
Re-imagining the Forgotten Folklore of Kerala in *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra*

Dr. Ashique Rashul

Assistant Professor

Haringhata Mahavidyalaya

Subarnapur, Haringhata, Nadia, WB, India

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Abstract:

This research contends that *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* makes use of the subaltern folklore of Kerala, to create a neo-mythological universe of superheroes with which to address the contemporary issues of gender, caste, and power. Instead of viewing such characters as static relics or as simply two-dimensional monsters, this research will argue that the film uses these characters as complex moral agents of justice; therefore, it is reversing earlier Brahminical and patriarchal frameworks that have used folklore as a mechanism by which to control female sexuality, and to enforce the existing caste hierarchies. This research will engage in a close reading of both the oral and textual traditions of the various stories, including *Aithiyamaala*, to trace the ways in which *Lokah's* narrative has humanized and politicized mythic beings, and further connects their supernatural violence to historical traumas, marginalizations, and resistances of subaltern communities. This study will examine how the film provides a feminist interpretation of Kalliyankattu Neeli by changing the yakshi from an alluring predator to a representative of community-based revenge and self-defense for marginalized groups. This study will also locate *Lokah* within the broader development of Kerala's oral traditions, and contend that *Lokah* is a representation of folklore as a "living archive" that continues to support cultural memory in a globally connected and digitally mediated media environment. Lastly, the study will contend that *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* is a major turning point for regional cinema, and provides the opportunity to create an expanded "Lokah Universe," utilizing folklore as a method of cultural reclaiming, feminist critique, and advocacy for socially just causes and intersectionality.

Keywords: folklore, superheroes, justice, marginalizations, yakshi, cultural memory, feminist.

Introduction

In the way of folklore in Kerala has been an evolving tapestry for the last few hundred years, which has drawn upon the many different cultural, religious, and historical

elements of the people of Kerala. These evolving elements include myths, legends, ballads, ritual performances, the worship of sacred groves (kaavu), and oral storytelling. As a result, this folkloric material reflects both the unique social and cultural characteristics of Kerala as well as the different ways in which Kerala has interacted with other tribes, Hindus, Christians and Muslims. The mythological characters that make up the essence of the folklore of Kerala include female spirits known as yakshis (often associated with fertility, vengeance, protection), shape-shifter characters known as Odiyans, characters who have been referred to as being without fixed moral alignment such as Chathan, and the legendary sorcerer KadamattathuKathanar. These mythic figures continue to be relevant in Kerala's collective consciousness today because they represent complex narratives about social memory, morality, and identity. Not simply remnants of history, they also act as living agents that allow contemporary issues—such as gender roles, caste hierarchies, and cultural resistance—to be negotiated and re-imagined on a daily basis in festivals, and in modern media. Through popular retellings of their stories, whether through oral or written forms (for example, collections such as *Aithihyamaala*), along with local cinema and literature, these figures continue to function as active and changing symbols of Kerala's cultural heritage and provide evidence of how the traditional continues to evolve within modernity. As Hemlock Journal notes, these stories “aren’t relics; they live, breathe, and still matter,” surviving through “oral traditions, ballads, and later compilation in works like *Aithihyamala*”. (When Folklore Fights Back.) Their continued relevance illustrates that folklore functions as an important and ever-changing repository of community values and histories that are being continually adapted to respond to the present realities and anxieties of a community.

Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra directed by Dominic Arun, is a recent film produced in India in the Malayalam language, which takes Kerala's rich folklore and places it into a modern cinematic world. “While the film’s imagination of the yakshi draws on several Western elements, Malayali folktales about the ‘monstrous feminine’ offer a more complicated picture, shaped as much by caste and male fantasy, as by the thrill of the dangerous and transgressive” (Manoj “Lokah Chapter One.”). The film tells the story of Chandra (Kalyani Priyadarshan), an enigmatic woman who comes to Bengaluru and eventually reveals her true identity as Kalliyankattu Neeli — a strong and powerful yakshi (female supernatural being) out of Kerala's folklore. The film utilizes a creative approach to combine the ancient mythic figures and stories of Neeli and KadamattathuKathanar with the contemporary social issues of organ trafficking, caste violence and misogyny.

Folklore Figures in Kerala and Their Original Contexts

A comparative study of mythological characters in Kerala folklore as well as those characters in the story “Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra,” based on their origins, ways of transmission and influence of the texts, such as *Aithihyamaala*, to their stories has been conducted. The study examines Yashkis, especially Kalliyankattu Neeli; Odiyan, the shapeshifter of lower caste; KadamattathuKathanar, the sorcerer-priest; Chathan, the trickster spirit and the legend of the elder or highest mentor figure, Moothon:

Yakshi (Especially Kalliyankattu Neeli): Yakshis are female spirits in Kerala folklore that are typically characterized by their connection to fertility, vengeance and supernatural

powers. In many cases, these spirits are represented as alluring and deadly toward men, particularly Brahmins. Kalliyankattu Neeli is one of the most popular and widely recognized Yakshi legends due to her tragic past and subsequent transformation into a spirit of vengeance. The origin of Yakshis lies in early Dravidian goddesses and animistic practices that were incorporated with the influence of Brahmanical and Jain traditions. Traditionally, the majority of the stories about Yakshis were transmitted orally through ballads, folk songs, ritual performances (theyyams), and community storytelling. The *Aithihyamaala* ("Garland of Legends"), which was written by Kottarathil Sankunni in the first half of the 20th century, is a significant collection of Malayalam literature that gathers and codifies many of the above-mentioned legends, including several Yakshi legends. As a result of this publication, it contributed greatly to the development of public perception by creating a mixture of mythology, history and morality. Many of the Yakshi legends are used as cautionary tales emphasizing issues of gender, caste and justice.

Kadamattathu Kathanar (Priest-Sorcerer): Kadamattathu Kathanar is a legendary Christian priest, whose stories portray him as having supernatural powers, including exorcisms and control over spirits such as Yakshis and demons. His character represents a combination of the religious practices of Christianity and the animistic and folk magical traditions of local people. The stories about Kathanar typically emphasize his wisdom, power and ability to act as mediator between humans and the world of spirits. The stories of Kathanar are part of the oral tradition of Kerala, which are transmitted through community narrations, church lore, and folk performances. Although his stories are not given prominence in the *Aithihyamaala*, they can be found in other regional chronicles and have been made into different forms of media in order to illustrate the relationship between religion and folklore.

Chathan (Trickster Spirit): Chathan is a shape-shifting spirit, with a mischievous personality and is often ambiguous regarding his morality - whether he will help or harm depends upon the situation. Chathan is rooted in the Dravidian and tribal animist traditions and represents liminality, as well as the unpredictable aspects of nature and society. He is also a representation of the subaltern power and cunning. The stories of Chathan have been recorded largely through oral tradition and continue to exist in folk music and in the form of ritual enactments. The *Aithihyamaala* mentions some spirits similar to Chathan, however, it deals more extensively with larger supernatural entities. As a narrative counterpoint to the dominant social orders, Chathan serves as a function of folklore.

Odiyan (Shapeshifter related to lower castes): Odiyans are believed to be witch-like figures, who possess the ability to transform themselves into various animals, and are commonly feared as contracted assassins and sorcerers. Throughout history, the legends of Odiyans have been connected to the oppressed lower caste communities and have revealed the social mechanisms of fear and control. The legends of Odiyans have been passed down through oral transmission, particularly in rural and tribal areas. The *Aithihyamaala* and other collections of folklore describe Odiyan legends, illustrating their connections to magic, social marginalization, and folk justice.

Moothon: Moothon is portrayed as an elderly or supreme mentor figure, drawing from both the universal mythological "old man" archetype and specific Malayalam folklore traditions. In the movie, Moothon is a guide and anchor for Chandra and other supernatural beings, ensuring the balance between supernatural and the humans.

Other Referenced Figures and Motifs: The narrative universe indicates potential future appearances by other folkloric beings such as Maadan, Marutha, Arukola, Thendan, and spirits from the *Aithiyamaala* collections. Folkloric motifs common to the movie include sacred groves (kaavu), rituals, spirit worship, and ballads, demonstrating the continued vitality of the mythic imagination of Kerala. The above characters demonstrate how *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* relies heavily on Kerala's folklore and indigenous mythologies, transforming them into living, dynamic agents in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

The *Aithiyamaala* is an important collection which further illustrates how these stories have become embedded in Kerala's collective memory. The *Aithiyamaala* is a unique blend of mythic, historical and moral storytelling; it helps to preserve many of the elements of oral traditions and also influences how they are interpreted. As such, these mythic creatures act as lenses into society's values, tensions and histories (e.g., gender roles, caste systems and power dynamics) as both oral and written forms of the *Aithiyamaala* are passed down through generations. In *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra*, this re-interpretation allows the previously feared/marginalized figures of folklore to be re-cast as modern day heroes/heroines engaging with current social issues including feminist and anti-caste activism; thereby illustrating how the evolving folk myths of Kerala continue to evolve within popular imagination. 'Lokah doesn't just reference these myths, it reorients them by making mythic beings reimagined as superheroes and vigilantes bringing in moral ambiguity by blending myth with urban crime and social issues'. (When Folklore Fights Back.)

The results of this research illustrate the layers of complexity and continuing relevance of Kerala's mythic characters; and further demonstrate the important function of written collections (textual codification) in addition to oral traditions in preserving and interpreting them.

The Reconfiguration of Myth in Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra

The Film, *Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* utilizes a non-linear format and has a layered narrative that embeds historical figures from the folklore of Kerala (such as Kalliyankattu Neeli, Kadamattathu Kathanar, Chathan, Odiyan) into its story line. It weaves together folklore and contemporary urban social issues of today's Kerala.

By utilizing the above-mentioned figures, the filmmakers were able to transform the static, legendary archetypes into complex moral figures. In this way, they transformed the yakshi (a vengeful spirit) Neeli from a figure simply driven by vengeance into a figure driven by the need to protect and survive. In addition, they also created a new moral ambiguity for Kathanar, who was previously perceived as a sorcerer in the distant past, he is now seen as a

mysterious ally in today's world, one who exists in a moral grey area. And, in the same way, the filmmakers also created a sense of morality and complexity to Chathan and Odiyan, who were once viewed solely as supernatural beings of chaos, they are now viewed as complex representations of subaltern resistance.

The filmmakers adapted the figures from folklore into humanized forms of the figures, allowing them to connect emotionally with the audience of today. In this way, the film also creates a unique dialogue between myth and reality of the urban world.

Throughout the film, we see mythological beings coexisting alongside the urban realities of today's Kerala, including police corruption, organ trafficking, caste violence, and gender oppression. The film shows that despite the changing times, the sacred groves, ritualistic symbols, and supernatural lore continue to live on beneath the surface of the urban undercurrents of the city. The film's ability to show the persistence of folklore as a living and breathing cultural entity, allows it to use the powerful distance of mythology to discuss the pressing social issues of today.

This form of storytelling, which combines the modern and the mythological, makes *Lokah* a groundbreaking film that represents a new direction in how to tell the stories of the past to the people of today.

Yakshi Reimagined: Gender, Agency, and Justice

The yakshi is a complex gendered archetype in Kerala folklore that includes elements of both the monstrous feminine and the wronged woman. Traditionally, she is a female spirit who uses magic to lure men to their deaths. Through this, she serves as a cautionary tale to warn men about the dangers of female promiscuity and female transgression.

Yakshi is such a concept, that is referenced extensively in Kerala Lore. It is also used as a common expression with varying semantic contexts – to indicate an evil woman who behaves dreadfully to others, to indicate a woman's ungroomed appearances or even to indicate a woman who is lecherous. Though originally the *Yakshi* is ethereally beautiful in appearance, no one uses the term to pay a compliment in Malayalam, only the *modus operandi* of *Yakshi* has filtered down the timeline – to allure someone for personal gains, then suck them dry financially or emotionally or in some other way. (L. Prasad 88)

The *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* depicts an alternative paradigm, in the context of the representation of the yakshi as a multidimensional character of survival and vengeance through supernatural means; whereas in traditional depiction yakshi is depicted as either a one-dimensional predator or villain, and/or as a cautionary tale regarding the dangers of feminine sexuality. Instead, the film portrays the yakshi as a character with a history of trauma caused by gender and caste based violence, as well as a form of collective resistance against the oppressive systems she was victimized by; and thus the film represents her as a character of feminist defiance and justice, rather than a threat to society. The film's depiction

of the yakshi as a symbol of feminist resistance and empowerment is a departure from the previous representations of the yakshi as a cautionary character designed to suppress women. Where Aithiyamala locked her in the mould of the seductress-turned-monster, Lokah reopens the myth to imagine what else she could be. Her power, in the film, is physical and deliberate. Theyakshi who once enticed and consumed men now acts decisively to protect the vulnerable. (Priya “The many lives of Neeli.”)

The film’s representation of the yakshi as a symbol of resistance is an empowerment of women that were previously marginalized and oppressed in Kerala’s sociocultural matrix. Thus, the film establishes the yakshi as a link between past forms of oppression of women and current feminist challenges and contests over agency and power; therefore the film converts the traditional fear of the yakshi into a call for justice and positive change. Film reviewer, Suresh, aptly states, ‘Considering that women who were smart, self-sufficient, and nonconformist were once labelled witches and massacred, this characterisation also serves to subvert the stereotypical portrayal of Neeli and women in general’. (Suresh “Lokah Chapter 1 Movie Review.”)

Thus, *Lokah* re-imagines the yakshi as an archetypal, inclusive, and empowering figure that is alive, evolving, and gendered and provides inclusive stories of empowerment and social justice within the continuum of folklore in Kerala.

Intersectionality: Caste, Class, and Power

These supernatural beings (Odiyan&Chathan) live in a complex world where both caste and class intersect in terms of power. Both are typically derived from marginalized communities; they represent both resistance and fear of hierarchical social orders. They act as agents in folklore to navigate, and sometimes subvert, traditional caste hierarchy structures. These folk tales illustrate tensions in society surrounding caste boundaries, control of supernatural powers, and community survival. Therefore, folklore is a contested space to negotiate identity and power.

Kalliyankattu Neeli’s legend is retold in *Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* to illustrate her narrative as a discourse on caste oppression and collective trauma. In contrast to most other legends, this version makes it clear how Neeli was transformed into a yakshi as a direct result of violence against her due to her caste and systemic exploitation. Therefore, she has evolved from a vengeance figure of an individual experience to a representative of broader marginalized experiences; linking personal trauma to social injustice. The film portrays her suffering as being in tandem with the communal pain of marginalized groups and frames her myth as symbolic reckoning with caste violence.

Both Neeli and the original legends of Odiyan and Chathan typically portray their monstrous nature as an inherent trait, or as punishment by the supernatural. The cinematic version of their lore reworks how we perceive their power as arising from historical/social trauma. Additionally, the simple legends’ moral binaries have evolved to create complex critiques of caste/class hierarchies. Specifically, the Neeli myth has become a way to

facilitate the exercise of subversive narrative agency, while characters like Odiyan and Chathan are being both humanized and politically contextualized; they symbolize and express the socio-cultural realities of marginalization through their supernatural attributes.

Therefore, Lokah is conducting an intersectional re-imagination of the traditional folklore of Kerala, by turning stories that formerly were used to reinforce the power of dominant groups in terms of caste and class into empowering and unifying narratives and critical examinations of societal structures. In addition, folktales can be a mechanism of dialogue regarding identity, violence and resistance in contemporary Kerala society.

The Persistence and Transformation of Oral Tradition

The long life span of Kerala's oral tradition and its ability to adapt are both important as they relate to how folklore has been able to stay a major part of Kerala's overall cultural identity. Ballads, ritual performances (theyyam and kavu) and the practice of storytelling within communities were used to pass on the folklore of the cultures so that these could be passed from one generation to another. These performances are not merely forms of entertainment; they serve as ritual activities that provide a means for the community to collectively retain their memories and values, as well as spiritual convictions that contribute to the overall fabric of society. Collecting, codifying, and ultimately preserving the many different types of folk narrative present in Kerala, texts such as *Aithihyamaala*, a 20th-century collection of the state's legends, has played a crucial role in linking oral traditions with written ones.

Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra utilizes and re-interprets Kerala's rich oral tradition in a new way for a global and digitally connected audience through the adaptation of folklore into a cinematic experience that blends preservation with transformation. Although the film maintains key elements of the original oral tradition including central mythological characters, motifs and cultural symbols, it creates new visual narratives based on these traditional stories, and provides new connections to contemporary social issues including gender and caste inequality. In doing so, the film does not create a historical or fossilized representation of folklore, rather it brings the traditional folklore alive as a current living memory that resonates with a modern day audience — whether it be local or international — generating renewed interest, dialogue, and re-interpretations of folklore.

Scholarship today sees folklore as “a living memory,” not as static relics but dynamic traditions that are continually adapted and re-negotiated by communities in response to changing environments. *Lokah* demonstrates this view by illustrating the ability of folklore to remain relevant when transformed into cultural resources that address modern social concerns and identity politics. Therefore, the film represents a continuation of the long-standing practice of keeping oral traditions alive through the constant reinvention and revitalization of the community's continued interest and importance in the oral traditions.

Reception, Impact, and Future Possibilities

Although *Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* is a relatively new film, it already has a large following, particularly in the state of Kerala. In general, *Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* was

able to make an impact that was a combination of its ability to take elements of contemporary cinema and blend them into a rich and diverse regional folklore, empower women and reimagine female mythological characters, as well as visually compelling and socially conscious, and ultimately, as a result of these qualities, a commercially viable product which is culturally significant to those interested in the preservation of their cultural identity and the pursuit of social justice.

Kerala has given India a truly unique gift – a female superhero who doesn't conform to the usual tropes. *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*, Malayalam cinema's first female-led superhero film, has not only broken box office records, but it has done so with a relatively unknown lead actress, Kalyani Priyadarshan. This success is a testament to the audience's hunger for stories where women wield power rather than endure suffering. (Verma "When Goddesses Fight Back.")

Additionally, the movie has been impactful beyond entertainment, and has positively impacted the development of regional and feminist mythology. The movie has accomplished this by viewing figures like Kalliyankattu Neeli through a feminist lens, and shedding light on issues of caste and gender to challenge patriarchal narratives and provide a platform for marginalized voices and perspectives in Kerala's mythological traditions. The film has generated both academic and public discourse about the significance of folklore to modern day identity formation and gender politics.

Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra provides a hopeful precedent for future folklore adaptations, suggesting that future films will be able to explore the many different stories of regional myths and provide more diverse representations of the archetypes of the stories themselves. Furthermore, the expansion of the Lokah franchise into an interconnected media landscape has the potential to further encourage the use of folklore in the creation of new, modern forms of storytelling. There is strong possibility of presenting other folkloric characters like, Maadan, Marutha, Arukola, Thenden and Thee Chamundi in the Lokah Universe as "many of these characters exist mainly in the collective imagination of Malayalis who grew up hearing about them and have only been rarely portrayed in popular art and films" (D. Ancila). Henceforth, there is a strong likelihood that upcoming installments of the Lokah franchise will represent an innovative and evolving platform by which to bring Kerala folklore into the mainstream cultural consciousness and the realm of global discourse.

Thus, *Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* marks a critical juncture in the historical trajectory of Kerala cinema; it enables novel approaches to folklore adaptation; stimulates discussions on regionalism and feminism within mythology; and signals the advent of a new era of indigenous narrative representation through media.

Conclusion

The use of folklore in today's society has many significant implications because the reconnection of communities with their cultural heritage will also address present day issues. The *Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* example shows this clearly by taking the lesser known,

subaltern mythological characters from Kerala (Kalliyankattu Neeli, Chathan, and Odiyan) who are normally portrayed as powerless or even evil in mainstream stories, and instead portrays them as powerful agents of justice and resistance. The new, cinematic interpretation of these folkloric characters does not only keep alive the cultural heritage of the region, but it gives the old stories new life, and allows the stories to grow along with our current conversations about gender, caste and identity.

Important to the process of using *Lokah* as a model for the future is its ability to create a framework for progressive reinterpretations of dominant, often Brahminical or patriarchal systems, creating a counter narrative based upon the everyday lives and belief structures of Kerala's various communities. In the film, "Chandra uses her power to fight against these challenges that root back to the hidden shadows of patriarchy and superiority complex in a progressive society that views women still as inferior and other" (Illiyas "A review of Lokah."). In addition, the film creates a new space for greater diversity and critical consideration of previously marginalized perspectives by placing folklore into a "neo-mythic" cinematic world, while still celebrating and honouring local culture and traditions, but at the same time, questioning hegemonic cultural norms and expectations.

Therefore, *Lokah* demonstrates how folklore is not just an artifact of the past, but rather, it is a living archive that can continue to inspire people to act for empowerment and social critique today. The fact that *Lokah* has been successful indicates the possibilities of other regional mythologies being interpreted anew and having relevance worldwide, without losing their unique cultural characteristics. Overall, *Lokah* represents a model for the reclamation of cultural heritage, and a vision for how folklore can be used to envision a more equitable future, and make the old relevant, timely, and transformational.

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