



## Between Myth and Modernity: Reconstructing the Spectre of Kalliyankattu Neeli in *Lokah* Chapter 1 - Chandra

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### Abstract

The cultural imagination of Kerala has been long permeated by the mythical entity of Kalliyankattu Neeli as both a spectral figure and a symbol of subversive femininity. Neeli is conventionally represented as a vindictive spirit. She encapsulates her trepidations regarding gender, desire and the paranormal. The Malayalam movie *Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* resuscitates this legend within the framework of a cinematic universe. Neeli is displaced from the regional matrices of folklore to the modern cultural lexicon of speculative fictional narratives. This research article analyses the film under consideration and examines how it navigates the conflict between myth and modernity by reinterpreting and reconstructing Neeli as an interstitial presence who transcends the limits of tradition, genre and gender. The paper examines how the film reinterprets the indigenous myth for contemporary viewership. It also shows how the recapping of this myth undermines the conventional past/present dichotomy. To put it differently, the film *Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* not just successfully recreates Neeli but also situates her in a wider discourse of mythopoesis in Malayalam, or rather Indian cinema, where tradition and modernity engage in an active conversation.

Keywords: Spectre, myth, modernity, tradition, mythopoesis

### Introduction

Kalliyankattu Neeli is one of the most intriguing female spectral creatures in the folklore of Kerala and gives immense scope for interdisciplinary study. Neeli is typically shown as a spirit seeking vengeance for a wrong, which reveals the patriarchal doubts regarding women's agency and sexuality. Besides her

folkloric role, the story of Neeli finds rich ground in feminist and cultural studies in relation to marginalisation, resistance and the awful female. Neeli is reinterpreted as a symbol of cultural memory and subversive feminine power, shifting her away from the position of a frightening villain in contemporary literature and cinema.

*Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra*

*Lokah: Chapter 1 - Chandra* is a Malayalam superhero film that merges Kerala mythology with fantasy and cinematic world-building. The film directed by Dominic Arun and produced by Dulquer Salmaan places the narrative of Kalliyankattu Neeli in a modern tale. The film is about the mysterious character of Chandra, who merges horror, mythology and superhero narrative to create a unique cinematic universe. Kalyani Priyadarshan plays the titular character Chandra, and Naslen plays the role of her companion Sunny. The film portraying feminine power attempts to blend folklore and indigenous myth with modern visual narratives.

Myths have always functioned as repositories of collective anxieties, desires and ideological structures. Mircea Eliade states that "myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in the primordial time" (Kuritz 3). Myths are therefore meaningful narratives that explain the origins, beliefs, collective identities and customs. As asserted by Roland Barthes, "myth is a type of speech defined by its intention much more than its literal meaning" (124). The importance of myth is not in the narrative itself, but in what the narrative is supposed to convey to a culture. Neeli's portrayal as a terrifying spectral woman in the film expresses deep cultural anxieties related to femininity, sexuality, betrayal, fear and hegemonic control. Here, the intention of the myth is more important than the conventional literary story as the film reflects the ideological fears surrounding female agency and transgression. In doing so, the film does not merely reproduce a familiar narrative; instead, it reconstructs Neeli as a complex interstitial presence that moves between folklore and speculative fiction.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida says, "the spectre is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees" (125). In Kerala folklore, Neeli is often portrayed

as a scary, spectral figure linked with death, seduction, and revenge. Such depictions place Neeli within the more general image of the "monstrous feminine", a concept developed by Barbara Creed. Creed explains that patriarchal civilisations conventionally portray female bodies and anger as monstrous to control and limit female agency. Neeli's presence, therefore, should not be read merely as a supernatural phenomenon but rather as a reflection of cultural anxieties about female sexuality, autonomy, and vengeance. Jan Assmann observes that "cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (213). The notion of cultural memory is useful for understanding how communities sustain their collective identities through myths, legends, rituals, and shared narratives transmitted across generations. It is this inherited repository of memory that endures Kalliyankattu Neeli in the cultural imagination of Kerala. Although rooted in oral folklore and regional storytelling traditions, Neeli's sustained existence in literature, popular culture, and cinema reflects the enduring power of cultural memory in influencing collective consciousness.

Mythopoesis provides a framework for understanding the film's engagement with myth and modernity. The term 'mythopoesis' describes the creation and reconstruction of mythological stories within contemporary artistic practices. The term comes from the Greek words 'mythos' (myth/story) and 'poiein' (to make). As noted by Joseph Campbell, "myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation" (Saleh 156). Barthes also opines that myth is a living tradition constantly reinterpreted by each generation.

The Malayalam film industry has increasingly shown interest in works that combine elements of myth with fiction and fantasy. Therefore, the revival of Neeli is not merely an act of adaptation in *Lokah* but also an

act of cultural preservation. The film reconnects a contemporary audience to an indigenous narrative tradition while adapting it for present cultural discourse by rewriting the myth within a contemporary cinematic universe. Thus, while preserving the folklore tradition, Neeli serves as a living emblem within contemporary cultural discussions. The film destabilises the temporal binaries, reflecting Homi K. Bhabha's assertion that "beyond is not a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past..." (3), but an ongoing negotiation with it. This is noteworthy because it demonstrates myth may be changed to fit new cultural sensibilities without diminishing its symbolic value. Sunny's statement in the film: "The world doesn't need another legend. It needs someone to stand up when everyone else is sitting down" suggests that society does not merely need mythical heroes or legendary figures preserved in stories; instead, it needs individuals who actively resist injustice and take action in the present. As a result, Neeli develops into a cultural symbol and becomes more than a mythic apparition, traversing across time, space and genres.

One of the most compelling aspects of the film is the dismantling of the traditional past/present dichotomy. In contrast to speculative fiction, which is generally associated with futurity and technological modernity, myths are conventionally thought of as being from a pre-modern era. Still, the film isn't about maintaining such rigid distinctions. Yet the film refuses to maintain such rigid distinctions. Instead, it shows how cultural memory and narrative repetition keep the past alive and continue to haunt the present. There is a conversation between Sunny and Chandra that marks a crucial moment in *Lokah*, where mythology directly enters contemporary reality:

Sunny: Who are you really? I've figured out you're not exactly human. Are you a Yakshi or something?

Chandra: Yes...

Sunny: Is your real name Chandra?

Chandra: My real name is Neeli

Sunny: You mean Kalliyankattu Neeli.

Chandra Yes. (1:15:28 - 1:30:40)

Sunny frames his question to Chandra through the prism of modern curiosity and scepticism, calling her "not exactly human" and associating her with the mythical Yakshi. However, with Chandra's confession that her "real name is Neeli" and Sunny's recognition of her as "Kalliyankattu Neeli", the distinction between truth and legend is dissolved. The conversation between them represents the return of a Neeli from a mythical figure to an integral part of the modern cinematic universe. This marks the reconstruction of Neeli into modern times. Furthermore, it also highlights the film's mythopoetic strategy of reconstructing indigenous folklore in the context of modern speculative fiction, proving that myths are still relevant and changing in today's cultural awareness.

The popular belief is that Kadamattathu Kathanar subdued Neeli by putting a nail into her head, exorcising the female superpower in her. However, the film reconstructs this story with Kathanar's confession that he never wanted to destroy her but merely wanted to satisfy the fears and expectations of the villagers.

Kathanar: I only did this to convince the villagers that I had exorcised you. I never intended to kill you. I am well aware of your weaknesses and strengths. You came this way because of something that defies death has fused with your blood....

Sunny: I always believed those were myths.

Neeli: Do you have any idea, how so-called myths and legends are actually real. (1:30:53 - 1:32:57)

Sunny's dialogue reflects the rational scepticism associated with modernity, when

myth is generally rejected as superstition or fiction. Neeli's response confronts this modern assumption by claiming the continuous significance and presence of myth within the contemporary reality. In this context, their conversation blurs the binary between myth and modernity. This conversation also demonstrates that myths are not dead remnants of the past but living cultural forces shaping present consciousness. In an encounter scene with Chandra, Inspector Nachiyappa Gowda dismisses her as "just a girl with a glow-stick." However, his statement that he has "seen gods bleed in these streets" collapses the boundary between the supernatural and the contemporary world. The dialogue suggests that myth is not confined to a distant sacred past but continues to exist within modern social reality.

The reconstruction of Neeli in the film also invites a feminist reading. In conventional folklore, Neeli is frequently reduced to a vindictive figure whose rage and sexuality are portrayed as destructive forces. As Creed notes, "All societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine" (1). However, the film rewrites this myth by bringing in a bat attack as a central thread in the tale weaving together legend and speculative fiction. It is the start of her change into a person beyond human constraints. The film therefore rewrites her from a quasi-scientific lens, where the infection is the cause of her immortality and supernatural powers. Patriarchal narratives often demonise women who resist social norms, transforming them into monstrous entities that must be feared or controlled. Hélène Cixous, in *The Laugh of the Medusa*, reclaims the demonized figure of Medusa by challenging the patriarchal narratives that portray powerful women as monstrous and threatening. Similarly, the film also complicates this stereotypical representation by granting Neeli a more complex and psychological and symbolic dimension. Rather than portraying her simply as an object of terror, the narrative positions her as a figure of resistance against oppressive

structures. The film shifts her identity from that of a destructive supernatural entity to a saviour figure who intervenes against violence inflicted upon women. The basement sequence, in which Neeli rescues a girl from an acid attack, exemplifies this reinterpretation. This transformation also reflects a broader cultural shift in the representation of female mythic figures in contemporary cinema.

The film's visual language further backs this reinterpretation. Malayalam cinema has traditionally depended heavily on realism as its dominant aesthetic mode. However, recent filmmakers like Basil Joseph (Minnal Murali) and Dominic Arun (Lokah) have increasingly pushed the boundaries of fantasy and supernatural themes. *Lokah* utilizes the cinematic strategies to create a mythic atmosphere that conduits myth and modernity. The visual representation of Neeli in the film oscillates between familiarity and otherness, allowing her to function simultaneously as a folkloric memory and a futuristic cultural icon.

Linda Hutcheon maintains that "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Demory 3). One of cinema's greatest strengths is the unique ability to transform oral narratives into visual experiences, making them accessible to a far larger audience. Adapting the story of Neeli for the big screen preserves the myth and expands its cultural significance. Consequently, in the framework of modern spectatorship, Neeli's legend takes on new significance. The interstitial nature of Neeli's identity is central to the film's thematic structure. As Derrida observes, "the spectre is neither present nor absent" (60), Chandra in the movie exists between life and death, folklore and fiction, and femininity and monstrosity. This state of transition enables the character to challenge fixed dichotomies. Neeli's characterisation mirrors the fluidity that poststructuralist thinkers emphasise: the instability of identities and meanings. She cannot be confined within a singular interpretative framework because she

continuously shifts between multiple symbolic positions. This ambiguity is precisely what grants the character her enduring cultural relevance.

The film reflects Bhabha's argument that cultures are never "unitary," as it merges indigenous folklore with contemporary global cinematic aesthetics. The reconstruction of Neeli echoes how by fusing indigenous myth with global cinematic trends contemporary Malayalam cinema retain their local specificity. In another instance, Chandra bites the inspector Nachiyappa and turns him into an entity like herself, which is a major departure from the usual Kerala folklore. Neeli is traditionally a single ghostly figure of revenge and supernatural horror. But the film adds to the mythology by hinting at the idea of transmissible transformation, a trope often associated with Western zombie and vampire stories. This moment is an intersection of Indigenous myth and global horror conventions. In vampire lore, the bite serves as a vehicle for the transmission of supernatural identity from one body to another. Similarly, zombie stories tend to be about infection and the spread of monstrosity. This motif is hybridised with transnational horror aesthetics in the legend of Neeli to produce this film. This creates a new mythic structure that is not exclusively local or wholly derivative of Western genres. While contemporary Indian cinema is increasingly engaging with fantasy franchises, cinematic universe, and speculative narration influenced by global cinematic culture, they prove that such representations or experimentation need not rely on western mythological models. *Lokah* is a solid validation that indigenous folklore itself can provide rich material for the argument. The incorporation of vampire or zombie-like elements allows the myth of Neeli to transcend regional boundaries while remaining rooted in Kerala's cultural imagination. The film argues that localised tales can be culturally viable within larger popular

culture by centring around a mythical person that is uniquely Malayali.

In Kerala's cultural imagination, Chattan is linked to mischievous and supernatural beings, especially in the traditions of Kuttichathan worship and ritual practices associated with folk religion and occult belief systems. Chattan is not part of the mainstream mythology and its divine figures. He is part of the liminal world of spirits, magic and subaltern belief traditions. Chattan is used to create a mythic and interconnected universe for the film, drawing on regional folklore. The cameo played by Tovino Thomas is not merely fan service, or a cinema spectacle, but a symbolic gesture toward the expansion of a larger folklore-based cinematic mythology. Neeli, for instance, is a reinterpreted feminine supernatural force; Chattan, in contrast, conjures another stratum of Kerala's mythic ground—one based in ambiguity, trickery, occult power, and challenge to rigid moral categories.

The film poses also fundamental questions regarding memory and cultural preservation. "Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity" (Assmann 213). Myths survive through repetition and reinterpretation. If myths are not retold, they risk disappearing from public consciousness. The film reimagines Neeli for contemporary audiences, contributing to the preservation of Kerala's cultural heritage while simultaneously transforming it. This process reflects the dynamic nature of folklore itself. Myths endure not because they remain unchanged, but because they adapt to shifting historical and cultural contexts.

### Conclusion

*Lokah: Chapter 1 – Chandra* is a major intervention in the growing interaction between mythology and contemporary Malayalam cinema. The film's reimagining of Kalliyenkattu Neeli overturns customary portrayals of feminine ugliness and relocates the mythical

figure within a contemporary speculative space. The film deconstructs the barriers between past and present, folklore and modernity, demonstrating the fact that myths remain a lively aspect of current cultural imagination. Neeli is not simply a ghostly residue of folklore but a powerful liminal character that embodies resistance, memory and transformation. Ultimately, the film is part of a larger effort of mythopoesis in Indian cinema, where indigenous myths are always being reinterpreted in conjunction with changing social, cultural and cinematic realities.

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