



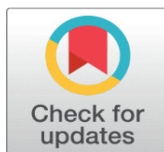
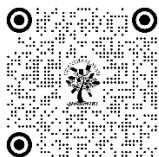


# HAUNTING THE PSYCHE OF MALAYALI: THE TRADITION OF HORROR IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

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## ABSTRACT

Malayalam Cinema is well known for its making of exceptional horror films along with great films in other genres. It is quite interesting that Malayalam Cinema has had a tradition of horror from the beginning. The tradition of horror in Malayalam Cinema starts with A. Vincent's *Bhargavinilayam*, released in the year 1964. It is notable that Malayalam Cinema attempted the genre of horror even in its early period.

This paper tries to examine how Malayalam cinema deals with horror and thereby creates a say in the culture of Kerala. Interestingly, the culture of Kerala has contributed a lot to the making of Malayalam horror films and it in turn helped in shaping the culture too. So, horror in Malayalam cinema is an area that needs discussion and analysis.

The exciting part of the study is that Malayalam Cinema has varied versions of horror. As Kerala is enriched with folklore and stories that engagingly instill horror, it is not surprising that Malayalam films have a say in the horror tradition. Not only that but also, Malayalam Cinema owns different kinds of horror films, each one linked with various cultures that exist/existed in Kerala. The study explores various types of horror films made in Malayalam. The paper also aims to examine the cultural connection that each type holds. Feminist Film theories and psychoanalytic theories provide the foundation for the study.

**Keywords:** Film, Media, Culture, Cultural Studies, Popular Culture, Folklore

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malayalam cinema attempted the horror genre in its early period. The horror tradition in Malayalam Cinema starts with A. Vincent's *Bhargavinilayam* released in the year 1964. After that, Malayalam Cinema witnessed very many horror films. It is not surprising that in Kerala where numerous folklore and stories have horror elements, such films emerge plentiful. The exciting component of the study is that not

all films deal with horror similarly. The varied cultures that exist/existed in Kerala help films take different perspectives to instill horror in the audience's mind.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his *Monster Theory*, states that "Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural and literary-historical) that generate them." [Cohen \(1996\)](#). As horror films depict 'monsters' in society, each Malayalam horror film has something in connection with Kerala's social, cultural, literary, and historical scenario.

An attempt to dive into the world of Malayalam Horror Films makes it clear that, as Kerala is a state that includes various cultures, horror films also fall under different categories. There are films that deal with the mythical concept of Yakshi, and films with ghosts of deceased people, mostly of women, who seek revenge against their murderers. And a handful of films use black magic to instill horror in the audience's minds. There are also horror films that worked on the concept of *punarjanmam*. Malayalam cinema even tried a hand at the comedy-horror genre too.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to examine how Malayalam Cinema deals with the horror genre and what cultural connections the genre has. The study looks for the significance of the history, politics, and geography of Kerala in these films too. The study also attempts to analyse different types of horror films made in Malayalam and check what are the factors that make each type differs from one another.

## 3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is not only that the horror tradition in Malayalam Cinema started at an early period as far as the history of the cinema in Kerala is considered, but also the tradition has a strong say even now. The genre horror is plentiful with quite a lot of films released every year. In such a scenario in which many horror films get released and the audiences are excited to receive them, this study becomes significant. As the study is capable of contributing to multiple areas of knowledge such as Film Studies, Monster Studies, and Genre Studies, it is highly pertinent as far as academics is considered.

## 4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The very first horror film in Malayalam, [Bhargavinilayam \(1964\)](#), tells the story of a young novelist who confronts the spirit of a deceased lady in an isolated mansion named, Bhargavinilayam ("Bhargavi Nilayam"). The lady, Bhargavi, who had a lover Sasikumar, tells the novelist their story, which he listens to with great interest. The film's screenplay is done by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer based on his own story, 'Neelavelicham'. The film deals with a meta-cinematic aspect; close watching of the film reveals the symbiotic relationship between the filmmaker and the writer through the portrayal of the amicable relationship between the novelist and Bhargavi. Throughout the film, the pain behind the creation of a literary/artistic piece is visualised; and that is made engaging by bringing a non-earthly character into the plot. The presence of Bhargavi instills enthusiasm and fear at the same time; the loneliness felt by the audience along with the protagonist, the novelist, in a mansion like Bhargavinilayam, gets erased when they confront Bhargavi on screen, but the fact that she is ethereal imbues fear in their minds.

It is obvious that Malayalam Cinema has very well used the mythical concept of Yakshi in creating horror through plenty of films. The mythical character of Yakshi

somehow got mixed up with the Western 'ghost's characteristics', somewhere in history. So, after a while, the Yakshi – who was originally the attendee of Kubera, in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain mythologies got a tint of Western ghosts. So even though earlier films like *Yakshi* (1968) by K. S Sethumadhavan portray Yakshi as a celestial being, later films started giving her the attributes of a ghost; that is, often women who confront an unnatural death come back to avenge their murderers as Yakshis. The films like *Lisa* (1978), *Neeli* (2018), *Sreekrishna* (1984), *Veendum Lisa* (1987), *Akashaganga* (1999), *Indriyam* (2000), *Bhadra* (2001), *Yakshiyum Njanum* (2010), etc. presents Yakshi in the above-mentioned light. *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (1998) directed by Hariharan stands apart from these as it attempts to portray Yakshi from a female perspective. The film visually presents Kunjathol, the Yakshi through the perspective of Janakikutty, the title character. For her Kunjathol is a friendly-Yakshi. This was a huge milestone in the feminist reading of horror films.

Another notable Malayalam film in the horror tradition is *Yakshi*. *Yakshi* is directed by K.S. Sethumadhavan. The film got released in the year 1968. It is an adaptation of Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's novel of the same title. The film is about Sreenivasan, a young and handsome college professor, and his encounter with a Yakshi. Sreenivasan's life turns downside-up after an accident in his chemistry lab. The accident leaves half of his face scarred. A psychoanalytic reading of the film displays that the accident not only scarred his face but also his mind. He develops intense insecurity about himself, and it begins to get reflected in all his activities. After the accident, Sreeni loses his girlfriend and is reluctant to go to college and pursue earlier hobbies like tennis. Later he meets a beautiful woman, Ragini; they fall in love immediately and get married. Soon after the wedding, Sreeni starts doubting Ragini's identity, for she chose to be his lover; he firmly believes that no ordinary woman would love his disfigured face. The film seems like a puzzle in which the identity of Ragini is questioned throughout. Thus, the film is an exploration of the disturbed mind of the protagonist with the backdrop of horror.

Another film that can be read with the assistance of psychoanalytic theories is *Akam* (2013) by Shalini Usha Nair. It is a remake of Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Yakshi*. In *Akam*, the protagonist is Srinivas, an architect. He got his face disfigured in a car accident. After this incident, he develops an insecurity similar to the protagonist of the 1968 film *Yakshi*. He falls in love with Ragini, whom he meets on a lonely night. Later he becomes unsure of her identity and starts doubting her to be a Yakshi. A reading with the help of psychoanalytic theories and feminist film theories unravels the disturbed male psyche of Srinivas when a woman with free sexuality is encountered. In both these films, the mythical character of Yakshi is portrayed, in two different time periods.

Another major area used to instill fear in Malayalis is black magic. The fact that black magic can instill fear in the audience is proven by the film *Vayanadan Thamban* in the year 1978. The film was directed by A. Vincent and produced by S. Hariharan. The film starts in a period in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the protagonist, Vayanadan Thamban played by Kamal Haasan, is a very old feudal warlock. He lives in a ruined fortress. He then starts worshipping the devil – Karimurthey. After long days of worship, Karimurthey appears before him. He requests him to provide eternal youth. Karimurthey grants his wish on the condition that he must be appeased by offering 10 virgin girls at certain intervals of his life, failing which can make him old and rotten. Thus Thamban, who gained the nectar of youth started seducing virgin girls for Karimurthey. His first victim was Kochammini, the heiress of a famous aristocratic family. She was the only female member of the family who has to keep on the family lineage. Thamban appears before them as a rich young prince of Wayanad. He tells

her uncle his desire to marry Kochammini. The family asked him to wait till they fix the horoscope, albeit Kochammini's elder brother agrees to the proposal. But Thamban was in a hurry to take away the girl. So instead of waiting till the marriage, he seduces Kochammini using his magical powers and kidnaps her. Kochammini's elder brother Ananthu witnesses this and reports it to the elders, who rush to her rescue. But they were made powerless by Thamban's magical powers. By the time his mask of youth withers away, he manages to offer her forcefully to Karimurthey and collect the second glass of nectar to regain youth. Later the family found out the truth about the mysterious prince that such a man or place does not exist.

Later Thamban seduced many girls, offered them to Karimurthey, and regained his youth. At last, he tries to seduce a girl named Elisy, who was his daughter in his relationship with Anna, another girl he seduced years before. As he is about to offer Elisy to Karimurthey, Anna comes there and tells him that she is his daughter. Dilemma-stricken Thamban could not move and failed to offer the girl to Karimurthey. Suddenly his mask of youth withers away and his body gets rotten down instantly.

An intertextual reading of this film with Christopher Marlowe's famous play, *Doctor Faustus*, where the protagonist sells his soul to the devil for attaining power and worldly pleasures is possible. The greed of humans is depicted with the backdrop of horror in both the play and the film. The film was a huge success that it is dubbed in Tamil as *Kanni Vettai* and later in Hindi as *Pyasa Shaitan*. The horror theme was the first of its kind when it got released.

The 1989 film *Adharvam*, directed by Dennis Joseph is also based on black magic. Ananthapadmanabhan, (played by Mammooty) the illicit son of Thevalli Namboothiri, a renowned astrologer, becomes the master of Vedas and tantric painting. He practices these in a well-mannered way until he gets insulted on his birth in an assembly of Namboothiris. This irks him and he turns to Adharvaveda, which is usually prohibited to attain. He sooner becomes a master in Adharvaveda and starts practicing black magic. Ananthan's practice of black magic plays havoc on many lives. Later towards the end, he realises his mistakes and offers himself to the Goddess. This film can be read against the backdrop of the strong caste system that prevailed in Kerala at that time. It is a clear-cut picture of Kerala society where there were so many illicit children born to Namboothiris as they had many extramarital affairs, at that time.

A similar background provides the setting for another popular horror film *Sreekrishna Parunthu*. It got released in the year 1984. It was directed by A. Vincent and written by P. V. Thampi based on his novel *Krishna Parunthu*. The film tells the story of Puthoor illam where positive tantric magic is practised under the blessings of Lord Garuda ("Sreekrishna Parunthu"). The protagonist is Kumaran Thambi a womanizer and an alcoholic. But later he starts learning tantric magic from his maternal uncle Pappu. He promises him that he will keep eternal celibacy hereafter. Thus, he becomes very powerful and attains popularity. But event sturn in such a way that he loses his celibacy. This incident takes away all his attained powers. He realises his mistakes, but it is too late. Then in haste, he starts learning and performing black magic. The film later deals with many supernatural events where Sreekrishna Parunthu still protects his ancestral home, but evil spirits take hold of Kumaran. In the end, due to the curse of Sreekrishna Parunthu, the illam, and all the *taliyolas* get destroyed in a fire.

After these two films it is *Anandabhadram*, released in the year [Anandabhadram \(2005\)](#) imbues fear through black magic. It is based on Sunil Parameshwaran's novel of the same title. It is the directorial debut of Santhosh Sivan

and Riya Sen. The film has a villain, named Digambaran, who is a master of black magic. The film through its spell-bounding visuals of *kavu* and *tharavadu*, which all were an integral part of Kerala at one period, takes the audience to another world. The music, which haunts the audience even after watching the movie adds effect to the horror.

*Manichithrathazhu* is a film that can be watched against the backdrop of psychoanalysis. The film is directed by Fazil and got released in the year 1993. [Manichithrathazhu \(1993\)](#). The film deals with a hitherto unusual theme in Malayalam Cinema. The film was much acclaimed after its release and it completed 300 days of run in many theatres. It won the National Film Award for Best Popular Film Providing Wholesome Entertainment and Shobana was awarded National Film Award for Best Actress for portraying the protagonist Ganga/Nagavalli ("*Manichitrathazhu*"). Ganga, a newly wed woman visits her husband's ancestral home. The film deals with her experience there which brought out the multiple personality disorder that was suppressed in her for years.

## 5. THE ROLE OF FEMALE DIRECTORS

Even though female directors are fewer in number compared to male directors, as far as Malayalam Horror films are considered, a few are there who proved their excellence through their films. *Yakshaganam*, was the first Malayalam Horror film directed by a woman. It was directed by the veteran actor Sheela in the year 1976. [Yakshaganam \(1976\)](#). *Nidrayil Oru Rathri* (1990) is another horror film directed by a female director, Asha Khan. The latest Malayalam horror film from a female director is [Akam \(2013\)](#) by Shalini Usha Nair.

There are a lot of Malayalam horror films that feature Yakshi. As Yakshi is a frequent character in folklore and stories of Kerala, it is not surprising that so many Malayalam horror films portray her. Keralites' fascination towards the Yakshi myth becomes obvious from the way they received such films. Films like [Yakshi \(1968\)](#), [Kaliyankattu Neeli \(1979\)](#), [Ennu Swantham Janakikutty \(1998\)](#), [Akashaganga \(1999\)](#), [Indriyam \(2000\)](#), [Pakalppooram \(2002\)](#), [Akam \(2013\)](#), [Neeli \(2018\)](#), etc. portrayed Yakshi in an alluring manner. The films like [Vayanadan Thamban \(1978\)](#), [Sreekrishna Parunthu \(1984\)](#), [Adharvam \(1989\)](#), [Anandabhadhram \(2005\)](#), etc., look into the intricacies of black magic.

The films like [Mayilpeelikkavu \(1998\)](#) by the Anil-Babu duo and [Vellinakshathram \(2004\)](#) by Vinayan deal with horror using the idea of reincarnation (*punarjanmam*). Both of the films were huge hits at the box office.

As the horror films of 20<sup>th</sup> century considered Yakshis and black magic, the horror films of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are much different. Films start talking about horror from different perspectives. Films strike the audience with fear in different styles. For instance, in [Aparichithan \(2004\)](#) the element of horror is brought out differently. Albeit there is hinting of horror elements from the beginning of the film, the main plot for the horror unveils towards the end of the film. [Vismayathumbathu \(2004\)](#) is another film that add shorror to the medical situation of a coma. It may be the writer's curiosity about what happens to a person's soul when he/she is in a coma that resulted in that film. Another film that deals with the concept of abortion in a frightening manner is *Kanakanmani*, directed by Akku Akbar in the year 2009. But it received many negative comments as it may influence the audience's take on abortion. The film *Nine* (2019), directed by Junues Muhammad, discusses a global crisis when a comet passes very close to the Earth and the consequent 9 days in which the Earth is in the magnetic field created by the comet. Later the disturbed



mind of the protagonist, Albert, an astrophysicist is revealed. Likewise, the films *The Priest* (2021) and *Cold Case* (2021) deal with the element of horror in a completely different way. It becomes clear that 21st-century horror films are affected by the new areas of knowledge that are emerging and developing. For instance, the areas of knowledge that develop day by day like medical science, psychology, astrophysics, etc. influence the horror films released in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Another sub-genre that emerged during this period is comedy-horror, also called horror comedy. This combines elements of comedy and horror. Films like *In Ghost House Inn* (2010) directed by Lal, *Adi Kapyare Kootamani* (2015) by John Varghese, and the recently released *Romancham* (2023) written and directed by Jithu Madhavan are comedy-horrors well received by Malayalis.

## 6. CONCLUSION

A deep analysis of horror films in Malayalam reveals the interest of people in Kerala in themes that creates fear in them. The reason behind the fascination may be the momentary scares that give them a chill down the spine. But a deeper analysis of this enthusiasm throws light on many cultural connections.

Horror films according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, try to bring out the 'monsters' of society, that is the fears of society that lay deep down. When Malayalam horror films are taken into consideration it is understood that different types of fears lurking in the society are addressed. For instance, the analysis of films that portrays yakshi shows how much the patriarchal society of Kerala fears the concept of yakshi – the concept of a female with high sexual prowess. That is yakshi films bring out the patriarchal society's fear of 'letting' females free.

The films like *Mayilpeelikkavu* and *Vellinakshathram* deal with the idea of reincarnation (*punarjanmam*) showcasing the fear or fascination about what happens after death. Likewise, Malayali's fear for the mysterious is dealt with in various films. This fear/fascination for everything mysterious can be considered a reason for the acceptance of all horror films in Malayalam.

The enthusiasm of Malayalis for horror is not something that is diminishing. The upcoming Malayalam movie *Neelavelicham*, directed by Aashiq Abu proves the point. *Neelavelicham* is based on Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's short story of the same title and a remake of the 1964 film *Bhargavinilayam* ("Neelavelicham' movie review: Aashiq Abu stays true to 'Bhargavi Nilayam,' but that is remake's weakness too").

So, the overall picture one gets while analysing these films is that Malayalam Horror films are very much connected to the society of its time. The films are highly influenced by the social, cultural, literary, and historical milieu of Kerala and it can be said that these films, in turn, have a say in developing the culture of Kerala.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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