Cultural Monsters in Indian Cinema: The Politics of Adaptation, Transformation and Disfigurement

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Abstract
In India, a popular trope is adapting cultural myths and religious iconographies into visceral images of the monster in literary and visual representations. Cinematic representations of the Indian monster are modelled on existing folklore narratives and religious tales where the idea of the monster emerges from cultural imagination and superstitions of the land. Since it rationalizes several underlying archetypes in which gods are worshipped in their monstrous identities and disposition, the trope of the monster is used in cinema to indicate the transformation from an ordinary human figure to a monstrous human Other. This paper examines cinematic adaptations of monster figures in Malayalam cinema, the South Indian film industry of Kerala. The cultural practice of religious rituals that worship monstrous gods is part of the collective imagination of the land of Kerala through which films represent fearsome images of transformed humans. This article argues that cultural monsters are human subjects that take inspiration from mythical monster stories to perform in a terrifying way. Their monstrous disposition is a persona that is both a powerful revelation of repressed desires and a manifestation of the resistance against certain cultural fears associated with them. The analysis of several Malayalam films, such as Kaliyattam *(1997)* Manichithrathazhu *(1993) and* Ananthabhadram *(2005), reveals how film performance adapts mythological narrative elements to create new cultural intertexts of human monsters that are psychotically nuanced and cinematically excessive.*

Keywords: *cultural monster, otherness, gender monster, adaptation, myth*

Monsters have always been there in all cultures and civilizations. They are entities whose monstrosity is part of the collective imagination through which people, communities, and societies make sense of the strange and the familiar. Monstrosity is relative in the sense that it appeals differently to different contexts. Halberstam states that "the body that scares and appalls changes over time, as do the individual characteristics that add up to monstrosity" (1995: 21). Therefore, one key feature of the identity of monsters is how unique their image and meaning are when they are shaped in different cultural environments and social contexts. Social values, public

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morality, religious superstitions and ethnic beliefs are elements that add emphasis to the imagination of the monstrous. The cultural text of the monster is a result of the juxtaposition of such elements, and the construction of the monstrous undergoes a phase where coordinates of reality and fantasy are incorporated naturally or artificially to a point that clearly establishes a notion of unnaturalness. The unnatural effect, a sense of weirdness to which other existing cultural mores are related and distinguished, makes the monster a cultural phenomenon.

Since the idea of the monster is integrated with the notion of culture, it becomes apparent that the representation and reception of the monster define a communicative discourse about how cultural expressions of an "othered identity" signify cultural values. In popular culture, this communicative discourse centralizes the image of the monster as a possibility, a medium through which one can identify with signs and performances the monstrous texts disseminate and then become involved in the signifying practice of reinterpreting and adapting them. In this process, what is ultimately revealed about the monster is how they fundamentally reflect humanity and its many vulnerabilities, perversions and fears in an essentially magnified form. When discussing the impact of monsters and monster studies, Asa Simon Mittman observed that the monsters "swallow up our cultural mores and expectations, and then, becoming what they eat, reflect back to us our own faces, made disgusting or, perhaps, revealed to always have been so" (2012: 1). The cultural versions of monster narratives, as they appear in popular cultural media like cinema, succinctly reveal the effect of this reflectivity through powerful images and performance.

In India, a popular trope is adapting cultural myths and religious iconographies into visceral images of the monster in literary and visual representations. Cinematic representations of the Indian monster are modelled on existing folklore narratives and religious tales where the idea of the monster emerges from imagination and superstitions of the land. Since it rationalizes several underlying archetypes in which gods are worshipped in their monstrous identities and disposition, the trope of the monster is used in cinema to indicate the transformation from an ordinary human figure to a monstrous human Other. The process of adaptation that produces monsters integrates several cultural narratives and texts into the constructed image of the monster.

This paper examines the cinematic adaptations of monster figures in Malayalam cinema, the South Indian film industry of Kerala. The cultural practice of religious rituals that worship monstrous gods is part of the collective imagination of the land of Kerala through which films represent

fearsome images of transformed humans. This article argues that cultural monsters are human subjects that take inspiration from mythical monster stories to perform in a terrifying way. Their monstrous disposition is a persona that is both a powerful revelation of repressed desires and a manifestation of the resistance against certain cultural fears associated with them. These monsters are human expressions in the basic psychological sense and their version of the cinematic performance is magnified by techniques that employ melodrama, the use of specific costumes, colour patterns, props, and song-dance sequences to create maximum visual intensity. This article investigates how notions of adaptation and performance combine to explain signs that relate to the disfigurement of normal human subjects in their visual transformation. The analysis of several Malayalam films, such as *Kaliyattam* (1997) *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and *Ananthabhadram* (2005), reveals how film performance adapts mythological narrative elements to create new cultural intertexts of human monsters that are psychotically nuanced and cinematically excessive. For example, an important idea is that of the "gender monster" in such films that transform the performance of sexuality and gender into monstrous forms. They are disfigured versions of underlying identity politics that engender deformed notions of desire, sexuality and social interaction. How disfigurement leads to deformation is analysed at the thematic as well as performative levels to understand how cultural fears lead to the creation of monstrous 'Others'.

Figuring the Monstrous

In the Indian diaspora, the figure of the monster is associated with tradition. Non-human entities are always referred to in epic stories, myths, folklore tales and religious narratives. They get a special place in these discourses because of their being symbolic representations of the evil force, unethical ways of life and the manifestation of material cravings. The monstrous figure was used to balance the good versus bad dichotomy in didactic narratives through which a virtuous hero becomes a cultural icon while the amoral villain becomes the cultural monster. In Hindu Vedic literature and epics like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the *devas* and *asuras* are conceptualized as two categories of divine supernatural beings occupying the hero-antihero/god-demon equation. The *devas* appear as soft, intelligent, and virtuous saviours residing in heaven, while the *asuras* are dark, violent, and savage creatures hailing from the underground. The *deva-asura* war is a central theme in Hindu scriptures and contrasting cultural values of *dharma* and *adharma* are attributed to their figures.

The evolution of the *deva-asura* myth through various adaptations and interpretations has led to the destabilization of their dichotomous cultural reception. This is apparent when we analyse the epic texts of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* where characters are not fixed on solid moral codes, as they often divert from their established forms and transgress the imagined barriers that define their collective separation between the human and the non-human. There are situations when both *devas* and *asuras* show contradicting behavioural patterns that ultimately delineate the humanness of the monster and the monstrousness of the human. According to Jonathan Edelmann (2013), the *deva-asura* dichotomy in Hinduism is about the "narrative depictions of tendencies within our selves", that symbolize contradicting motives, actions and beliefs." This god-antigod conceptualization of the *deva-asura* binary opposition has a spiritual interpretation that says values and virtues are the results of particular choices and actions of individuals rather than being culturally inherent. This is why *asura* kings such as *Mahabali* and *Ravana* are identified as deities and worshipped in temples in India.

Even though the *asuras* can shape-shift into different versions of their personality, what is interesting here is the fundamental demonic form with which they are identified as monsters. For example, *Ravana*, the *asura* king and the major antagonist in the *Ramayana* epic, is figured as a mighty *Rakshasa* (a class of malevolent demigods in Hindu mythology) with a dark complexion, a cruel face with a long and thick moustache, and ten heads and twenty hands. Gigantic statues and sculptures of *Ravana* are used in religious festivals as a sign of his monstrosity; most notably, the ritualistic burning of *Ravana*'s effigy as part of the religious festival of Dusshera in India shows the collective participation of communities in identifying and taming the symbolic monstrous other. In the case of *Ravana*, the corporeality of the monster figure is an adaptation of the human form to an expanded level, where the monster is presented as superior for *being* different. Here, the human quality of the monstrous figure is undeniably significant because it is explicitly visible as a layer. The suggestion is that the monster is not exported from an outer realm but they are beings whose metamorphosis is symptomatic of the change in human appearance as they represent nothing but the very values and expressions familiar to humanity. We give the monsters "anthropocentric significance" and make them "ours" when we "construct or reconstruct them" and "categorize, name, and define them" (Mittman 2012: 1). After all, the myths and stories responsible for the origin of these monsters are narratives emerging from interactions and imaginations of humankind.

The most significant connotation of the "monstrous" in the Indian mythological context is the idea of the divine monster expressed in the figure of a god; culturally accepted, celebrated, and internalized in religious communities and the public sphere. These god-figures carry a sense of distorted human identity in their being when they perpetuate themselves as supreme entities and cultural icons. The images of popular Hindu gods are defined by their ability to promulgate this non-human figuration; many of them have an image with multiple hands carrying weapons and a body that contains unimaginable power ready to erupt through palms, eyes, mouth, and temple. The benevolent gods such as *Ganesha* and *Hanuman* are highly popular in India, and their appearance as a hybrid entity with human and animal forms—*Ganesha* having an elephant head and *Hanuman* being a *vanara* (monkey)—centralizes the notion that the divine is something beyond the realm of the human but also relatable to humans. Another example is the *Narasimha* (the lion-man god), one of the ten reincarnations of Lord Vishnu, as a symbol of the monster and human in-betweenness. The cultural imagination and fantasy reflected in the construction and assimilation of god-monsters and demon-monsters simultaneously point towards the perceived divinity in "abnormal" structures and figures, as long as they stimulate the human imagination.

Performing monsters

The monster archetypes are widely used in art as a source of inspiration in creating strong visual imagery that can produce a significant amount of response in the audience. The appearance of the monstrous figure draws immediate attention to the story because the very presence of the monster creates an act of disturbance that elevates the situation to new heights of emotional outbursts. The monster exerts notions of fear, surprise, mystery, and horror in a way to create spectacles in which the confrontation between the strange and the familiar occurs. Stories of mythical monsters, both divine and demonic, are used in many traditional performative art forms like *Kathakali*, *Theyyam*, *Yakshagana*, puppet plays, and stage dramas in India. Artists who play the epic characters wear specific costumes with strong colours and captivating embroidery to recreate the envisioned horror image of the monster in reality. These impersonations, especially in South Indian performative art forms of *Kathakali* and *Theyyam*, are quite violent in the artistic and performative sense because they aspire to create an authentic adaptation of the mythical version of the monster by the actor's excessive use of facial expressions and physical actions.

In *Theyyam,* which is performed in a ritualistic fashion based on folklorist traditional myths, the performer is literally viewed as a manifestation of the divine monstrous who invokes ancient spirits and gods through his/her performance. *Theyyam* is performed in northern regions of the South Indian state of Kerala where the art form is seen as a cultural symbol of the region. It incorporates the unique tradition, beliefs and regional politics of the villages into the art form. The monstrosity reflected in the visual and performative aesthetics of *Theyyam* is considered sacred, and its being in the presence of the *Theyyam* figure when it appears in village homes and public spaces allows people to seek blessings from the ritual monster. Mothers used to scare their children by making stories about *Theyyam* figures capturing and abducting disobeying children. The performative aspects of *Theyyams* often go to extreme forms such as the performer literally walking on fire and doing acrobatic stunts. The *Theyyam* performances are known for their indigenous uniqueness which allows people from lower caste communities to perform the sacred art form. All such violations and transformations make the monstrous text of this art form a cultural intertext in which the cultural fear of the monstrous other is primitive, sacred, and divine at the same time. Timothy Beal (2020) observes this paradoxical existence of monsters in culture:

> Monsters are in the world but not of the world. They are paradoxical personifications of otherness within sameness. That is, they are threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established and accepted order of things. They represent the outside that has gotten inside, the beyond-the-pale that, much to our horror, has gotten into the pale (Beal 2020: 297).

In 1997, the cultural background of *Theyyam* was used in the Malayalam film *Kaliyattam* (The Play of God), directed by Malayalee filmmaker Jayaraj. The film was a regional adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* where Jayaraj uses the visual language of *Theyyam* to reframe the cultural monster as a manifestation of the deep psychological conflict ingrained in character personalities. It explores the personal and social realms of the human psyche to unearth the moral and cultural dispositions that drag the individual into total ruin. Malayalam film critic C. S. Venkiteswaran (2019) observes that:

> The setting of the film in the theyyam milieu opens visual possibilities in terms of spectacular night performances, masks, movements, orgiastic rhythms and colourful costumes. [...] These theyyam figures also invoke various legends – stories about valour and sacrifice, kinship feuds and rivalry – that constitute the collective memories of the region (Venkiteswaran 2019: 81).

The film adapts Shakespeare's text into a unique cultural context in which the monstrous is a combination of myth, history, fate and human misery. The film's protagonist *Kannan Perumalayan/Othello* (played by Suresh Gopi) is a *Theyyam* performer whose life is transformed to tragic proportions when subjected to the mischievous acts of Paniyan/Iago, who takes advantage of the anxieties, desires and fears—the basic human vulnerabilities that lead to the eventual doom of the characters. Here, the figure of *Theyyam* is used as a façade that not only hides these vulnerabilities in their human form but also expresses them in the monstrous form. When the truth about how he is deceived by Iago was revealed to him, Perumalayan ultimately descends into madness and throws himself into the fire to commit ritual suicide, and the final grand performance of the *Theyyam* in all its heightened monstrosity and ferociousness becomes the closing ceremony. Here, the monstrous image of the *Theyyam* manifests the cultural fears residing in the social consciousness under the form of jealousy, infidelity, betrayal, suspicion and revenge. Venkiteswaran (2019) notes that:

> The spirit of soldierly valour underlying the play is substituted in the film by the glory of donning key theyyam roles which turn humans into gods. The customs surrounding theyyam, which is both a ritual of invocation to village or community deities and ancestors, and an art form, and the ritual purity it demands from the performer and his wife; the rites and acts of penance that go with it; the awe that it inspires in its audience; the sacred space in which it is performed; and the elaborate process of facial make-up, costumes and preparatory rituals all constitute the visual and narrative elements in the film, portrayed through sensitive cinematography which lingers on the colours and contours without eroticising or sensationalising. The tragic drama of suspicion, jealousy, desire, violence and blind ambition is made more intense and poignant in the midst of the sacred rituals and verdant surroundings (2019: 81).

The performance of the monster as an integration of cultural practices can be seen in other films as well. Santhosh Sivan's *Ananthabhadram* (2005) was such a film in which dark fantasy, black magic, and horror elements are infused with the dance moves of *Theyyam* and *Kathakali*, and Kerala's own martial arts form, *Kalarippayattu*. The film takes its narrative to the indigenous ancestral lands where mysterious temples, local superstitions, and ancient curses make an atmospheric context for local magicians and tricksters to perform black magic and rituals to gain material wealth. Stories of cultural monsters appear in the film in the form of myths about *Yakshis* (the female ghost), the *Nagamanikyam* (the precious jewel on a mysterious

serpent's head), and *aabhichaaram* (the erotic black magic)—all referring to regional fantasies and folklorist traditions. Ananthan (Prithviraj), the protagonist from the modern era comes back to the village and encounters the supernatural and the monstrous in these myths. In the main plot of the film, the black magician Digambaran (Manoj K. Jayan), resorts to his mischievous acts to get the *Nagamanikyam*. However, the film's emphasis on Digambaran's anti-hero character later reveals the tragic love story between him and his lover Subhadra. When Subhadra was accidentally killed by his own hands, Digambaran becomes the monster he is now; the repressed grief and guilt control his actions to unconventionally violent proportions because he believes that he can revive the lover's dead body using black magic and the power of *Nagamanikyam*. In a visually captivating song-dance sequence in the film, Digambaran uses black magic to seduce Bhama (Riya Sen), with the intention of offering her as a blood sacrifice for the slight hope that makes Subhadra come back to life. The cultural fear about the death of a loved one is central to monster narratives because death is perceived as the ultimate unknown and people find reasons to make the dead not really dead (Landis 2011: 17). Digambaran pushes his limits, goes mad at times in his search for reviving the dead body of his lover, which he preserved for rituals using magic spells, ancient tantric chants, and specific dance moves. Shades of Digambaran's monstrous image, his loud cries and actions are desperate attempts to revoke the memories of the past that haunts the monster as much as the monster channels them to the people who surround him to block him without understanding the hidden reality that begets the monstrous.

The gender monster – performance of transformation and disfigurement

Stephen T. Asma notes that "monsters can stand as symbols of human vulnerability and crisis, and as such they play imaginative foils for thinking about our own responses to menace" (290). The repression of a traumatic past and the desire to outperform its haunting influence is what essentially signify the performative logic of cultural monsters. In the 1993 Malayalam film *Manichithrathazhu*, the female protagonist Ganga (Sobhana) returns from the city to her husband's traditional home where she finds the colours of the past in an ancient tragic myth that involves the killing of Nagavalli, a classical dancer, at the hands of a feudal lord. This makes the repressed childhood traumas of Ganga come into play as she was alone growing up with her busy parents not visiting her let alone caring for or loving her. She was looked after by her grandmother who let Ganga familiarize herself with the mystical stories, myths, rituals and regional superstitions. Ganga soon transforms into Nagavalli—the psychological transition of the self into

another, and the film later reveals that she suffers from dissociative identity disorder. This transformation is aided by the cultural myth of Nagavalli and adopting all corresponding elements that are used in its visualization.

Dennis Todd observes that monsters are "liminal creatures, straddling boundaries between categories we wish to keep distinct and separate, blurring distinctions, haunting us with the possibility that the categories themselves are ambiguous, permeable" (1995: 156). The figure of Nagavalli is one of the greatest female monsters in Malayalam cinema. The enactment of the monstrous feminine through Nagavalli evokes the cultural myth of the female ghost, called *Yakshi*, the human-like supernatural being with the power to seduce, possess, protect and destroy. The possessed female body becomes a *Yakshi* once she is capable of wandering through villages seeking *moksha* (deliverance) through revenge. The *Yakshi* stories focus on the transformation of a traditionally beautiful young woman into a grief-stricken dead entity that aspires to murder victims (often male) and drink their blood to satiate her thirst for retribution. Like many other monsters, the *Yakshi* can shape-shift into disguises under which she hides her monstrous identity and reveals only when it is necessary. *Yakshi* is often considered a gothic romantic ideal whose body is desired and feared at the same time. The 'monster' is an entity where one can apply the 'aesthetics of pleasurable fear' (Sedgwick 1986: 11). The *Yakshi*'s cultural image represents this pleasurable fear, the type of fear that lets the male spectator imagine a double identity of the woman—the seductress and the monstrous. This refers to the oppression of women by either romanticizing them as a loveable perfection of beauty and care or vilifying them for crossing the patriarchal boundaries to express too much of themselves. This is exactly what defines the identity of Ganga/Nagavalli in *Manichithrathazhu*. Ganga is the ideal romantic subject who is always available to her husband but Nagavalli is the cultural other, the disfigured version of the feminine whose violent expressions subvert the former. The ritualistic representation of the Yakshi is a mirror image of the real, and therefore, the cinematic form itself is a "ritual as reality"; something that is dreadful and attractive at the same time where "something real" penetrates the fantasy and "the natural conceals the supernatural" (Tyler 1960: 82).

The possession of the monster, the cultural invasion of the repressed other into the human ideal, brings disfigurement as a conceptual feature of the monster. The liminal figure of the monster collapses social boundaries, invoking cultural anxieties and disrupting conservative categories (Macaluso 2019). The 'gender monster' emerges as a manifestation of resistance when gender stereotypes repress certain gender identities in a

heteronormative social structure. Judith Halberstam reminds us in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* that monsters are heterogeneous figures capable of not only representing "any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative" (1995: 21), but also, because of their radical irreducibility, of allowing for new ways of imagining "social resistance" (23). Despite its cultural value as positive or negative, the monstrous is always a form of abnormality. It is a "strange distorted creature" with contradictory traits that "confuse the categories of rationality and order, creating its own logic and dominating its own space" (Braudy 2016: 19). Since the monster is the embodiment of this abnormality, the figure is always kept at a distance for observation, worship, exorcism and destruction. Malevolent monsters are worshipped to bring havoc to the mortal world. They are, as we have already seen, fundamentally human beings with emotional vulnerability in their cores and looking for a way out through cultural vessels. They use all sorts of cultural paraphernalia with which psychotically or sexually disturbed individuals adapt themselves to a new form for survival.

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