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Striking the Balance: Eco-Gothic Explorations in the South Indian Mythical Folklore of 'Kalliyankattu Neeli'

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Abstract:
Stories originating from a bio-diverse region like Keralam feature narratives, art, and culture that are unique to it, self-sustaining, and deeply ecological. The culture and its practices reflect nature's plenty and the hidden agenda of ecological preservation. In every context, from ancient times, nature is worshipped here as a goddess, symbolising power: enigmatic and consuming. The idea of Gothic, though a Western genre that originated in the late 18th century as stories of horror and fear, can be regarded as the first tradition in Western literature in which ecology plays a significant role. However, when one looks to the East, although there is no conceptual framework like the Gothic in literature, there is an atonement to ecology in their narratives originated from different regions. Here, we focus on the South Indian folklore of Kalliyankattu Neeli as oral lore and is traced for its Gothic stature. The article sets out to examine how the lore's association with the landscape and gender complicates the distinction between nature and culture, the human and the nonhuman, and terror and sacred power. All these studies pertain to theories of the Eco-Gothic concept, as developed by Tom J. Hillard, which have evolved to understand the Gothic-calibre texts in this region.
Keywords: Eco-Gothic, Ecology, Gender, Eastern Gothic, Psychology.

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Introduction

Interconnecting anthropocentric narratives with the mysteries of nature is a far more revered idea in Indian religions, myths, and cultures. A more inclusive, non-anthropocentric view here, was primarily due to the belief in nature's supernatural powers. It had enlivened their spirits and sustained their life for thousands of years. This uncorrupted relationship with nature kept their imagination alive. They revered and worshipped it. It was more of a 'she-spirit' identified from within, believed to have unimaginable powers, sometimes instilling horror and fear. In particular, various practices in the Hindu tradition have always taken one's living topography into account, a concept in South Indian languages called 'vasaidam.' Moreover, when the gods dwell there, it becomes 'devalaya'(a word of Sanskrit origin), always considered sacred. Louise Fowler-Smith observes that 'how we perceive and contemplate the land affects how we treat the land and ultimately how we live within it' (43). She adds that ancient cultures, whether monotheist or polytheist, all acknowledge the aesthetic rationale for treating land with sacredness and reverence.

The cultures that honoured their land have largely shaped their beliefs, rituals, and stories around it. Hinduism embraced the worship of nature, a practice later adopted by Buddhism and Jainism. When the rest of the world began to enlighten itself through empiricism and rationalism, it grew further estranged from Nature. In contrast, in the South Indian perspective, the Dravidians, maintained a border less relationship with Nature as its partner in sustaining life. India is believed to host the highest number of sacred forest regions in the world. Estimates state that the Kodagu district of the Western Ghats alone contains over 1200 sacred groves (Boraiah et al. 2003).

Land of Sacred Groves

Keralam is home to many such sacred groves, commonly called 'Kavu,' which serve as protected areas in honour of pagan gods, animistic deities, or ancestral spirits (qtd. in Ormsby, 328). Sacred groves are patches of land that inhabitants keep unaltered from deforestation or any other activities that harm their natural habitat. Conserving such places, even on private property, demonstrates a collective consciousness among people who understand the bond between them and nature. People believe that the spirits of gods dwell in these places to protect them. This was a practice in the south, especially in Keralam, as a way of life.

This part of India is a peninsular plateau, flanked on one side by the Eastern Ghats and on the other by the Western Ghats. Scholars says that its oral and folk traditions remain largely uncorrupted. (Basham 2). The four major Dravidian languages spoken in South India are Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. The oral tradition of these languages, also collected and studied during this period, was the result of the tireless efforts of Christian missionaries and inquisitive British civil servants (Handoo 140). The South Indian language Tamil, which dates back 2000 years, preserve the Dravidian culture strongly rooted in its indigenous origins; we can identify this in its oral and folk traditions. AK Ramanujan, known for his scholarly study of Indian folklore, observes

> One way of defining verbal folklore for India is to say it is the literature of the dialects, those mother tongues of the village, street, kitchen, tribal hut and wayside tea shop. This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian literature rests. (95)

For South Indians, it is a way of connecting with the spirit of their country's traditions and culture, handed down through generations, orally and otherwise. 'It is the symbolic language of the non-literate parts of me and my culture', says Ramanujan (93). Folklore travels across India in varied

hues, sometimes as ballads, but interestingly, they all share a common thread that connects them, irrespective of language, region, or religion. The autotelic nature of Folktales takes them to places, breaking barriers to become border less, as they were spread orally and adapted to the environments that fostered them.

The Gothic Perspective

First, what Eco-Gothic perspective can be taken on the ways in which the Western Ghats, an abode of many sacred groves and forests, inspire human imagination and weave complex Gothic narratives? The idea of Eco-Gothic was conceptualised by Tom J. Hillard in his essay "Deep into the Darkness Peering" (2009), which refers to a mode of critical enquiry that examines how Gothic literature reflects ecological concerns and the relationship between humans and the environment. This examines the role of the non-human environment in creating fear and horror in literature. Freeman, in his study on how Keralam has a kind of eco-gothic relationship with the nature around it, says, 'To the extent that the people of Keralam traditionally view their vegetation as imbued with aspects of the sacred, those various trees, plants, groves, and forests are regarded as ambivalently as other repositories of the sacred' (272). He further observes that teyyam songs and folklore from Keralam talk about rites of exorcism to ward off instances of 'Demonic sirens called yakshis typically live in palmyras and lure men at night up their trunks and to gory deaths' (273). In Keralam, their belief in a spiritual entity within the splendid greenery around them is not by accident. There, they could see life emanating out of it. There is this ancient custom from old times until the recent past: before cutting down a tree for its timber, carpenters and woodcutters would ask the spirit that dwells in the wood for permission to proceed. Many stories like that of 'Perumthachan' validate such beliefs.

Andrew Hock Soon Ng argues that Gothic does not belong to any particular country since "transgressing taboos, complicity with evil, the dread of life, violence, and the return of the repressed […] are not specific to any culture or people but are experienced throughout history" (Ng 2008, 1). Gothic elements in Indian literature are inherently linked to the Gothic features of the natural backdrop that evoke fear and terror, as well as the presence of supernatural forces and power. Ecogothic elements in the mythical folklore of Keralam are not difficult to find, as these stories, passed down through grandmothers' oral traditions, are intertwined with ecology and monstrosity. Concerning the connection between folklore myth and nature, Arshad V, in his study titled '*Folklore and environment analysis of the world view reflected in oral tradition of Kerala folk',* observes

> Myths are the creative representations of the emotions and experiences related to nature. The struggle men went through when they began to differentiate between nature and culture is evident in myths. Myths are not the representation of reality. Myths are reality. Myths are backed by beliefs. That is how myths become the narrative of a society's survival. Myths have both material and non-material dimensions. This is how myths achieve humane qualities. (68)

One such fluid, distinctive ballad-folktale tradition found within the Dravidian language family, characterised by an intermingling of Tamil and Malayalam, and represented in South Kerala, is known as Thekkan Pattu (Southern Ballads). It weaves stories on varied themes, featuring female protagonists, to narrate tales of domestic betrayal and societal violence, based on some popular myths, set in a Gothic environment, and featuring monstrosity. Such female-led ballad folktales, known as 'Yakshikatha' (Yakshi story) from 'villadichan pattukal'(bow-songs), are believed to be retellings of myths handed down orally for centuries. 'Yakshi,' the menacing female monster and

'Katha' means story. These stories first appear in writing in C.V Raman Pillai's historical romance novel, Marthandavarma (1891). The Yakshi in Marthandavarma is presented as a maternal figure, Karthyaaniyamma, who narrates the story to her daughter. In Southern Ballads, the master source of the Yakshi story is a legendary myth, told in a domestic setting. Diana Wallace, in her discussion about Elizabeth Gaskell's Gothic stories, says, 'Gothic…both a mode of history and a symbolic language of the psychological which could convey the female experience repressed in other modes of writing …combines the symbolic power of the gothic with a sophisticated understanding of the gendering of historical narratives' (67-68). Gothic motifs and conventions, always wild with imagination, allow storytellers the freedom to transcend societal hierarchies.

The myth of Neeli could be read as a Gothic narrative with two different opinions in mind. It could have been created by a community that seeks to confine women to specific roles, by women who resist these roles and are demonised through implausible narratives, or by a community of empowered women who dared to spread the tale of courage. Neeli is depicted as a madwoman exacting revenge on every man she encounters. Later, the Yakshi stories were interpreted, reinterpreted, and translated into different art forms and both fictional and non-fictional works. Yakshi tales have an aura of fantasy and sensuality. V. Ramaswamy observes about these Yakshi ballads that

> One cannot rule out the possibility that some of these were matrilocal myths that were gradually subsumed into the patriarchal register. Unfortunately, however, there are no extant versions of the core stories of myths, and what remains for the researcher to examine are only the myths as they appear after the process of patriarchal socialisation. Women's agency in such ballads survives as a subtext in some versions of the published ballads, as well as within performance traditions (131).

However, A K Ramanujan holds that women are the bearers of these tales and act as agents in shaping them through their narration (qtd. in Dharwadker 1999, 429–47). It is incredible to think of a woman-centred myth that has survived for more than 2,000 years, with variations cutting across time and space.

The Binary Perspectives in Kalliyankattu Neeli

The Neeli's narrative combines betrayal, ghostly vengeance, supernatural threat, and eventual deification, elements that many scholars see as mechanisms by which folklore both enacts and critiques gendered injustice. The conventional version (in oral tradition, temple precincts, and ritual performances such as villupāṭṭu / Thekkan Pattu) runs as follows: Neeli was born Alli, daughter of Karveni, a Devadasi from Pakhakannur. Alli is celebrated for her beauty, especially her long hair and captivating eyes. Alli marries Nambi, the priest of the local Shiva temple, who is drawn to her wealth more than to her. He violates conjugal trust, cheating on her; when Karveni ejects Nambi for his conduct, Alli (who is pregnant) nonetheless leaves with him. Nambi murders Alli to steal her jewels. Alli's younger brother, Ambi, on discovering her body, commits suicide. Nambi later dies by snakebite. Through reincarnation, Alli and Ambi become Neeli and Neelan, children of a Chola king. Their evil fully manifests: drinking cattle blood, terrifying the land. The Chola king abandons them, and the land around Panchavankadu (or Paḻayanūr) becomes Neeli's haunt. Seventy local elders (Uranmas / Veḷḷāḷar in some Tamil versions) hire a sorcerer named Nambi (distinct from the priest) to contain Neeli successfully, but Neeli remains unconstrained. Neeli pursues the reincarnation of her betrayer, Anandan (or a similarly named one), who possesses magical protection. In disguise, she lures him and kills him. Observing his death, the seventy Uranmas who had vowed to protect him fulfilled their vow by entering a fire, sacrificing

themselves. With vengeance complete, Neeli turns to a dwelling under a sacred tree (often a Kallipala / Devil's tree).

Psychologically, the very idea of Yakshi is an embodiment of cultural anxiety specific to a collective consciousness label. The human curiosity to define any unknown energy as fear is ancient. The confusion it causes is explored in myths. In this myth, a woman who exhibits immense energy is called a monster, conceptualised through a ghostly identity. Anyone who sees her is portrayed as having a disturbed mind and appears possessed, showing an extreme state of delirium and horror. Here we agree that "the symbolic value of collective desire for unknown forces reveals the deepest sense of affection people have for inanimate objects, especially when they signify a form of divine supernatural power" (Jalrajan). The men in this society feared women who were physically and powerfully different from them. They found their sexuality more powerful than their male machismo. This must have ended up in them making horror stories like the Neeli, where women are demonised in a gothic setting. Vijay Ramaswamy notes that 'In Dravidian cultures, the spiritual power of women was linked to both the fear of pollution (through menstrual blood and so on) and the male fear of female sexuality' (132). Ancient Tamils defined female sexual power as 'ananku' and chastity as 'karpu,' both of which were simultaneously feared and worshipped. The Tamil Sangam epic *Silappadikaram* associates Ananku with female power and personifies it as the youngest of the seven sisters who made Siva dance. All these views on women are a kind of othering by men.

Myths such as that of Neeli are traditionally associated with trees and nature, depicted as embracing trees, symbolising their connection to the earth's bounty and the flourishing of life, showing their role as guardians of ecological balance. Legends surrounding Neeli are spread across the state, that her permanent abode is deep inside the forests. Though Neeli is a

bloodthirsty, monstrous female, she is also adored and worshipped as a goddess. The Gothic fear in Neeli's story is aroused by the narrator, who locates her inside the dense forests of Keralam. This lore was kept alive orally. The lore spread the message that the good are kept alive and protected, while the bad are punished. This is deeply intertwined with spiritual and supernatural beliefs, embodying the tension, fear, and complexity that define the EcoGothic genre. Smith and Hughes define EcoGothic, in the introduction to their volume on the same, as "how the body as a site of Gothic fear – sexual, injured, dismembered and celebrated – can be seen and positively re-membered in a literary landscape" (8). David Del Principe elaborates that "the EcoGothic examines the construction of the Gothic body – unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid – through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity" (1).

The binaries human/nature, male/female, urban/rural are transgressed in EcoGothic to create fear and horror. In Neeli's lore, we see that it is not anthropocentric justice that prevails throughout. The victimhood of a devadasi, lower-caste woman, or tribal girl was never questioned by the largely patriarchal caste and race-bound society. It highlights the rural marginality and social exclusion that prevailed in 'Culture' then and still primarily prevail, though they are now largely questioned. This is subverted by the intervention of 'Nature,' as the lore narrates; it gives Neeli, who is from the devadasi community, powers beyond human imagination to exact revenge on her aggressor.

Neeli repeatedly resists domestication, embodying the landscape's uncanny power to subvert settled order. Neeli represents 'female' agency that is repressed and then expressed against the 'male' order. Her sexuality and power threaten patriarchal norms, and her image oscillates between a sacred goddess and a monstrous 'other' reflecting cultural anxieties surrounding marginalised

women. Neeli's vengeance symbolises resistance to 'urban' and caste oppression. Her haunting marks these sites as places where civilisation's boundaries are thin and vulnerable; 'rural' wilderness becomes both a source of terror (dangerous, unknown) and sacredness (ancestral, ecological memory).

Sherry Ortner, in her article "So is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?", proposes a metaphorical framework that aligns the male/female binary with the culture/nature binary. Ortner's analysis challenges the notion of "universal male dominance," situating it within broader anthropological and ecological discourses. By doing so, Ortner argues nature embodies a 'she-spirit, a feminine principle that is both nurturing and generative, paralleling the reproductive and child-rearing capacities traditionally ascribed to women. This metaphorical association highlights how cultural narratives have historically positioned men as agents of culture, controllers, and protectors, while relegating women to the domain of nature, which is perceived as passive yet essential for sustaining life. Ortner's argument, while contested by subsequent critics, offers a perspective on the intersection of gender and ecological symbolism in myth, ritual, and narrative, particularly in societies where nature is revered as a powerful feminine force.

However, Ortner also finds that domination is not intentional and that genders can have separate realms of power. We can align her argument with Neeli's myth, as it demonstrates how women, through their association with nature, can access and wield power outside the confines of patriarchal culture. This mythic narrative thus affirms the possibility of distinct female domains of authority.

The Neeli myth, however, directly contradicts this Euro-American Gothic notion of the absent or silenced mother. Neeli, murdered while pregnant, is indeed abjected before her child's birth, but her story does not end here; in her reincarnation, she becomes doubly powerful with a vengeance.

Unlike the absent Gothic mother who fades into the narrative margins, Neeli becomes central, her destructive power simultaneously terrifying and protective. Over time, this potency is not suppressed but transformed and reframed within temple worship as divine maternal energy. Thus, Gothic often relies on the absence/silence and erasure of mothers, however the Neeli myth asserts the mother's enduring presence, elevating her from abjection to sacred authority, and she is adored. She is a symbol of women's struggle against the power structure here.

Gothic often thrives on the seductive female who is dangerous and sucks human blood. Neeli functions in this same register, but with a cultural inflection: her seduction is aimed at men, turning their desire into their undoing. Neeli's victims are predominantly men, cast at the top of the caste hierarchy. Men function as custodians of ritual purity, and their downfall at the hands of a spectral woman dramatises the fragility of caste patriarchy. "A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence." (Chakravarti, 579). Here, we understand the Neeli myth foregrounds its Gothic tenor not only in questions of gender and maternity but also in caste conventions. As Vijaya Ramaswamy notes, southern ballads often encode "the notion of women's freedom and the urge to carve out one's own spaces independent of the ubiquitous patriarchal male" (149). Sheena Krishnan Ulamparambath's paper in the *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* uses medieval northern ballads to examine the complex and often contradictory roles and social status of women in Kerala. She states:

> Untouchability and unapproachability appeared in their most acute form in Kerala, where they were systematised and perfected more than anywhere else in India. The social distance between the lower and upper castes widened as rigidity emerged in the caste system during the medieval period. (396)

In the stories of *Aithihyamala* (translated: a garland of myth and legends) written by Kottarathil Shankunni, in the Yakshi stories that are told, the goddess often manifests in dramatic ways, sometimes through a woman challenging hierarchies, a deity choosing to reveal herself as a Yakshi through the marginalised, as in the case of Neeli, who has a genealogy of the Devadasi. As Bini BS says, these stories in Aithihyamala 'offer parallel accounts of caste practices, gender and status quo, customs, ethical norms and social organisation which can be read as a subtext to history' (30). Yakshi is a negative image of a woman crafted to portray women as destructive spirits. Bini observes in the stories, "the goddess is seen as a benevolent, fierce and at times vengeful female force, yakshi in the myths and legends of Kerala is a diabolical feminine embodiment or demi-goddess with shades of evil and kindness in her….two different manifestations of the feminine, the anthropomorphised goddess and yakshi reflect the social as well as the ritual status of women' (31, 33).

The importance of nature in South Indian Gothic tenor and the cult of the Yakshas and Yakshis here has emerged from a complex synthesis of nature worship, ancestral veneration, and evolving deity concepts that extend to encompass natural phenomena. Here, in the Eastern Ghats, worship is done in a naturally formed ecosystem or atmosphere that came to be regarded as the abode of mysterious and potentially threatening powers.

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