

Myth In Select Malayalam Movies: An Analysis of Anandabhadram, Njan Gandharvan and Vaishali

Gayathri Sreeraj¹, Dona Sabu², Anjali M. R³, Dr. M. G. Priya⁴

¹PG Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidhyapeetham, Kochi, India.gayathrisreeraj98@gmail.com

²PG Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidhyapeetham, Kochi, India.thazhathukunneldonasabu@gmail.com

³PG Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidhyapeetham, Kochi, India.anjalimr116@gmail.com

⁴Assistant Professor (SG), Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences, Amrita Vishwa Vidhyapeetham, Kochi, India. mgpriya@asas.kh.amrita.edu

ABSTRACT

The Malayalam movie industry, known for its creative experimentations and realistic innovations, has been churning out gems of artwork with themes and ideas of all stripes for decades. Nevertheless, the Industry is less spoken about in a global scenario and lacks critical acclaim in world journals. This paper intends to decipher the concept and treatment of myth in Malayalam movies, through a comprehensive analysis of mythical symbols, images, and other elements illustrated in select movies, thereby elevating its stature by disseminating it to a larger audience. Archetypal criticism of myth is carried out through the semiotic analysis of three selected Malayalam movies, namely, *Ananthabhadram*, *Njan Gandharvan* and *Vaishali*.

Key Words : Myth, Art, Film, Archetypal Criticism, Semiotic analysis

Introduction

Mythology implies the story of the people passed on by word of mouth. With the passage of time and the evolution of language, ancient Greece started to mean “Fiction” when they referred to the term “Myth”. In the present literary scenario, the term signifies the inclusion of supernatural elements or Gods in fictional stories. Usually, these stories are borrowed down the memory lane and have their roots in the ancient past, thus conforming to the Greek definition of the term “Mythology”. Thus, as pointed out by Alen, the term Myth denotes stories of timeless and universal appeal and truth (Alen, 2003: 34). A mythological story is thus set amidst the supernatural and the contemporary world, with the presence of non-human characters such as gods, goddesses, monsters, spirits, ghosts, etc. Such fiction carries incidents that bend or break the laws of nature, thereby magnifying the “supernaturalness” of the world it portrays. Core values for the community are often instilled in the characters it depicts.

During ancient times Greek Drama and later English fiction were prominent literary genres or art forms in vogue and the present-day world is obsessed with motion pictures. Films are a popular medium of art that have made numerous attempts to re-establish the lost glory of mythologies and folklore. Malayalam cinema has not got its due credit in the world scenario and hence this attempt to showcase mythological elements of universal appeal and truth to academia across the globe. The initial phase of Malayalam cinema has produced many classics, based on myths relating to the history and true legends, but these movies remain underrated even after decades. This paper narrows down the study to three notable movies that have played a crucial role in augmenting the Malayalam Film Industry and intends to dissipate the concept among a larger audience. Through semiotic analysis, a detailed study of the traditional myths, archetypal symbols, images and characters employed in the movies *Ananthabhadram*, *Njan Gandharvan* and *Vaishali* are identified and elucidated for a comprehensive understanding.

Myth In Films

Myth is a conventional or classical tale about a peoples' early history or an explanation of a natural or social phenomenon, involving supernatural forces or events. It is a symbolic narrative that ostensibly relates actual events that are deeply associated with religious beliefs and ritualistic practices. Myths are of anonymous origin and exist in every culture. They also explain some of the mysteries of nature and the comprehensive relation between gods and humans. The characters in myth are usually gods, goddesses, warriors, celestial beings, heroes, etc. These characters are often responsible for the creation and maintenance of various physical, emotional and practical aspects of human experiences. According to Cynthia (qtd, in Andi Nirwana), myth is an "ideology in narrative accounts of historical events, as an allegory for or personification of natural phenomena, or as an explanation of ritual, used to convey religious or idealized experience, to establish behavioural models, and to teach". The term myth stems from the ancient Greek word *mythos* meaning a speech account, story, fable, etc. Ancient myths are known today, only by the virtue of documentation. Even today, some myths are deeply rooted in the cultural core of society and have become a part of everyday life. They fall into the category of social myths, which tend to justify or endorse existing social beliefs or behaviours and occur as a perpetual violation of socially acceptable norms and actions.

Literature, which represents life, serves an enduring bond with mythologies and folklores. The sort of relationship that exists between myth and literature exists between myth and other forms of arts also. Films are a powerful and influential medium of art that records and reflects the images of life. When compared to other art forms, films project the exotic fantasy worlds of myths in another dimension with the addition of visual elements of necromancy and illusions. It is also a dynamic agent of socialisation and influences people's perspective of the world. The codes of cultural signs and symbols employed in the films are identified and interpreted through semiotic analysis. Through this, the audience understands the meaning and contribution each object bears in the movie.

The theoretical study of myth is very complex because it involves etymological, anthropological and sociological analysis in order to ascertain a comprehensive understanding. Several problems may arise while conducting a study of myth. As they exist in every culture, there might be a diverse variety of tales centred around a particular myth itself and each symbolising different cultural beliefs. Sometimes these theories might be inadequate to explain several mysterious aspects of life that a specific myth poses. A type of critical theory known as Archetypal Literary criticism interprets a text by concentrating on recurrent myths and archetypes in the plot, symbols, pictures, and character types in a literary work. Archetypes, it claims, define the shape and purpose of literary works. Such archetypal studies help the readers in gaining a comprehensive view of the fundamental beliefs and the anxieties and fears of a particular society. Archetypal characteristics of this nature amount to an all-inclusive consideration of an entire generation, simultaneously tapping human anxiety and needs as well.

Malayalam movies are very creative, but they lack critical acclaim in world journals. Myths that revolved around history and true legends were a constant presence in the early phase of Malayalam cinemas. The relationship of the individual to mythical narratives embodies and expresses the society's ritualistic institutions and values that existed. The movies of this genre sometimes play a significant role in resolving some of our socio-cultural dilemmas and traumas that are deeply rooted in our shared psyche.

With the growth of the rational movement as part of the Renaissance, mythological movies which remained dormant gained a lot of attention. If we examine the period from 1930 to the 1980s, the Malayalam Industry boomed and experimented on varied topics related to superstitious beliefs and fantastical tales that existed in contemporary society. The visual adaptation of these had a huge value and produced some iconic mythological movies in the Industry. In this paper, by executing the theory of

archetypal literary criticism into selected movies, a thorough analysis is done to identify the myths in the plot, themes, characters, objects and images in selected movies. For the purpose of study, *Anandhabhadram*, *Njan Gandharvan* and *Vaishali* are chosen.

Analysis

The mining of epics and mythologies has always been an intimation for plots that could turn into films. This paper aims to explore the concept and treatment of myth in select Malayalam movies dissecting various mythical elements in *Anandhabhadram*, *Njan Gandharvan* and *Vaishali*.

Movies that portray black magic and dark arts have always captivated the audience. Though the majority of Malayalam films have been rooted in reality, this genre has enjoyed perennial freedom. To cite an example, the 2005 Malayalam movie *Anandhabhadram*, (directed by Santosh Sivan) is a typical instance of dark fantasy. Ghosts, spirits and black magic form an integral part of the storyline. The plot of the film highlights the shadowy characters of the mother and the grandfather, who were instrumental in moulding the character of Ananthan, the protagonist, and Digambaran, the antagonist, respectively. The foundation of the building of Ananthan's character is laid by his mother Gayathri, who narrates mysterious stories about her homeland Sivapuram to the child Ananthan.

Ananthan's mother narrates the story of the aristocratic *Madambi Tharavad*, detailing the unyielding culture of the elite. This family comprised practitioners of black magic, who were responsible to protect the precious *Nagamanikyam* preserved in the magical house called the *Manthrika pura*. Ananthan is awestruck at his mother's account of the age-old tradition of the household of consecrating the virgin daughters of the house as Goddesses, who possessed the ultimate authority over the *Nagamanikyam*. These young "Goddesses" were believed to possess miraculous medicinal powers also and people from far and wide came to these young girls to seek cure from grave diseases. Ananthan's mother was also one such "Goddess" chosen to be anointed among the children of her generation. Unfortunately for the *Madambi Tharavad*, this chosen Goddess elopes with Sethu, and therefore, Subhadra, the eldest daughter in the next generation, was anointed and conferred the much-coveted title. As fate would have it, Digambaran kills Subhadra, who was awaiting the anointing ceremony amidst all celebrations. Bhadra, the sole virgin female family member becomes the next in line. This is the point where the movie begins and then dips into further past and swings to the present narrative. Ananthan, who is introduced to these mysterious stories of the ancestral house and the aristocratic family of his mother, has an undeniable impact on his mind and he is eager to visit his ancestral village. Soon after his mother's demise, he decides to go there and is keen on lighting the traditional lamp at the *Shivakavvu*, as his mother wished him to. But this auspicious act of Ananthan's has to face the indelible black magic of Digambaran, the self-imposed guardian and proprietor of the precious stone – the *Nagamanikyam*. As every family has a black sheep, Digambaran accomplishes the legacy of his grandfather, Siddha Yogikal, in being a hurdle in the path of righteousness and goodness.

The plot unfolds the character of Chemban, the blind martial art expert, whose sister Bhama, was enticed into a relationship with Digambaran, who schemes to make use of her for some occult tantric seduction. Digambaran believed that this evil ritual would enable him to re-claim the soul of his murdered lover, Subhadra. Meanwhile, Bhadra, the chosen virgin to be deified according to the family tradition, faces the predicament of opting between her love for Ananthan on the one hand and keeping up the tradition of the *Madampitharavaad* on the other. Through transmigration, Digambaran makes use of the body of Ananthan, in order to achieve his ulterior motives. He is victorious to a great extent in this regard but ultimately truth wins as in all mythological stories and the test of time sees to the

restoration of the *Nagamanikyam*, the illumination of the *Shivakavu* through the lighting of the lamp, and the much-awaited union of Bhadra and Ananthan.

Ananthabhadram exquisitely illustrates some of the myths ingrained into the culture of Kerala. With the presence of places like *Shivakavu* and *Manthrika pura* that have a history of magic and dark arts, the village of *Sivapuram* becomes the hub of superstitious beliefs. Earlier the serpents were worshipped at *Shivakavu* but later *Digambaran* used the place for his evil deeds and human sacrifices. *Mantrikapura*, an ancient cave temple, assumes paramount significance in the movie. The precious *Nagamanikyam* and several *Thaliyolaas* were preserved inside the *Mantrikapura* that was watched by *Yakshi*. The sacred stone of *Nagamanikyam* was guarded by serpents. Thus, the place was concealed by supernaturalism.

Numerous myths revolve around the concept of *Nagamanikyam* but none of them is proved to have a scientific background. It is also known as viper's stone, snake's pearl, *nagamani*, serpent's stone, etc. It is widely used as a folk medicine for the cure of certain ailments too. This precious stone is believed to be shaped inside the head of a cobra. On full moon and black moon nights, the cobras that possess the gem spit it out to worship the almighty and swallow it back after the prayer. The *Nagamanikyam* is also assumed to have great powers to protect one from evil spirits. *Nagamanikyam* is considered as the soul of nature. In the movie, it is only visible after seeking the permission of the serpent *kunjattan* and in the presence of a virgin who belongs to the *Madampitharavaad*. *Digambaran*, the antagonist of the movie wishes to plunder the *Nagamanikyam* in order to strengthen his evil powers. *Naga Mothiram* is another mythical element used in the movie. Wearing this metal snake ring is a key to the mystical dimension of life and helps one to excel in *mantra siddhi*. In the movie the *Siddhayogikal* steals the ring from *Manthrika pura*.

The movie also accounts to several ritualistic practices that existed in ancient kerala. The tradition of anointing daughters as Goddesses as followed by *Madambi Tharavad*, is an example of this. The practice of bringing the ashes of the dead (*Chithabhasmam*) to their home land is another ritual practised even today.

Through the character of *Digambaran*, the movie opens a world of black magic and dark arts to the audience. He has a great wisdom in *marma siddhi* which he uses to defeat the people who stand against his occult deeds. His greed to become a great sorcerer prompted him to perform human and animal sacrifices. By practising *Tantric* seduction ritual he was able to take control over *Bhama's* mind and body, making her his slave. The process of transmigration was used by *Digambaran* in order to enter others' bodies and also bring *Subhadra* to life in exchange for the life of *Bhama*. The symbols, characters and settings in the movie are portrayed in such a way that it totally justifies the dark and rustic legends of ancient times.

Njan Gandharvan is a 1991 Malayalam romantic fantasy movie written and directed by P. Padmarajan, hinged upon the mythical tales of *Gandharvas*. *Gandharvas*, the musicians in the court of *Indra* are immortal male celestial beings who are destined to guard and serve *soma rasa* (an alcoholic beverage). According to Hindu mythology, *Gandharvas* are said to carry the lineage of Lord *Brahma*. They are considered to possess variegated magical powers including the ability to teleport and shapeshift. *Gandharvas* are bound to live with numerous rules and regulations imposed by the *devas*. They are forbidden from many heavenly pleasures of *Devaloka*, including the consumption of *soma rasa* and developing love and affection towards the *apsaras*. Transgressing these rules will result in *Gandharvas* being evicted from *Devaloka* with all their memories brushed off. They will be cursed to wander the earth for several *kalpas* through the shadows of night. *Gandharvas* are natural philanderers who seduce and steal the virginity of young maidens at their first sight, thereby making them their slaves or maids

forever. Once the curse is lifted, they are summoned back to *Devaloka* with all their memories on earth being left behind.

Bhama, the protagonist in the movie *Njan Gandharvan*, is a damsel who falls in love with Devan, a *Gandharva*, who appeared from a mystical wooden sculpture. From the very first encounter, he takes her to an esoteric world of love, pleasing all her senses and igniting the deepest passions within her. Breaking the conventional *Gandharva* narrative, Devan gets smitten with Bhama and becomes a slave to the one whom he was expected to enslave. Out of love, he was obligated to break many *gandharvic* rules which include him appearing before other humans in sunlit days and enchanting her parents with his ethereal voice. He gifted her the *rudraksham*, a holy and divine stone reckoned to be worn by all *Gandharvas*. Whenever she craved his presence, she could summon him in a trice with a sole touch of her lips on the *rudraksham*. The mythos of *Gandharvas* was initially revealed to Bhama by her grandmother and later by Devan himself. Devan promised Bhama that he will never desert her and expressed his desire to stay back as a human by hacking off his wings of immortality. Meanwhile, he was spotted by the guards of Chitrarathan, the lord of the celestial city of the *Gandharvas*, who stripped him off his voice and took him away to Chitrarathan's palace where he was heinously persecuted for breaking the rules of the heavenly world. After seven days and seven nights, he was granted his voice back on the condition that he should never talk to Bhama again. But the intense desire Devan had for Bhama made him break this vow. His misconduct was once again rumbled and Lord Brahma cautioned him about the impending doom awaiting him in hell. Bhama and Devan further decide to engage in copulation that would reduce the severity of the punishment as suggested by Lord Brahma.

The movie comprises ample amounts of recurring myths and archetypes associated with cultural fallacies and superstitions related to Hindu mythology, placing the mythical character of *Gandharva* as the pivot. The supernatural symbols and images are juxtaposed with the mythical narrative. The ancient wooden sculpture of *Gandharva* which Bhama finds at the seashore introduces the element of mysticism to the mythical nature of the movie. During their initial encounter, *Gandharva* appeared in the form of a blue butterfly. The blue colour reflects their desire and the butterfly symbolizes the short span of their love life. The sacred stone of *rudraksham* exemplifies the transcendental love they share while conserving its stature as a mysterious stone. The blooming blackboard tree which has a constant presence across the movie is an archetypal image of their blooming love. In the climax of the movie, the barren plain where they spend their last moments together resembles the barrenness of their lives without each other. The spurt of strong wind, sounds of lashing and revelations of the messengers and Lord Brahma are instances of celestial warnings. The blood oozing out of the broken branch of the tree operates as a bad omen. The burning handcuffs mark the beginning of his hideous ordeal for yearning plebeian mortality of earth. The holy *rudraksham* turning into mere white dust embarks the decline of Devan from the stature of *Gandharva* to an inferior being left to rot in hell. The mist of feathers, the blue butterfly and the light posse adds the element of fantasy. The movie also accounts for many superstitious rituals practised by ancestors to protect young maidens from the tricks of *Gandharvas*.

The mythical concepts of *Devaloka*, *Naraka*, etc. are also employed in the movie. Superior beings like *Devas* and *Gandharvas* belong to *Devaloka*. They are dispatched to *Bhoomi*(earth) for their misconduct and *Naraka* (hell) is the place where they pay for their sins. For frequently infringing the code of conduct, the displeased Indra *deva* ruled that Devan should confront severe retribution in hell where poisonous snakes and stinging spears awaited him. He will have to enclose molten female statuettes for every single moment he shares with Bhama. He was also dictated to fornicate with Bhama before the Seventeenth Wind of the Night or else he will be cursed to roam around the earth for a billion *kalpas* as a foul-smelling beast.

Unlike the conventional mythical narrative where the presence of an antagonist character is quintessential, *Njan Gandharvan* unfurls a new realm of imagination by replacing the antagonist with Devan being victimised by his own destiny. Instead of a valiant mythical hero, the movie renders the aspiration of a mystical character to attain a lucid human life, leaving behind the prerogatives and ruptures offered by his world.

Indian mythology has a vast trove of stories, deeply concerning Ramayana and Mahabharata that have hundreds of sub-stories that are conspicuously rich in culture, colour, lore, detail and heritage. *Vaishali* is one such film adapted from the epic *Mahabharata*. *Vaishali* (1988) is a period drama directed and edited by Bharatan. Produced by M. M Ramachandran and scripted by M. T Vasudevan Nair. It is the story of Vaishali, a *devadasi* who was assigned the mission of seducing Rishyasringan, the son of *Maharshi* Vibhandakan. The mission was to bring him to Champapuri, which was stricken with famine and drought to perform a *mahayagam* to shower rain.

In the film, Champapuri is struck by drought and famine and the only one who has the panacea to this situation is Rishyasringan, the son of the mighty and potent sage Vibhandakan. But the king knew that the sage Vibhandakan will not let his son accompany the royal retinue; neither can they use force against the *Rishi*, as this will result in contingent anger and trigger envy of the sage. In order to elude this danger, the king chooses treacherous means of seduction. Vaishali, the most voluptuous and charming woman in the kingdom, was entrusted with this mission of bringing Rishyasringan to *Angarajyam*. Rishyasringan who has not experienced any human presence other than his father was effortlessly lured by the *devadasi*. Towards the end of the movie, though Vaishali managed to fetch the sage to the country, she was cursed to death for her sin. Neither her love nor her consecration was granted. As labelled as *devadasi* her whole life was forfeit to sacrifice, agonize and finally lose end to death.

The actual myth of Vyshali and Rishyasringan is slightly different from the movie adaptation. In Hindu mythology, Rishyasringan was a deer-horned child. His father, the Vibhandaka *Rishi*, was a seer and his mother was a celestial paramour. According to another legend, he was said to have been born of a doe and had a slight protrusion on his forehead. Rishyasringan's story is told in Buddhist Jataka stories, and Vaishali is known as Shanta. Vibhandakan, Rishyasringan's father, raised him without any contact or sight of women. His father saw him as a sign of his weakness, so he drew a line that would erupt in flames if crossed by anything feminine. So, Vaishali, popularly known as Shanta the first child of King Dashrath, was sent to entice him out of the line. Later she lived as a hermit in the woods. In the movie, Rishyasringan is presented as a sage with human features and towards the end, Vaishali had a tragic end which is not as being ascribed in *Mahabharata*.

Though intertwined within the mythical taboo and religiosity, the movie is an advocate of civilization, clearly demarcating between the uncouth dark and light knowledge over ignorance. It nostalgically mourns the pre-modernised era. In addition to its plot, *Vaishali* explores diverse mythical elements all through the movie. Vaishali and Rishyasringan are mythical characters adapted from *Mahabharata* and various symbols defend this.

Myth is juxtaposed through different symbols and images such as vultures, skeleton, snake, etc. Death, rebirth, perception, and wisdom are all associated with vulture symbolism. The vulture symbolism represents judgement, shame, and a sick spiritual state. Since vultures feed on corpses, their spiritual sense is that of a grubby animal. These birds are associated with the kingdom of death, and they are known for leaving bodies in their nests. Here vultures can be considered as an ill omen of protagonists in the perceived future. Vultures can be metaphorical to the aristocratic community that fed on the

destitute. King Lomapada is an example of the wickedness of the vulture, who even offered a kingdom to Vaishali in pursuit of his need, neglecting her right after the completion of his mission. Just the fruit of her efforts is sordid. The vultures, rotted bodies and droughted lands convey devastation and total annihilation of the social evils in the land of Champapuri.

Skeleton signifies the poverty and sinful nature of Champapuri. The serpent is a symbol for the toxicity of many characters. Nature and humans shared a soulful connection in ancient times. Through several signs and codes of nature, man was apprised from impending danger. For instance, Vibhandakan instructed nature to protect his son from external beings. The mountains and ferocious wild animals were held responsible to obstruct the path of invaders. Everytime Vaishali tries to get near the sage, nature tries to obstruct in many ways. Even at the end, rain is showered as a symbol of love but it turns out to be the demise of Vaishali. These elements in the movie try to justify and naturalise the supernatural factor of the myth.

Yaga is a conventional ritual, practised to please the Lord of rain (Indra) for begetting rain. This ritualistic belief and practise of *yagas* submerges to the plot of the movie. Like *yaga*, curse is a mythical element that has a prominent role in the life journey of many characters. It is a solemn utterance intended to invoke a divine force to injure or punish anyone or anything. The curse that fell upon the kingdom of Champapuri, is the protruding stigma of this movie. The tragic death of the character Vaishali was also an aftermath of a curse for seducing the sage.

Conclusion

Over the past decades, scholars of Film Studies have recognised the value of mythographic methodologies for motion picture analysis. But most of the research in this field has been focused either on mythic archetypal images or mono mythic narrative structure, rather than combining the two approaches. Through a qualitative approach, this paper tries to propose an analytic study of the movies in cultural and mythical context. The symbols, characters and settings in the movies *Anandhabhadram*, *Njan Gandharvan* and *Vaishali* are portrayed in such a way that the rustic legends of ancient times are expressed to the modern-day audience in a convincing manner.

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