurring injustices that compel each generation to confront the past anew. The film thus decolonises the heroic archetype, transforming Maniyan from a “thief” into a rebel and hero who fights for dignity against caste oppression, reclaiming agency for the marginalised.

The 2019 Jenuse Mohamed film, *NINE*, explores the conflict between two systems of knowledge: scientific rationalism and indigenous ancestral wisdom. Its narrative embodies epistemic disobedience, affirming the validity of mythic and non-Western epistemologies. The film unfolds around the arrival of a comet, which scientists perceive as a natural phenomenon to be studied, while the mountain tribes interpret it as a spiritual omen (*The Hindu*). Albert, a scientist leading the expedition to the Himalayas, approaches the event with Western instruments and empirical logic. In contrast, the tribes only rely on inherited cosmologies that link the comet to past cosmic disruptions. Banerjee in the paper, “Decolonizing Deliberative Democracy: Perspectives from Below” observes, “universal” reason privileged Western knowledge systems while delegitimizing local knowledge systems in the colonies: the ‘rest’ of the world, because it ‘lacked’ reason could only be constituted as objects of Western knowledge, a process of epistemic violence that devalued

and disqualified knowledge possessed by the colonial subject" (287). This observation aligns directly with Nine's narrative structure, where Albert's dependence on tribal wisdom to interpret comet signals the breakdown of colonial epistemic hierarchies.

The breakdown of Albert's mission is not a matter of choice, but environmental coercion. It was the comet's electromagnetic interface, which disrupted all electrical services worldwide, that left him no alternative but to rely on the tribes. Albert's resulting dependence on the tribes, therefore, is a profound symbolic act. The breakdown of all electricity-induced machines effectively strips Albert of the very foundation of Western rationalised progress (*Firstpos*t). This idea aligns with philosopher Alan Watt's observation that the modern "sense of alienation between man and nature leads to the use of technology in a hostile spirit - to the conquest of nature instead of co-operation with nature" (*Buboquote*). When the technology becomes obsolete, the film shows humans starting to notice and rely on nature. Stripped bare of his instruments, Albert is compelled to acknowledge the tribal knowledge. The plot reveals that the tribal people's predictions regarding the comet were never wrong. This scene establishes reliability, which comes not from Western rationality or calculations but from long-term observation, decisively placing indigenous knowledge on par with scientific prediction.

The mysterious woman "Ava," who enters Albert's life during the comet's appearance, is depicted as mirroring the mythic figure recorded in the ancient cave paintings, reappearing in every cosmic event. The film's narrative strategically leverages this connection by revealing that the local tribes had long foretold the comet's incident, and their ancient cave paintings explicitly depict a similar cosmic event alongside a female-like comet creature terrorising people. These ancient warnings directly link Ava to a recurring evil that preys on vulnerable individuals, exploiting their mental state of inner turmoil. This dynamic, where the indigenous people possess an innate ability to comprehend and predict profound phenomena that remain inscrutable to a more scientifically advanced person, underscores the paramount importance of indigenous foresight and is central to the film's theme. The convergence of myth and science profoundly destabilises the rigid binary of knowledge and belief. *Nine* thus re-centres indigenous power and ancestral wisdom, suggesting that modern science is incomplete without acknowledging its mythic and cultural counterpart.

Lokah: Chapter 1- Chandra, a *s*uperhero film written and directed by Dominic Arun, assimilates global superhero conventions with regional flair of folklore. The movie exemplifies what can be termed as strategic genre appropriation through decolonizing the superhero genre. *Lokah* establishes an indigenous superhero cinematic universe which falls into the realm of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism'.

> Vernacular cosmopolitanism, an oxymoron that joins contradictory notions of local specificity and universal enlightenment, is at the crux of current debates on cosmopolitanism. These pose the question whether the local, parochial, rooted, culturally specific and demotic may co-exist with the translocal, transnational,

> transcendent, elitist, enlightened, universalist and modernist – whether boundary-crossing demotic migrations may be compared to the globe trotting travel, sophisticated cultural knowledge and moral world-view of deracinated intellectuals (Werbner 496).

Lokah through the appropriation of the superhero genre creates what Jameson might term 'pastiche':"Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style" (16). However, unlike postmodern pastiche's presumed hollowness, *Lokah* posits strategic appropriation with clear political motive—creating scope for indigenous narratives within globally domineering forms.

The film exemplifies what Bhaba theorizes as 'colonial mimicry', a mimicry with difference: "Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say that discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence, in order to be effective , mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (86).

As Devika establishes regarding Malayali women's cultural production:"The 'new woman' of early twentieth-century Kerala was a product of complex negotiations between indigenous patriarchies and colonial modernity" (45). Through appropriating and resurrecting Neeli from a feminist decolonial lens, Lokah reimagines the folkloric narrative by challenging both patriarchal tradition and Western feminist frameworks. As Kappen points out:

> Chandra is shown as a (not so typical) *yakshi* who doesn't wear the white of submissive purity, but wears the coal black of agency and power (….) She is enough to fight for herself; (...) her entire story, including her past, is "constructed like a male superhero's", where the question of justice and honour is not just tied to her body or her sexuality, but the cruelty towards her family which is a result of systemic marginalization.

Lokah reclaims female folkloric power without orientalizing femininity or romanticizing tradition.

> The popular Indian horror movies (…) have a female ghost, her past would be shown in a disturbingly graphic manner with her being raped or killed in gruesome ways by a man/men, that we ultimately start feeling sorry for the ghost instead of feeling satisfied/ satiated that justice was served, with her murderous revenge(…). Even the *Kalliyankattu Neeli* folk tale where the *yakshi* is ultimately "tamed" and "killed" by a male priest is beautifully subverted in the film, helping it stay true to what it claims to be. (Kappen)

Lokah envisions the idea of "Speaking Nearby" rather than "Speaking For": Applying Minh-ha's concept:"Speaking nearby (...) is a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject" (Minh-ha 87). The film

portrays Neeli's power, creating a room for female agency that exceeds both traditional and modern genres. As Sreekumar points out:

> The *yakshi* in *Lokah* exemplifies a striking posthuman configuration, embodying an ontology where the spectral, the mythic, and the technological coalesce. Traditionally imagined as a supernatural being feeding on the life-force of humans, Neeli in Lokah is sustained not through folkloric blood rituals but through transfusion bags—an icon of biomedical modernity. This transformation from organic consumption to medicalised sustenance is emblematic of a shift in her ontological status: from a demon of ancient vengeance to a being suspended between life, machine, and myth.

By building a cinematic universe, *Lokah* employs transmedia storytelling as a cultural intervention. Jenkins theorizes: "A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics."(95-96). Lokah's universe-building represents long-term cultural intervention, not a far-flung commercial venture. However, the academic study critically distinguishes Lokah's Universe from Marvel's franchise capitalism.

Commercialization of dialectic can be a potential critique that may arise with the appropriation of folklore arguing that commercialization exploits folklore. However, commercial and global availability serves decolonial purposes when overseed by cultural insiders. When Malayalam filmmakers control representation, commercial success becomes cultural empowerment rather than mere appropriation.

Aavasavyuham, The Arbit Documentation of An Amphibian Hunt, 2022 mockumentary science fiction comedy film written and directed by Krishand explores environmental folklore which can be conceptualized into what might be called 'ecosophic cinema'. 'Ecosophic cinema' identifies films merging ecological, spiritual, and social dimensions through indigenous cosmologies. This moves past Western environmentalism's anthropocentric limitations.

Transformation folklore teaches relational ontologies where humans exist in mutual relationships with non-human nature. This contrasts with Western nature/culture dichotomy. Devadas in his critical study points out this transformational/amphibian consciousness of the character Joy.

Joy is no longer an ordinary human being but has metamorphosed into a human-animal hybrid, an amphibian man with webbed hands and greater-than-normal skin elasticity. Several theories and speculations come up about the origins and metamorphosis. (...) Amidst this pandemonium and commotion, Murali sneaks into Madhusmita's house and kills Joy to avenge his brother. The epilogue shows the skeletal remains of the

“half-human half-frog” as an exhibit at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris, slowly turning into plant life (3).

The metamorphosis of the protagonist Joy creates what Turner theorizes as "liminal" states: "The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous" (Turner 95). This threshold consciousness between species generates moral and behavioral responsibility toward non-human worlds.

The movie encompasses spatial agency wherein Kerala’s wetland ecosystem exists as an active presence unfolding the narrative rather than a mere backdrop. As Bhaktin defines chronotope: "Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotype" (84).

The film portrays the interconnectedness of cultural loss with ecological destruction through the character Joy and the events that unfolds in the movie.

> The central character Joy strikes a balance between the human and non-human world by exhibiting characteristics of both realms. But just like Mother Earth, he is taken advantage of or enslaved by the human world for his gifted ability. Lissy’s family, Vava and even Madhusmita, who had started charging money to see the “abnormal frog man” like a pay-to-view gallery and the police made capital out of him. When Joy is reluctant to catch more than required, Vava insists that Joy produce sounds that attract shoals of fish and crustaceans. It establishes Joy as an element of nature that detests unnecessary loss of life and believes in conservation and sustainable use. While Vava embodies the capitalist economy and society that do not provide any incentives for preserving the environment, Joy personifies environmental conservatism, feeling a threat to his existence in the future (Devadas 3).

Spivak's warning about "epistemic violence" remains relevant in the academic research endeavors: "The clearest available example of such epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* 24-25). Western theoretical frameworks potentially distort indigenous knowledge systems even when employed with decolonial lenses. Malayalam cinema’s folkloric revival envisions that decolonial critical studies are not only for political agency and autonomy but epistemic liberation. The movies under study participate in this ongoing endeavor using transmedia as a device for reimagining and rebuilding an alternate brave new world.

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