Sacred Groves, Forbidden Desires, and Colonial Imaginaries: Spatial Politics of Ecology, Sexuality, and Power in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract—The article critically examines the representation of indigenous belief systems, ecological–spiritual spaces, and ritualised intimacy in select Malayalam films, situating them within postcolonial, feminist, and intersectional theoretical frameworks. Drawing upon key cinematic texts—*Gandharvakshethram* (1972), *Rathinirvedam* (1978), *Adharvam* (1989), and *Anandabhadram* (2005)—the study interrogates how colonial epistemologies continue to shape visual narratives of desire, gender, caste, and spirituality. Particular attention is paid to *Rathinirvedam*, adapted from P. Padmarajan's novel of the same name, first published in 1974, which remains a seminal literary work in Malayalam for its candid exploration of adolescent sexuality and moral anxiety. Anchored in feminist intersectionality, eco-theological criticism, and postcolonial film theory, the article analyses how sacred groves (*kavu*, *sarppakavu*) and ritual landscapes are transformed into sites of erotic danger, moral panic, and ideological control. The author argues that these cinematic spaces frequently reproduce colonial binaries of civilisation and primitivism, while disproportionately disciplining female and subaltern bodies. The primary aim of the article is to unpack the gendered and caste-based politics embedded in cinematic depictions of eco-theological spaces. Its objective is to demonstrate how Malayalam cinema, while engaging indigenous spirituality, often re-inscribes patriarchal and colonial hierarchies under the guise of cultural representation.

Index Terms—Eco-theology, Indigenous spirituality, Gender and desire, Malayalam cinema.

I. INTRODUCTION

Colonialism, capitalism, and globalization have functioned as formidable forces in reshaping the lives of indigenous communities across the Global South, reconstituting social hierarchies and, in many instances, eroding deeply embedded spiritual and cultural worlds. The hierarchical and ostensibly 'civilized' belief systems imposed through colonial intervention—often aligned with sanitized and institutionalised religions—proved inadequate in engaging with the complex ecological realities that structured everyday indigenous life. Contrary to the dominant narrative of disappearance, many indigenous belief systems and mystic philosophies have not vanished; rather, they have adapted, transformed, and survived, often occupying silent, concealed, or marginalised spaces. Understanding these transformations is crucial, as such philosophical and spiritual frameworks were historically rooted in the emotional, psychological, and ecological terrains inhabited by indigenous communities.

The advent of globalised media has enabled an unprecedented visibility of indigenous spiritual worlds, a phenomenon that echoes the extractive and display-oriented practices of colonial institutions such as the British Museum. Within cinema, both indigenous and external filmmakers have capitalised on the spectacle of representing indigenous spirituality within mythological and ritualistic spaces (Joseph, 2013, p. 31). However, these representations are frequently mediated through a colonial optic that positions the spectator in a stance of dominance, reducing ecological landscapes and belief systems to 'uncivilised' curiosities—spectacles reminiscent of a cultural "freak show."

Colonial morality, shaped by Victorian prudishness, exhibited deep discomfort with representations of intimacy and eroticism. In the Indian context, however, sexuality historically occupied a visible and legitimised place within religious and ritual spaces. As a result, indigenous belief systems and their

performative expressions became objects of scrutiny and moral judgement under the colonial gaze. This aristocratic sensibility subsequently permeated postcolonial Indian discourse, reshaping indigenous understandings of the body, desire, and sacred performance (Padte, 2018, p. 4). Kerala was no exception to this ideological shift (Menon, 1997, pp. 291–292), as colonial discomfort gradually translated into local perceptions, rendering sexual and ritual representations 'exotic' rather than integral.These epistemic shifts have had enduring consequences for the cinematic portrayal of indigenous cultures and spiritual practices.

The colonial gaze not only exoticised but also distorted these representations, foregrounding notions of 'otherness' and perceived primitiveness. Consequently, depictions of ecological spaces and ritual performances in Malayalam cinema became entangled with inherited colonial narratives, perpetuating stereotypes and diminishing the cultural complexity of indigenous traditions. An intersectional analytical framework thus becomes essential to unpack the layered dynamics of ecology, spirituality, gender, and power embedded within these cinematic texts.

II. CRAFTING THE 'EXOTIC'

Kerala, a small state located at the southernmost tip of India, offers a distinctive socio-cultural and ecological context for this inquiry. Formed in 1956 through the linguistic reorganisation of post-independence India, the state comprises predominantly Malayalam-speaking regions and is marked by remarkable ecological and spiritual plurality. The Western Ghats, which traverse Kerala, render it a biodiversity hotspot, cloaked in dense greenery that has long functioned as fertile ground for myths, legends, lores, and diverse belief systems. Ritual performances such as *Theyyam*, *Thira*, *Padayani*, *Thumbi Thullal*, *Mudiyettu*, and *Gandharvan Pattu* are deeply embedded in ecological rhythms and practices, reflecting an intimate interdependence between nature and spirituality.

Despite its limited geographical size, Kerala sustains a complex constellation of belief systems rooted in nature-centric worldviews. Folk arts and oral traditions draw extensively from the environment, evident in ritualistic dances and performances that foreground the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the natural world. The region is also home to numerous marginalised or 'silenced' deities—such as Kali, Kuli, Potten, and Chathan—whose mythologies often exist outside the boundaries of dominant religious frameworks (Sakthidharan, 2019, pp. 10–11). Colonial ethnographers and writers frequently dismissed or ridiculed these local spiritual imaginaries (Thurston, 1909, p. 36; Logan, 1887, p. 145), a tendency that persisted even in later writings which failed to depart meaningfully from the colonial epistemic lens (Dalrymple, 2009, pp. 29–53).

In the post-Independence period, Kerala's villages were increasingly framed within nationalist discourses as spaces of innocence and rustic simplicity (Poorakkali, 2018, pp. 162–163). This romanticised representation permeated literary and cinematic productions of the era and subsequently became entrenched within the expanding tourism industry—a narrative that continues to circulate today (Kerala Tourism, *Village Life Experience*, n.d.). The lush landscapes and idyllic rural settings of Kerala were thus transformed into consumable spectacles—an 'exotic' artefact curated for visual pleasure (Kerala Tourism, *Village Life*, n.d.). Beneath this aestheticised surface, however, lay a problematic representational idiom that reinforced the trope of the 'uncivilised' or archaic villager, imagined as existing outside the domains of rationality and modernity (Sreekumar & Menon, 2023, pp. 28–29). Such narratives implicitly situate the spectator in a presumed position of 'civilisation', constructing a binary between the observer and the observed. Whether overt or subtle, this framing presupposes that Kerala's rural communities remain untouched by logic or scientific rationality, thereby simultaneously romanticising and marginalising them. Within the context of Malayalam cinema, this necessitates a critical interrogation of how intimacy is performed within what may be termed *eco-theological spaces*. In this study, the term denotes environments where ecological and spiritual dimensions intersect—spaces that transcend mere physicality and are imbued with symbolic, cultural, and ritual significance. These spaces function as vital sites for the articulation of indigenous belief systems and embodied cultural practices (Kallolickal, 2023, p. 104).

The contemporary relevance of examining intimacy within eco-theological spaces in Malayalam cinema is underscored by shifting socio-cultural paradigms and

intensified debates around representation, identity, and ecological consciousness. As global concern for environmental sustainability grows, there is an increasing demand for cinematic narratives that acknowledge the interdependence of human and non-human worlds while simultaneously challenging entrenched stereotypes and colonial inheritances. By foregrounding expressions of hypersexuality within these eco-theological spaces, this analysis probes the intersection of gender, spirituality, and power. A gender-sensitive critical framework enables an exploration of how intimacy, desire, and embodiment are negotiated within ritualistic and spiritual contexts, revealing underlying hierarchies and modes of representation (Rajendran, 2014). Examining intimate performances within these spaces thus becomes crucial to unpacking the layered intersections of ecology, belief, and gender, and to contesting the colonial and patriarchal perspectives that continue to inform cinematic representations.

III. REELING RITUALS

Cinema, as a potent cultural artefact, plays a decisive role in shaping social narratives and consolidating stereotypes. Within cinematic spaces structured by colonial epistemologies, women frequently function as key indicators through which tradition, morality, and cultural "backwardness" are measured. Malayalam cinema, in particular, has often perpetuated the trope of the oppressed and helpless woman trapped within the confines of the traditional village (Rajasree, 2018, p. 115). Narratives of women's suffering commonly reduce female subjectivity to a narrow spectrum: women are portrayed as either unwillingly assuming the role of a *Devi* (goddess) within sacred groves or renouncing their personal desires—typically limited to romantic fulfilment—in obedience to ritual obligation. Such representations situate women in a perpetual dilemma, stripped of agency and positioned as passive subjects awaiting salvation from what is framed as the "dark" belief systems of archaic village life. This narrative logic installs the 'civilised' male protagonist as a saviour figure—a metaphorical prince rescuing the damsel in distress—while simultaneously constructing indigenous rituals and ecological spaces as sites of irrationality and oppression.

The recurring image of the woman waiting to be rescued reinforces a deeply patriarchal worldview (Pillai, 2013, pp. 140–141), wherein the hero is celebrated as a liberator, even as his intervention often entails the destruction or erasure of ecological and ritual landscapes. In this formulation, the village is rendered as a space of primitive darkness, and belief systems rooted in ecological practices are delegitimised and cast as entities in need of purification or reform (Sreekumar & Menon, 2023, p. 33). Such portrayals not only sustain gendered stereotypes but also reproduce colonial hierarchies that devalue indigenous epistemologies. This study is anchored in a theoretical framework that synthesises feminist intersectionality with gender analysis.

Drawing upon intersectional feminist theory, the research recognises the interlocking nature of social categories—such as gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality—and examines how these axes intersect to shape lived experiences and cultural representations. Within this framework, particular attention is paid to the construction of masculinity and femininity within indigenous belief systems and ritual practices as depicted in Malayalam cinema. A gender-based critique enables a critical interrogation of how cinematic representations of sexuality and intimacy within eco-theological spaces either reinforce or disrupt dominant gender norms embedded within broader socio-cultural discourses.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, employing purposive sampling to select Malayalam films that foreground eco-theological spaces and ritualised performances of intimacy. Through close textual and visual analysis, the research examines narrative structures, cinematic aesthetics, and contextual cues to uncover the layered meanings embedded in these representations. This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of how intimacy, gender, and ecology intersect within cinematic imaginaries, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the ideological tensions that underwrite the portrayal of indigenous cultures in Malayalam cinema.

IV. PHYSICAL BODIES AND METAPHYSICAL LOVE

The 1972 Malayalam film *Gandharvakshethram* is situated within a period of profound socio-economic and political transition, marked by the erosion of

feudal structures and the gradual emergence of salaried employment as a dominant mode of livelihood (Panikkar, 1995). This shift signifies a reconfiguration of power—from matrilineal autonomy towards the consolidation of patriarchal authority vested in salaried men (see also Muhammedali, 2017, pp. 18–31). Such transformations have been extensively examined in both scholarly and creative discourses, which reflect on the decline of traditional kinship systems alongside the rise of modern social formations (Jeffrey, 1976; Varma, 1893; Arunima, 2003; Menon, 1890).

Central to *Gandharvakshethram* is Lakshmi, portrayed by Sharada, whose coming-of-age unfolds amidst these tectonic shifts. Raised by her grandmother within an environment saturated with oral traditions, Lakshmi's consciousness is shaped by mythical narratives surrounding figures such as Nagaraja, Yakshi, and Gandharvani. These mythic imaginaries function not merely as inherited folklore but as formative frameworks through which Lakshmi begins to understand desire, intimacy, and corporeality.

According to familial belief, unmarried women in Lakshmi's lineage are destined to be seduced by the enchanting songs of the Gandharvan who inhabits the sacred grove (*kavu*). Within this belief system, the Gandharvan is regarded as the woman's true consort, even though she is formally united through *sambandham* with a Namboodiri man. These spiritual and ecological spaces thus become sites where Lakshmi's emotional and sexual subjectivity is articulated. They provide her with a symbolic vocabulary through which her infatuations and fantasies are legitimised and interpreted.

Lakshmi's desire is deeply entangled with broader anxieties surrounding matriliny, polyamory, and social order. Rituals such as *Gandharvan pattu*, performed despite severe financial strain, along with repeated admonitions concerning bodily presentation and behavioural restraint, reveal the community's attempts to regulate her emerging sexuality and protect her from the perceived dangers associated with desire. These measures underscore the collective effort to discipline the female body under the guise of spiritual safeguarding.

Despite sustained surveillance and moral instruction, the Gandharvan—played by Prem Nazir—remains a powerful presence in Lakshmi's inner life. Drawn by the songs that reach her through the window, she ventures into the dense forest of the Gandharvan *kavu*, where she experiences a sexual encounter whose nature remains profoundly ambiguous. The film deliberately destabilises the distinction between consent and coercion, particularly in light of the later revelation that the Gandharvan is, in fact, Gopalan—a Dalit man whose caste position prohibits direct engagement with Lakshmi under feudal social codes. Lakshmi's ignorance of his identity, coupled with the constraints imposed by gendered social conditioning and mythic belief, complicates any straightforward reading of agency. Her inability to confront or question male authority further obscures the conditions under which consent is formed.

The ambiguity deepens when Lakshmi awakens alone before the *Gandharvakshethram*, abandoned. Yet, intoxicated by the intensity of the encounter, she recounts the Gandharvan's sensual prowess to her maid, Kunjikutti (K. P. A. C. Lalitha), displaying a mesmerised fascination. Her subsequent longing for a child fathered by the Gandharvan suggests an emotional investment that unsettles simplistic moral interpretations. Desire, pleasure, vulnerability, and social restriction converge, leaving Lakshmi suspended in a space of profound confusion.

Following these encounters, an urgent attempt is made to arrange Lakshmi's marriage through the *sambandham* system. This decision, however, is forcefully opposed by her brother Vasudevan (K. P. Ummer), an English-educated salaried professional in Bombay. Embodying the aspirations of colonial modernity, Vasudevan envisions a future for Lakshmi that transcends sub-caste hierarchies and ritual affiliations. Consequently, she is married to Satheesan (Madhu), a Chakkala Nair whose economic stability, urban employment, and youthful appeal align with modern matrimonial ideals. This marriage marks the abrupt severance of Lakshmi's metaphysical bond with the Gandharvan, whose presence had previously shaped her desires.

As Lakshmi relocates to Bombay with her husband and brother, she attempts to conform to the role of the modern wife, negotiating cultural dislocation and internal dissonance—experiences reflective of early twentieth-century social realities in Kerala (Ali, 2022, pp. 26–50; Vinayan & Raj, 2019, pp. 399–411). The narrative takes a decisive turn with the premature birth of their son, which prompts Satheesan to question the

child's paternity. In a startling confession, Lakshmi attributes the child's conception to the celestial Gandharvan. Medical consultation leads to her diagnosis as mentally unstable, invoking a familiar trope in Malayalam cinema wherein women who articulate sexual desire are pathologised as mad (Nair, 2023, pp. 22–23).

Lakshmi thus becomes emblematic of a recurring cinematic pattern that penalises female non-conformity. Interestingly, Satheesan's rejection is directed not at Lakshmi but at the child, revealing a layered complexity in his character. The child's subsequent death becomes the catalyst for Lakshmi's awakening: she realises that the divine lover she imagined was, in reality, a mortal neighbour driven by desire. This revelation dismantles the mythic scaffolding of her experience, leaving her emotionally detached even as Gopalan seeks acknowledgment.

Satheesan, transformed by grief, revisits his earlier hostility and extends forgiveness to both Lakshmi and Gopalan, offering emotional support in the aftermath of loss. However, this gesture of forgiveness is deeply problematic when examined through an intersectional lens (Khandekar, 2024, pp. 10–13). The film romanticises stalking by framing Gopalan's persistent singing and eventual encounter as expressions of love, disregarding the asymmetrical power relations produced by caste hierarchy and gendered vulnerability. Lakshmi's agency is further diminished by attributing her actions to ignorance and naivety, effectively erasing the complexity of her desire.

Satheesan's forgiveness centres male moral redemption while bypassing the structural violence embedded in caste, gender, and power. By privileging his transformation, the narrative absolves male transgressions without addressing their impact on Lakshmi. The climactic sympathy extended towards Gopalan—portrayed as a tragic subaltern lover—overshadows Lakshmi's suffering, rendering her narrative secondary (Manju, 2019, p. 244). This empathetic framing is reinforced by Prem Nazir's established on-screen persona (Johny, 2020, pp. 24–33), which enables the redemption of male characters at the expense of female subjectivity. Consequently, the film reproduces a gendered logic wherein men are redeemable, while women remain confined to silence, loss, and diminished agency (Chandrasekhar, 2020, p. 132).

V. THE 'FORBIDDEN' MAZE OF DESIRE

Bharatan's *Rathinirvedam* (1978) offers a nuanced cinematic exploration of adolescence through the character of Pappu, tracing the turbulence of desire, curiosity, and moral anxiety that mark his transition into adulthood. Adapted from P. Padmarajan's novel of the same name (Padmarajan, 2017), the film foregrounds the psychic and emotional complexities of awakening sexuality as it collides with entrenched social norms and expectations. Pappu's journey is shaped by an intense quest for self-understanding, marked equally by innocence and transgression.

A striking aspect of the film lies in its spatial politics: Pappu's encounters with Rathi are staged predominantly within the *Sarppakavu* (sacred serpent grove). Traditionally imbued with ritual sanctity and mysticism, the *Sarppakavu* is reconfigured in the narrative as a liminal site where adolescent desire unfolds. This sacred ecological space becomes a charged arena in which taboo, longing, and power intersect.

While awaiting his school examination results and admission to college, Pappu finds himself with ample unstructured time, during which his long-suppressed attraction towards Rathi intensifies. Rathi, over twenty years old and long positioned as an *achechi* (elder sister) figure in his life, initially dismisses his advances as childish mischief, failing to recognise the depth of his emotional and sexual awakening. Gradually, however, Pappu's persistence unsettles her, placing her in a conflicted position shaped by maternal concern, moral obligation, and social scrutiny (Rajasree, 2018, p.141). Despite moments of irritation, Rathi refrains from publicly reprimanding him, conscious of the reputational and familial consequences such exposure might entail.

The *Sarppakavu* functions as more than a backdrop; it becomes a symbolic site where power relations are negotiated and contested. Pappu's advances within this sacred space signify his attempt to transgress both social and moral boundaries, asserting a nascent agency within a framework that otherwise constrains him. The shrine's ritual significance heightens the intensity of these encounters, foregrounding the collision between cultural prohibitions and embodied desire.

On the eve of Pappu's departure for college, Rathi meets him at midnight in the *Sarppakavu*. In this

moment of emotional vulnerability, Pappu acts upon the desire that has long been simmering. Rathi initially resists, burdened by her internalised sense of responsibility and gendered expectations, yet she ultimately yields to the encounter. While the experience offers her fleeting pleasure and emotional intensity, it is immediately followed by overwhelming guilt. Rathi internalises blame, reproaching herself for her perceived lack of caution and for allowing the relationship to cross socially sanctioned boundaries. Her acquiescence proves catastrophic: in her disoriented state after the encounter, she is bitten by a snake.

Choosing silence over scandal, Rathi returns home and endures her suffering in isolation, a decision that ultimately leads to her death. Significantly, despite spatial reconfigurations in the 2011 remake, the *kavu* remains central to the narrative's symbolic economy. This narrative trajectory positions Rathi in a deeply paradoxical role—simultaneously an object of desire and a figure of authority—producing an inherent imbalance of power. Her initial rejection of Pappu's advances reflects dominant expectations surrounding female chastity and emotional restraint (Sasi, 2012, p.112). However, her eventual participation exposes the precarious terrain of female desire within a patriarchal order that permits its expression only at the cost of punishment and moral condemnation.

The *Sarppakavu*, while enabling Pappu's assertion of agency, denies Rathi a similar latitude. Though framed as a sacred and protective space, it ultimately becomes a site where patriarchal logic asserts itself most violently. Rathi bears the consequences of transgression, her death serving as a moral closure that reaffirms social order. Thus, the film underscores how eco-theological spaces, far from being neutral or emancipatory, often reproduce gendered hierarchies—granting mobility and experimentation to male desire while rendering female desire fatal.

VI. TRIBAL BODIES, DESIRE, AND SPATIAL DYNAMICS

The 1989 film *Adharvam* functions as a complex cinematic site where representations of tribal identities intersect with questions of gender, power, caste, and spatial politics. Although the film derives its title from the Atharvaveda and appears, on the surface, to engage with ritualistic and spiritual themes, it ultimately reinforces entrenched stereotypes and hierarchical power relations. A critical reading of the narrative reveals how cinematic storytelling can inadvertently marginalise subaltern voices, foregrounding the ethical stakes of representation within popular cinema. The narrative centres on Thevalli Namboodiri, a renowned astrologer who uncovers the role of black magic and tantric practices performed by his childhood friend, Mekkadan Namboodiri, in disturbing the harmony of their village. When Thevalli attempts to intervene rationally, he is rebuffed, and it is foretold that Mekkadan's illegitimate son, Anantha Padmanabhan, will inherit and master these dark practices. In response, Thevalli resolves to instruct both his legitimate son, Vishnu, and Anantha in the three Vedas, hoping that formal Vedic learning will provide them with moral and social legitimacy.

Anantha emerges as an exceptionally gifted student of Vedic knowledge and tantric art. He falls in love with the daughter of Putthedan Namboodiri, a respected Brahmin who harbours deep-seated contempt for Anantha due to his caste status. Vishnu, by contrast, moves to the city for higher education and becomes romantically involved with Usha. A public astrological consultation exposes the simmering caste tensions when Putthedan humiliates Anantha, prompting him to leave in protest. While Mekkadan expresses sympathy and encourages Anantha to pursue deeper knowledge of the Atharvaveda, the situation escalates violently when Putthedan discovers Anantha with his daughter. Anantha is assaulted, his home is burned, and his elderly mother perishes in the fire. This traumatic rupture propels Anantha towards vengeance. He submits himself to Mekkadan's tutelage in dark magic, embracing malevolent ritual practices. Even after Mekkadan's death, Anantha continues his penance, unleashing chaos upon the village. His domination extends to the local tribal community, whom he subjugates through magic, using Ponni—the daughter of the tribal chieftain—as an instrument for advanced *abhichara karma*. Alarmed, Thevalli implores Vishnu to intervene and dissuade Anantha. When Vishnu and his companions attempt to confront him, they are rebuffed by the tribal people and warned away. Their interference proves disastrous: protective magical boundaries are dismantled, a companion dies, a catastrophic storm is unleashed, and Ponni is killed.

In the film's climactic sequence, Anantha recognises the magnitude of his transgressions. Directing Vishnu

to seek refuge at the Devi idol hidden in his mansion's basement, he sacrifices himself to the Goddess in an act of atonement. The destructive forces annihilate the mansion and the surrounding forest, yet Vishnu and Usha survive unharmed, sheltered by divine grace.

Despite its dramatic resolution, *Adharvam* remains deeply problematic in its representational politics. Anantha, as the illegitimate and caste-marked son, is constructed as the quintessential 'Other', associated with impurity, darkness, and transgression. His desire for an upper-caste woman and his subsequent turn to tantric practices are framed as moral aberrations, reinforcing Brahmanical hierarchies. The narrative further deploys a saviour complex by positioning Vishnu—the legitimate, upper-caste son—as the moral centre capable of redeeming both Anantha and the village. This framing silences alternative voices and erases the agency of subaltern characters.

The portrayal of Ponni, the tribal woman, is particularly troubling. Her character exposes how the cinematic imagination of the subaltern body is entangled with Brahmanical and colonial ideologies. The casting of Vijayalakshmi Vadlapati (Silk Smitha), an actress renowned for her erotic screen persona, raises critical questions about intent and effect. Whether driven by commercial considerations or deeper representational biases, this choice infuses the tribal female body with hypersexualised imagery, aligning with a long-standing cinematic tradition that objectifies women. Ponni is rendered an 'exotic' spectacle—sensual, available, and consumable— rather than a subject endowed with agency, cultural specificity, or emotional depth.

The film further situates the tribal settlement as a secluded, mysterious enclave, intensifying the exoticisation of indigenous spaces. Within this constructed geography, Ponni is depicted as willingly participating in ritualistic nudity for Anantha's exorcistic practices. Such scenes foreground the commodification of the tribal body under the guise of spirituality, revealing the film's colonial undercurrents. Desire is unevenly distributed: Ponni articulates emotional and physical longing, while Anantha is elevated to a detached, *sattvic* figure consumed solely by ritual. This asymmetry reinforces patriarchal norms by assigning affect and desire to the female body while absolving the male protagonist of emotional accountability.

Spatially, the narrative charts a familiar trajectory— from the urban centre to the rainforest enclave— romanticising the latter as a site of primal authenticity and spiritual potency. This movement reiterates the trope of indigenous spaces as untouched domains awaiting external intervention and enlightenment. Ponni, as a figure rooted in the forest, is simultaneously infantilised and eroticised—portrayed as naïve, innocent, yet dangerously sensual. Her desires are ultimately marked as deviant, reaffirming the stereotype of the hypersexual tribal woman whose body must be disciplined or sacrificed. Through these narrative and visual strategies, *Adharvam* participates in the broader cinematic discourse of Othering, reinforcing colonial, casteist, and patriarchal assumptions. Rather than interrogating structures of power, the film naturalises them, legitimising external authority and moral intervention while marginalising indigenous voices and experiences.

VII. ECOLOGICAL–SPIRITUAL SYMBOLISM IN ANANDABHADRAM

he 2005 Malayalam film *Anandabhadram*, adapted from Sunil Parameshwaran's novel of the same name, negotiates the fraught interface between modernity and tradition through a dense symbolic use of ecological settings. The film mobilises ritual landscapes—particularly the *kavu* or sacred grove—as charged sites where spirituality, fear, and power intersect, thereby reinscribing long-standing colonialist and socio-cultural narratives. This analysis examines how these ecological–spiritual spaces are cinematically constructed as repositories of ritual practice and as perceived threats to social order.

The narrative centres on Anandan, a young man returning from the modern, urban milieu of San Francisco to a remote village entrenched in ancestral customs. Within this village, ecological–spiritual spaces—most notably the sacred groves—function as performative stages for arcane rituals and occult practices. These rituals, repeatedly framed as dark, archaic, and destabilising, propel the villagers to seek Anandan's intervention to liberate them from the malevolent force personified by the tantric practitioner Dhigambaran.

In *Anandabhadram*, ritual practices are not merely narrative embellishments but constitute the very axis around which the story revolves. The sacred groves,

inscribed with ritual symbols and esoteric meanings, are depicted as liminal spaces that oscillate between the sacred and the profane (Gupta, 2003, p. 44). These ecological–spiritual landscapes are rendered secretive and threatening, subtly embedding colonial tropes that frame indigenous ritual spaces as enigmatic zones harbouring danger. Such representations reinforce stereotypes that characterise local belief systems as primitive and inherently hazardous, particularly to women, who emerge as the most vulnerable subjects within these spaces.

Anandan's positioning as a saviour figure further aligns the film with colonial narrative structures, wherein the educated, rational outsider assumes the role of redeemer, rescuing the village from the perceived excesses of its own traditions. The stark contrast between Anandan's "civilised" modern background and the village's "uncivilised" ritual environment perpetuates a binary that privileges modernity while delegitimising indigenous epistemologies.

The romantic subplot between Anandan and Bhadra deepens this ideological framework by introducing discourses of purity and contamination within ecological–spiritual contexts. Anandan's love is coded as restrained and 'pure,' implicitly associated with his urban, educated identity, while rural traditions are positioned as morally suspect. In contrast, Dhigambaran is constructed as a figure driven exclusively by corporeal desire and lust, reinforcing the association of ritual spaces with unchecked sexuality and moral decay. His presence consolidates the film's depiction of sacred groves as sites of transgression and threat, thereby legitimising the need for external intervention.

The narrative complexity intensifies when Anandan, under Dhigambaran's possession, exhibits overt physical and sexual desire towards Bhadra. This transformation reinforces the civilised/uncivilised dichotomy at the heart of the film: emotional restraint and 'pure' love are attributed to the modern subject, while embodied desire is displaced onto the figure of the occult other. Through this trope, *Anandabhadram* ultimately reaffirms colonialist binaries that oppose rational modernity to ritualistic primitivism, using ecological–spiritual spaces as symbolic terrains upon which these ideological struggles are played out.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The study has examined how Malayalam cinema constructs and circulates images of indigenous belief systems, ritual practices, and ecological–spiritual spaces through frameworks deeply inflected by colonial epistemologies. By situating cinematic narratives within the intersecting forces of colonialism, patriarchy, caste, and modernity, the article demonstrates that eco-theological spaces are rarely neutral backdrops. Instead, they function as ideologically charged terrains where power is negotiated and hierarchies are reaffirmed. The persistence of colonial binaries—civilised/uncivilised, rational/irrational, modern/archaic—continues to shape representational logics. Cinema thus becomes a key site where historical anxieties are re-enacted and legitimised. These narratives often obscure indigenous epistemologies rather than engaging with them on their own terms. Consequently, cultural complexity is reduced to spectacle and stereotype.

The analysis reveals that ecological spaces such as kavus, sacred groves, and forested landscapes are repeatedly framed as zones of danger, secrecy, and moral excess. While these spaces historically functioned as sites of communal memory, ritual continuity, and ecological ethics, cinematic representation often reconfigures them as threats to social order. Such portrayals draw heavily on colonial and Victorian moral frameworks that pathologised indigenous spirituality and sexuality. The transformation of sacred ecologies into spectacles of fear or eroticism reinforces the notion that tradition must be corrected or eradicated. This cinematic strategy legitimises external intervention, usually embodied by a modern, educated male protagonist. In doing so, indigenous belief systems are delegitimised and rendered incompatible with progress. The ecological is thus stripped of its ethical and cultural depth.

Gender emerges as a central axis through which these representational politics operate. Women's bodies are consistently positioned as sites where tradition, desire, and morality are contested. Female characters are either sanctified as passive embodiments of purity or demonised as hypersexual, irrational, and dangerous. The punishment of female desire—through madness, death, or silence—functions as a narrative mechanism to restore patriarchal order. Eco-theological spaces,

rather than enabling female agency, often become arenas where women bear the cost of transgression. The repeated alignment of femininity with vulnerability and culpability reinforces patriarchal control over both body and space. Thus, cinema naturalises gendered violence while presenting it as cultural inevitability.

The article further demonstrates that caste and indigeneity are inseparable from these gendered representations. Subaltern and tribal bodies are frequently exoticised, eroticised, and instrumentalised to advance dominant narratives. Characters from marginalised communities are denied interiority and agency, reduced instead to symbols of darkness, desire, or disorder. The saviour trope—centred on upper-caste, modern masculinity—reaffirms Brahmanical and colonial hierarchies under the guise of moral resolution. Such narratives erase indigenous voices while claiming to speak on their behalf. The cinematic imagination thus reproduces social inequalities rather than interrogating them. Representation becomes an act of containment rather than dialogue.By employing feminist intersectionality and gender analysis, this study foregrounds the need to read cinematic texts as sites where ecology, spirituality, gender, and power intersect. An intersectional approach reveals how sexuality is policed differently across gender, caste, and spatial location. It exposes how desire is legitimised for some bodies while criminalised for others. The films analysed demonstrate that eco-theological spaces are mobilised to discipline deviance and reaffirm normative identities. Cinema, therefore, participates in the cultural governance of bodies and beliefs. Recognising these patterns is essential for dismantling inherited colonial frameworks.

In conclusion, this article argues that Malayalam cinema, despite its progressive reputation, often reproduces colonial and patriarchal imaginaries through its depiction of indigenous ecologies and spiritual practices. These representations obscure the lived realities, ethical systems, and epistemic richness of indigenous communities. A reimagining of cinematic engagement with eco-theological spaces is urgently required—one that acknowledges plurality, agency, and historical context. Such a shift would move beyond exoticism towards ethical representation. Cinema holds the potential to become a space of resistance rather than repetition. Reclaiming indigenous ecologies from cinematic othering is thus both an aesthetic and political imperative. Only then can film function as a medium of genuine cultural dialogue.

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