Sacred Groves and Sinless Sex: Eco-Theological Intimacy and Gendered Representation in Malayalam Cinema

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***Abstract*—The study examines the cinematic representation of eco-theological spaces and ritualised intimacy in Malayalam cinema through an intersectional, feminist, and postcolonial lens. Situating its inquiry within the historical contexts of colonial modernity, indigenous belief systems, and ecological spirituality, the paper explores how sacred landscapes—particularly groves, forests, and ritual sites—are mobilised to frame desire, corporeality, and gendered embodiment. While indigenous spiritual systems historically integrated sexuality, ecology, and ritual practice, colonial moral frameworks recast these expressions as primitive, excessive, or dangerous. Malayalam cinema, shaped by these inherited epistemologies, frequently reproduces such binaries through its visual and narrative strategies.Through close textual and visual analysis of selected films—*Gandharvakshethram* (1972), *Rathinirvedam* (1978), *Adharvam* (1989), *Anandabhadram* (2005), and *Chayilyam* (2012)—the study traces how eco-theological spaces are alternately romanticised, eroticised, and pathologised. These films often construct sacred ecological sites as liminal zones that sanction "forbidden" intimacy, producing what may be termed a cinematic grammar of "sinless sex." However, such representations frequently reinforce patriarchal and colonial hierarchies by marginalising female agency, exoticising tribal bodies, and positioning indigenous rituals as threats requiring purification or rescue by modern, masculine protagonists.**

***Index Terms*—Eco-theology, Malayalam cinema, Indigenous ritual, Gender and intimacy.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Colonialism, capitalism, and globalization have functioned as formidable forces shaping the lived realities of indigenous communities across the global South, reconfiguring social hierarchies and, in many instances, eroding deeply embedded spiritual and cultural worlds. The hierarchical and ostensibly 'civilised' belief systems imposed during colonial modernity—often aligned with sanitised religious practices—proved ill-equipped to engage with the complex ecological, emotional, and psychological dimensions of everyday indigenous life. Contrary to dominant assumptions, indigenous belief systems and mystical philosophies have not vanished; rather, they have persisted through adaptation, transformation, and, at times, through silent or concealed modes of existence. Understanding these shifts is imperative, as such spiritual frameworks were intricately interwoven with the ecological landscapes and affective experiences of indigenous communities.

The rise of globalised media platforms has facilitated an unprecedented display and circulation of indigenous belief systems and mystical worlds, a phenomenon that parallels the contentious practices of institutions such as the British Museum. Within cinematic discourse, both indigenous and non-indigenous filmmakers have increasingly drawn upon the spiritual and mythological realms of indigenous communities (Joseph, 2013, p. 31). However, these representations are frequently mediated through a colonial gaze that positions the viewer as a dominant observer, reducing ecological spaces and belief systems to spectacles of primitivism—akin to a 'freak show'—rather than recognising them as living, complex epistemologies.

Colonial morality, deeply informed by Victorian sensibilities, expressed particular unease with representations of intimacy and eroticism. In the Indian context, however, sexual symbolism and corporeality were historically integral to religious and

ritual spaces. Consequently, indigenous belief systems and their visual representations became sites of intense colonial scrutiny. This aristocratic moral framework continued to shape postcolonial Indian discourses on sexuality and representation (Padte, 2018, p. 4), a process that was equally evident in Kerala (Menon, 1997, pp. 291–292). Over time, colonial discomfort permeated indigenous modes of interpretation, recasting sexual and ritual representations as exoticised deviations.

These epistemic shifts profoundly influenced cinematic portrayals of indigenous cultures and their spiritual practices. In Malayalam cinema, the colonial gaze has not only exoticised but frequently distorted indigenous representations, foregrounding notions of 'otherness' and alleged primitiveness. As a result, depictions of ecological spaces and ritual performances have often become entangled with colonial narratives, reinforcing stereotypes and marginalising the cultural depth and symbolic richness of indigenous traditions. An intersectional critical framework is therefore essential to disentangle these layered representations and their ideological underpinnings.

This essay seeks to examine the intricate relationship between ecological spaces, spiritual performances, and their cinematic representation within the Malayalam film industry. Through a nuanced analysis of select Malayalam films, the study explores how intimate ritual performances are embedded within ecological landscapes and how these spaces are reimagined through cinematic language. Given Malayalam cinema's extensive reach—both within India and among global diasporic audiences—this inquiry is particularly significant, as the industry plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural perceptions and discourses within the South Indian cinematic milieu.

II. CRAFTING THE 'EXOTIC

Kerala, a small state situated at the southern tip of India, offers a distinctive cultural and ecological context for this inquiry. Formed in 1956 through the linguistic reorganisation of post-independence territories, the state comprises predominantly Malayalam-speaking regions and is marked by remarkable ecological and spiritual diversity. The Western Ghats, which traverse Kerala, render it a biodiversity hotspot, characterised by dense forests and fertile landscapes that have long functioned as fertile ground for myths, legends, and indigenous belief systems. Ritual performances such as Theyyam, Thira, Padayani, Thumbi Thullal, Mudiyettu, and Gandharvan Pattu are deeply embedded within these ecological environments, reflecting a symbiotic relationship between nature, spirituality, and everyday life.

These ritual practices also foreground the intersectionality of gender and spirituality, offering a critical lens through which power relations, representation, and identity negotiation may be examined (Rajendran, 2014). A gender-based critique enables a deeper engagement with the ways in which intimate performances within eco-theological contexts articulate and regulate gender roles, expectations, and hierarchies. Analysing such performances is crucial to unpacking how indigenous belief systems negotiate corporeality, desire, and authority within sacred ecological spaces, while simultaneously challenging inherited colonial frameworks that continue to inform cinematic representation.

Despite its modest geographical scale, Kerala encompasses a rich constellation of nature-inspired belief systems and ritual traditions. Folk arts and oral folklore draw extensively from the natural environment, particularly in ecological dance forms that celebrate the interconnectedness between human life and the non-human world. The region is also home to numerous 'silenced' or marginal deities—such as Kali, Kuli, Potten, and Chathan—whose mythologies often exist on the fringes of institutionalised religion (Sakthidharan, 2019, pp. 10–11). Colonial ethnographers and administrators frequently dismissed or derided these spiritual imaginaries (Thurston, 1909, p. 36; Logan, 1887, p. 145), a tendency later echoed by writers who remained bound to a colonial epistemic lens (Dalrymple, 2009, pp. 29–53).

In the post-Independence period, Kerala's villages became enmeshed in nationalist narratives that portrayed them as spaces of innocence, simplicity, and moral purity (Poorakkali, 2018, pp. 162–163). This romanticised construction permeated literary and cinematic representations and was further institutionalised through the state's tourism discourse, where it continues to persist (Kerala Tourism, *Village Life Experience*, n.d.). The rural landscapes of Kerala—lush, tranquil, and visually seductive—were

reframed as consumable 'exotic' artefacts for exhibition (*Kerala Tourism, Village Life*, n.d.). Beneath this idyllic imagery, however, lay a problematic representational logic that perpetuated the trope of the 'archaic' or 'uncivilised' villager, positioned as irrational and pre-modern (Sreekumar & Menon, 2023, pp. 28–29).

Such narratives implicitly situate the spectator within a presumed 'civilised' vantage point, reinforcing a binary between the observer and the observed. Whether overt or subtle, these portrayals assume rural Kerala to be untouched by rationality or scientific consciousness, thereby simultaneously romanticising and marginalising its communities. Within Malayalam cinema, this representational framework necessitates a critical examination of intimacy as it unfolds within eco-theological spaces. The term *eco-theological space* is employed here to describe environments in which ecological and spiritual dimensions converge—spaces that are not merely physical terrains but are imbued with symbolic, cultural, and ritual significance, functioning as sites for the articulation of indigenous cosmologies and practices (Kallolickal, 2023, p. 104).

The contemporary relevance of interrogating intimacy within eco-theological spaces in Malayalam cinema lies in the shifting socio-cultural landscape and the growing discourse surrounding representation, identity, and ecological consciousness. As global environmental awareness intensifies, there is an increasing demand for cinematic narratives that move beyond reductive stereotypes and colonial imaginaries. By foregrounding the expression of intimacy and hypersexuality within these eco-theological contexts, this analysis seeks to examine how desire, corporeality, and spirituality are negotiated on screen, and how such representations either reinforce or resist dominant ideological structures governing indigenous cultures and their sacred landscapes.

III. REELING RITUALS

Cinema, as a potent cultural apparatus, plays a decisive role in shaping social narratives and reproducing ideological assumptions. Within cinematic spaces structured by colonial epistemologies, women frequently function as symbolic indicators through which tradition, modernity, and morality are measured. Malayalam cinema, in particular, has repeatedly reinforced the trope of the oppressed and powerless woman confined within the rigid structures of the 'traditional' village (Rajasree, 2018, p. 115). Narratives centred on women's suffering often depict female protagonists as reluctantly compelled to assume the role of a *Devi* (goddess) within sacred groves, thereby sacrificing personal desire—frequently reduced to the aspiration for heterosexual companionship—in deference to ritual obligation.

Such representations situate women within a false dilemma: either submit to deified embodiment within indigenous ritual spaces or await deliverance from these 'dark' belief systems by a male saviour. The figure of the 'civilised' hero emerges as a modern, rational force, cast as a metaphorical prince rescuing the damsel in distress from the perceived irrationality of age-old traditions. This recurring narrative structure reinforces patriarchal imaginaries (Pillai, 2013, pp. 140–141), positioning the male protagonist as liberator while rendering the village a site of archaic superstition. Notably, this heroic intervention often entails the symbolic or literal destruction of ecological spaces, particularly sacred groves, thereby erasing the environmental foundations of indigenous spirituality. In this process, ritual practices embedded in ecological knowledge systems are framed as oppressive, regressive, and in need of purification (Sreekumar & Menon, 2023, p. 33).

This study is anchored in a theoretical framework that synthesises feminist intersectionality with gender-based analysis. Drawing upon intersectional feminist theory, the research recognises the interlocking nature of social categories—such as gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and sexuality—and examines how these axes collectively shape lived experiences and representational politics. Within this framework, the analysis interrogates the construction of masculinity and femininity in Malayalam cinema, with particular attention to how indigenous belief systems and ritual performances become sites for the regulation of female sexuality and bodily autonomy. Through a gendered critique, the study explores whether cinematic representations of intimacy within eco-theological spaces reinforce dominant gender norms or offer moments of resistance within the broader socio-cultural narrative.

Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative approach grounded in close textual and visual analysis. A purposive sampling strategy has been employed to select Malayalam films that foreground eco-theological spaces and ritualised performances, thereby enabling a comparative exploration of indigenous spirituality, ecological imaginaries, and gendered embodiment. The analysis involves close readings of narrative structures, mise-en-scène, visual symbolism, and contextual cues, allowing for a nuanced examination of how intimacy, desire, and spirituality are negotiated on screen.

The selected films—*Gandharvakshethram* (1972), *Ratinirvedam* (1978), *Adharvam* (1989), *Anandabhadram* (2005), and *Chayilyam* (2012)—serve as critical entry points into the evolving cinematic discourse surrounding ecological spaces, ritual performances, and the representation of women in Malayalam cinema. Across these films, ecological landscapes—often depicted in their pristine, untamed beauty—are paradoxically framed as spaces requiring purification. This narrative construction establishes a dichotomy between nature's visual splendour and the alleged moral or spiritual darkness of indigenous belief systems, reinforcing the notion that ritual traditions must be cleansed or dismantled to facilitate progress.

By examining films across multiple decades, this study traces the persistence and transformation of these representational patterns, revealing how cinematic imaginations of eco-spiritual spaces and embodied passion have transcended generational shifts within Kerala's film culture. Through this longitudinal analysis, the research seeks to uncover the enduring power structures that shape cinematic narratives and perpetuate gendered and ecological stereotypes within the Malayalam film industry.

IV. THE 'FORBIDDEN' MAZE OF DESIRE

The 1978 Malayalam film *Rathinirvedam*, directed by Bharatan and adapted from P. Padmarajan's novel of the same title (Padmarajan, 2017), offers a nuanced exploration of adolescence through the subjectivity of Pappu. The narrative foregrounds the turbulent processes of desire formation, curiosity, and emotional conflict, situating adolescent longing within the intersecting pressures of social expectation and moral regulation. Pappu's journey is marked by a restless pursuit of knowledge and experience, shaped by unrestrained desire and internal turmoil.

A significant dimension of the film lies in its spatial politics, particularly the recurring staging of Pappu's advances towards Rathi within the *Sarppakavu* (sacred serpent grove). Traditionally associated with mysticism and ritual reverence, the *Sarppakavu* is reconfigured as a liminal site where adolescent desire is articulated and negotiated. This eco-theological space becomes a symbolic arena in which the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, restraint and transgression, are repeatedly tested.

At the narrative level, Pappu is an adolescent awaiting his school examination results and the prospect of college admission, while Rathi, his neighbour in her early twenties, has long occupied the position of *chechi* (elder sister) in his life. Pappu's emerging sexual desire unsettles this familiar relational dynamic. Initially dismissing his advances as juvenile mischief, Rathi fails to recognise the intensity of his growing passion. However, as his persistence intensifies, she becomes increasingly disturbed, weighed down by the moral and social responsibilities associated with her age and gendered role (Rajasree, 2018, p. 141). Despite moments of irritation, Rathi's maternal concern compels her to respond with restraint and empathy, choosing to reprimand Pappu privately rather than expose him to public scandal or familial censure.

The *Sarppakavu* serves as a critical site where these power relations are played out. Pappu's repeated attempts to approach Rathi within this sacred enclosure function as acts of spatial transgression, through which he negotiates agency and challenges normative boundaries. While his youth and social position constrain his authority, the shrine nevertheless offers him a liminal space to articulate forbidden desire. For Rathi, however, the same space operates under vastly different constraints.

On the eve of Pappu's departure for college, Rathi meets him at midnight within the *Sarppakavu*. What begins as an encounter marked by resistance soon gives way to a sexual relationship, as Rathi—caught between internalised social norms and personal desire—momentarily yields to the excitement of the experience. Almost immediately, however, pleasure is supplanted by guilt. Rathi internalises blame, repeatedly castigating herself for failing to exercise caution and for allowing the relationship to transgress

established boundaries. Her submission to desire is framed as a fatal error. Distressed and disoriented, she staggers away from the grove and is bitten by a snake. Returning home, she endures her suffering in silence to avoid social scandal, a silence that ultimately leads to her death. Significantly, even in the 2011 remake of the film—despite notable alterations in spatial representation—the *kavu* retains its central symbolic function.

This narrative configuration positions Rathi simultaneously as an object of desire and as a moral authority figure, producing an inherent imbalance of power. Her initial rejection of Pappu's advances reflects entrenched societal expectations that demand emotional restraint and sexual purity from women (Sasi, 2012, p. 112). Her eventual reciprocation, driven by curiosity and suppressed longing, exposes the contradictions faced by women whose desires are both aroused and censured within patriarchal structures. The *Sarppakavu*, far from being a neutral backdrop, emerges as a charged symbolic site where social codes collide with personal impulses.

While Pappu's transgression of sacred space allows him to assert a tentative form of agency, the patriarchal order does not extend the same latitude to Rathi. Despite her resistance, remorse, and vulnerability, she alone bears the consequences of the encounter. Her death functions as a moral closure that restores social order, reinforcing a gendered logic in which female desire is punished and male transgression rendered survivable. Through this asymmetry, *Rathinirvedam* exposes—and yet ultimately reproduces—the inequitable structures governing desire, agency, and accountability within eco-theological spaces.

V. TRIBAL BODIES, DESIRE, AND SPATIAL DYNAMICS

The 1989 Malayalam film *Adharvam* presents a complex yet deeply problematic cinematic text in which representations of tribal bodies intersect with issues of caste, gender, power, and spatial politics. Although the film derives its title from the fourth Veda and foregrounds ritualistic and metaphysical themes, it ultimately functions as a conduit for reinforcing entrenched hierarchies and stereotypes. As such, *Adharvam* offers a compelling case study for examining how mainstream cinema can inadvertently marginalise subaltern voices while reproducing Brahmanical and patriarchal ideologies, raising critical questions about the ethics of representation within Malayalam cinema.

The narrative revolves around Thevalli Namboodiri, a respected astrologer who identifies black magic and tantric rituals performed by his childhood friend, Mekkadan Namboodiri, as the source of misfortune in their village. When Thevalli's rational interventions are dismissed, he is warned that Mekkadan's illegitimate son, Anantha Padmanabhan, is destined to inherit the mantle of dark arts. In response, Thevalli undertakes to educate both his legitimate son Vishnu and Anantha in the three Vedas, hoping to redirect Anantha's trajectory and ensure social stability.

Anantha emerges as a gifted scholar proficient in Vedic learning and tantric painting. His romantic involvement with the daughter of Putthedan Namboodiri, an orthodox Brahmin who harbours deep contempt for Anantha's caste status, triggers a violent rupture. While Vishnu pursues higher education in the city and develops a romantic relationship with Usha, Anantha remains bound to the village and its rigid hierarchies. During an astrological gathering, Putthedan publicly humiliates Anantha, prompting his withdrawal. Subsequently, when Putthedan discovers Anantha with his daughter, he violently assaults him, destroys his home, and causes the death of Anantha's elderly mother in the ensuing fire. This act becomes the catalyst for Anantha's descent into the very dark arts he was once discouraged from pursuing.

Fuelled by grief and rage, Anantha seeks tutelage under Mekkadan and embraces *abhichara karma* (malevolent magic). Following Mekkadan's death, Anantha's unchecked power wreaks havoc on the village. Central to this phase is his domination of the tribal community, whom he subjugates through supernatural force. Ponni, the daughter of the tribal chieftain, is instrumentalised as a ritual medium in Anantha's advanced tantric practices. Thevalli, alarmed by the devastation, implores Vishnu to intervene and restore moral order. Vishnu's attempt to reason with Anantha fails, as the tribal community—rendered voiceless and fearful—refuses to assist, reinforcing their portrayal as passive subjects under external control.

The narrative culminates in chaos following Vishnu's intrusion into Anantha's ritual space. Disregarding warnings, Vishnu and his companions disrupt the protective enchantments, resulting in death,

destruction, and a violent storm in which Ponni is killed. In a final act of penitence, Anantha sacrifices himself to the Devi, enabling Vishnu and Usha—positioned at the feet of the Goddess—to emerge unscathed, while the mansion and surrounding forest are annihilated.

From an intersectional perspective, *Adharvam* exemplifies a deeply problematic representational framework wherein caste, gender, and tribal identity converge to reinforce exclusionary narratives (Parayil, 2014, p. 71). Anantha, the illegitimate and caste-marked son, is constructed as the threatening 'other', whose intellectual prowess and romantic transgression destabilise Brahmanical order. His attraction towards an upper-caste woman and subsequent embrace of dark magic are framed as moral deviations, reinforcing the association between caste impurity and danger. Simultaneously, the film deploys a saviour complex by positioning Vishnu—the legitimate, upper-caste son—as the sole agent capable of restoring harmony, thereby silencing alternative voices and erasing subaltern agency.

The character of Ponni warrants particular critical attention. Her portrayal reveals the film's deeply entrenched Brahmanical and colonial logic in representing tribal bodies. The casting of Vijayalakshmi Vadlapati (Silk Smitha), an actress widely associated with erotic screen personae, raises significant concerns regarding intent and implication. This casting choice appears to capitalise on her established sexualised image, thereby framing the tribal woman's body as an object of erotic spectacle rather than as a site of cultural specificity or autonomy. Such representation aligns with a cinematic tradition that hypersexualises marginalised women, particularly those associated with nature and 'primitive' spaces (Mini, 2019, p. 57; Radhakrishnan, 2010, p. 205).

Ponni is depicted within an intentionally secluded tribal landscape, constructed as a mysterious and exotic enclave detached from the modern world. Within this spatial imagination, her willingness to participate in ritual nudity for Anantha's tantric practices is framed as natural and unquestioned, raising troubling questions about consent, commodification, and voyeurism. The tribal body is thus rendered available for ritualistic and visual consumption, reinforcing colonial fantasies of indigenous spaces as sites of unrestricted access.

The gendered dynamics between Ponni and Anantha further entrench patriarchal binaries. Ponni is allowed emotional and erotic expression, yet her desire is pathologised and ultimately punished. Anantha, by contrast, is elevated to a *sattvic* figure whose engagement with Ponni remains framed as ritual necessity rather than desire. This asymmetry constructs female sexuality as excess and male agency as disciplined transcendence, perpetuating normative gender hierarchies.

Spatially, the narrative's movement from urban or semi-urban spaces to a secret rainforest enclave romanticises the tribal landscape as a site of authentic spiritual pursuit. This trope reinforces the exoticisation of indigenous spaces as untouched, mystical terrains awaiting external discovery and control. Ponni, as a figure rooted in the forest, is portrayed as naïve and innocent—an infantilisation that echoes colonial discourses of primitivism. Yet paradoxically, her sexual desire is marked as deviant, reinforcing the stereotype of the hypersexualised tribal woman whose body must be regulated or sacrificed.

Through these representational strategies, *Adharvam* contributes to the cinematic Othering of tribal communities, reinforcing the notion that indigenous spaces and bodies require external intervention, purification, and moral governance. The film thus exemplifies how ritual-centred narratives, when filtered through dominant caste and patriarchal lenses, can reproduce exclusionary ideologies while obscuring the lived realities and agency of subaltern subjects.Here is a clear, academically polished rephrasing that retains your critical depth, theoretical framing, and nuance, while improving coherence, flow, and argumentative sharpness. I have preserved your citations and conceptual emphases while smoothing repetition and tightening phrasing.

VI. ECOLOGICAL–SPIRITUAL SYMBOLISM IN ANANDABHADRAM

The 2005 Malayalam film *Anandabhadram*, adapted from Sunil Parameshwaran's novel of the same name, explores the tension between modernity and traditional ritual practices through its evocative use of ecological landscapes. The film situates these spaces—particularly the *kavu* or sacred groves—as symbolic sites where colonialist anxieties, socio-cultural hierarchies, and spiritual fears converge. This

analysis examines how *Anandabhadram* mobilizes ecological-spiritual spaces to frame indigenous ritual practices as both mystified and threatening, thereby reinforcing long-standing colonial binaries.

The narrative follows Anandan, a modern, urban subject raised in San Francisco, who becomes ensnared in a remote village governed by ancient traditions. Within this setting, sacred groves function as ritualistic stages where archaic worship and occult practices unfold. These groves, depicted as dense, secretive, and foreboding, are associated with dark magic and spiritual danger. The villagers' plea for Anandan's intervention against the dark magician Dhigambaran positions him as a saviour figure—one who must liberate the community from the malevolent forces embedded within their own traditions.

Ritual practices in *Anandabhadram* are not incidental narrative elements but central mechanisms through which relationships, fears, and desires are articulated. The sacred groves are represented as paradoxical spaces—simultaneously revered and feared, sacred yet profane (Gupta, 2003, p. 44). These ecological-spiritual sites are coded as secretive zones of danger, reinforcing colonial tropes that frame indigenous rituals as primitive, irrational, and socially destabilizing. Such portrayals disproportionately construct women as vulnerable subjects within these spaces, further entrenching patriarchal and colonial anxieties.

Anandan's role as the enlightened outsider aligns closely with colonial narratives that privilege education and modernity over indigenous knowledge systems. The film sustains a rigid binary between the "civilized" urban subject and the "uncivilized" rural community, positioning modern rationality as the ultimate corrective to archaic belief systems. This ideological framework is further reinforced through the romantic subplot between Anandan and Bhadra.

The love story operates as a moral allegory in which Anandan's affection is framed as "pure," reflective of his urban, modern upbringing, while Dhigambaran's desire is portrayed as excessive, predatory, and corporeal. This contrast reinforces colonial assumptions that urban relationships are inherently refined and ethical, whereas rural traditions are driven by unchecked sensuality. The ecological spaces associated with Dhigambaran thus become symbolic breeding grounds for moral corruption and social threat.

Anandan's behavioural transformation when possessed by Dhigambaran—marked by the emergence of physical and sexual desire—complicates this dichotomy while ultimately reinforcing it. The narrative suggests that emotional restraint and moral purity are products of "civilized" modernity, whereas physical desire is aligned with the "uncivilized" other. The film thus perpetuates a hierarchical moral framework in which indigenous spiritual practices and ecological spaces are rendered dangerous, excessive, and in need of containment.

VII. GAZING AT THE GODDESS: ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGY IN CHAYILYAM

Manoj Kana's *Chayilyam* (2012), named after the red pigment used in Theyyam face painting, offers a markedly different engagement with ecological-spiritual spaces. Emerging in a cinematic moment shaped by feminist and intersectional perspectives (Gopinath & Raj, 2015, p. 73), the film foregrounds women's agency and subaltern intimacy within the ritual landscapes of North Malabar. Unlike earlier representations, *Chayilyam* reframes the sacred grove not as a site of fear, but as a space of possibility, resistance, and embodied spirituality.

The narrative centres on Gouri (Anumol) and Kannan (Bijoy), lovers belonging to two marginalized communities. Their relationship unfolds against the backdrop of sacred groves steeped in myths, folklore, and the ritual performance of Theyyam. These ecological settings become performative spaces where love, ritual, and resistance intersect. Of particular significance is the film's exploration of physical intimacy within the grove, where ecological theology legitimizes forms of love otherwise prohibited by social norms.

Departing from the male-centric gaze of earlier films, *Chayilyam* foregrounds mutual consent and feminine desire, situating women's agency at the heart of its narrative. The lush green grove functions as a sanctuary for forbidden intimacy, enabling the expression of desire beyond the constraints imposed by caste, community, and tradition. This shift in gaze challenges dominant cinematic conventions and reimagines ecological spaces as sites of subaltern empowerment.

The film's pivotal moment occurs during Kannan's preparation for his trance as Kathivanoor Veeran

Theyyam—an embodiment of love familiar from *Kaliyattam* (1997). As Kannan occupies a liminal state, both human and divine, the grove transcends its everyday restrictions. This liminality spatially sanctions Gouri and Kannan's intimacy, rendering their relationship sacred rather than transgressive. The grove thus emerges as a theological and ecological mediator, where ritual and desire coexist without moral condemnation.

Following societal backlash, the couple elopes, and Gouri gives birth to their son. Kannan's subsequent death isolates Gouri, leaving her traumatised. Her grief manifests physically through the cessation of her menstrual cycle, culturally interpreted as the suspension of impurity. Concurrently, Gouri experiences a psychic episode, which the community reads as divine possession. This leads to her coercion into performing Devakooth—a Theyyam ritual traditionally reserved for post-menopausal women (Narath, 2015, p. 29).

While *Chayilyam* powerfully critiques the persistent male gaze imposed on women—whether in their human or deified forms—the film's conclusion introduces a troubling reversal. Despite Gouri's sustained assertion of agency, she is ultimately recast as a damsel in distress. Her rescue from the perceived darkness of ritual space is enacted by her young son, himself deeply traumatised. This narrative turn undermines the film's earlier subversion of patriarchal and ritualistic authority, unsettling the emancipatory possibilities it so carefully constructs.

VIII. THE PROBLEMATIC ALLURE OF ECO-THEOLOGICAL EROTICISM

Malayalam cinema, while celebrated for its layered and socially resonant narratives, has also relied on troubling representational strategies in its depiction of intimacy. This essay examines a recurring cinematic tendency to situate physical intimacy within eco-theological landscapes and geographically remote locations, thereby rendering such encounters more acceptable to mainstream audiences. By placing erotic moments within sacred or quasi-sacred ecological spaces, filmmakers invoke a juxtaposition of the spiritual and the sensual. This fusion imbues intimacy with a sense of forbidden allure—simultaneously arousing and absolving—effectively cloaking erotic desire beneath a veneer of spirituality. In doing so, these films contribute to what may be understood as a genre of "sinless sex" (Rafi, 2021, p. 81).

The spatial distance of these settings from everyday social surveillance further facilitates the portrayal of desires that would otherwise be deemed transgressive within familiar social environments. These remote ecological spaces function as zones of perceived liberation, allowing characters to momentarily suspend normative constraints. However, this same remoteness also serves an ideological function: it "otherizes" both the characters and their actions, distancing them from the audience's immediate social realities. As a result, the intimacy depicted appears exceptional rather than relatable, thereby softening its perceived moral or cultural transgression.

At a moment when spatial discourse is regaining prominence within academic inquiry (Harikrishnan, 2024), this paper proposes the conceptual framework of a "sacred–ecological intimate space" as a critical lens. While existing scholarship has extensively examined desire, intimacy, and their cinematic vocabularies in Malayalam cinema, a space-specific analysis of "sacred intimacy" remains relatively underexplored. This intervention seeks to address that gap by foregrounding the role of ecological and ritual spaces in shaping cinematic representations of desire.

Despite their surface-level transgressiveness, many of these portrayals ultimately reproduce entrenched gender hierarchies. Female characters are frequently positioned as objects within a predominantly male gaze, with their agency and consent either marginalised or rendered secondary. The emphasis on the "forbidden" nature of intimacy often eclipses meaningful engagement with emotional reciprocity or female desire, reducing intimacy to a spectacle structured around masculine fantasy.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the gradual shifts within Malayalam cinema that move beyond merely cataloguing misogynistic representations (Pillai, 2023, pp. 1–11). A longitudinal perspective reveals an increasing visibility of female agency and a departure from narratives that rely on guilt and moral punishment to regulate women's sexuality. Earlier cinematic texts largely portrayed women as passive subjects, constrained by patriarchal norms and male authority. In contrast, contemporary films increasingly depict women as autonomous individuals with desires, aspirations, and the capacity

to make choices—even when such choices challenge social conventions.

Encouragingly, the use of guilt as a narrative mechanism in the portrayal of sexuality has diminished, and rigid binaries of masculinity and femininity are being progressively unsettled. Nevertheless, the path toward genuine representational equity remains fraught. While these developments signal meaningful progress, sustained critical engagement remains essential to ensure that Malayalam cinema continues to evolve toward narratives that are not only aesthetically compelling but also ethically and socially responsible.

IX. CONCLUSION

Encouragingly, the use of guilt as a narrative tool to discipline women's sexuality—so prevalent in earlier Malayalam cinema—has begun to diminish, giving way to more complex and empathetic portrayals. Yet, this shift remains uneven. While recent films attempt to reimagine ecological and sacred landscapes as empowering rather than punitive, many continue to draw on inherited colonial and patriarchal grammars that naturalise male entitlement, romanticise transgression, and exoticise subaltern bodies. The eco-theological spaces that once symbolised communal spirituality and ecological balance become, within cinematic frames, ambivalent terrains: they sanctify intimacy even as they mask coercive structures and reinscribe gendered inequities. This study demonstrates that Malayalam cinema frequently mobilises environmental and ritual spaces to mediate desire and corporeality, crafting a visual language of "sinless sex" that neutralises moral anxiety while obscuring power. At the same time, these representations are entwined with broader epistemic legacies—colonial modernity, Brahmanical dominance, caste hierarchies, and patriarchal authority—that shape how tribal bodies, ritual practices, and female agency are imagined and disciplined. Through an intersectional feminist approach, we see how these layered representations privilege male protagonists as rational saviours, reduce indigenous epistemologies to mystified spectacle, and circumscribe women's desire within narrow moral boundaries.

However, films such as *Chayilyam* indicate emerging cracks in this paradigm. By foregrounding consent, mutuality, and the subversive potential of ritual spaces, such works gesture toward alternative cinematic vocabularies—vocabularies that could reclaim ecological sites as arenas of agency rather than transgression. The task ahead for Malayalam cinema lies not merely in relocating intimacy to sacred landscapes, but in interrogating and dismantling the ideological assumptions that render these spaces simultaneously seductive and disciplining. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the need for a critical rethinking of how eco-theological spaces are deployed on screen. A truly decolonial cinematic practice must recognise these landscapes not as exoticised backdrops for desire, but as culturally embedded, historically situated, and politically charged terrains. Such a shift would allow Malayalam cinema to move beyond the romanticised and the sensational, toward representations that honour the complexity of indigenous traditions, affirm bodily autonomy, and acknowledge the ecological and spiritual worlds these beliefs inhabit.

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