

Kavu as a Cultural Imaginary: A Study on the Representation of Sacred Groves in Malayalam Cinema

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by

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Abstract

Kavu, the sacred groves in Kerala, India, is a of trees (nature) guarded in the interest of a particular deity (culture) against human intervention through the medium of myths and taboos. It is an umbrella term for the heterogeneous systems of nature worship practised by the caste communities in Kerala from the dominant ones to the subaltern ones. This tradition has variations from caste to caste and from one geo-space to another. This eco-cultural space has been subjected to academic introspection from ecological, anthropological, historical and Folk Culture Studies perspectives. Interestingly, Malayalam cinema or the regional film industry of Kerala has extensively represented this space in numerous films either as a prop or mise-en-sc'ene or with due narrative significance. This motif was featured as early as in the late 1950s and it recurs to the present. Intriguingly, this eco-cultural institution ventured into the filmic narrative as early as at its infancy while the films were studio made. Once the industry debouched from the cloisters of studios to location-shooting, images of the real kavu were availed of through the agency of art direction. This thesis focuses on the representation of kavu in the popular discourse of Malayalam cinema. The primary objective of this thesis is to determine whether Malayalam films have addressed the heterogeneity of kavu, while considering its diverse systems of worship, caste dynamics, gender equations and ecological diversity.

Incorporating the tools of content and discourse analysis, data collected from field visits, interviews with experts and a review of literature, this interdisciplinary study would examine select film texts through the theoretical frameworks of cultural studies, subaltern theory, psychoanalytic film theory, theories on gender and sexuality, eco-theories on films, and theories on the imaginary, to demonstrate how Malayalam cinema has taken from and given to the construction of kavu in the Malayali's cultural imaginary. It has been argued here that Malayalam cinema, which is a patriarchal art aimed at satisfying male desires, instead of rendering the multidimensionality of the eco-cultural space of kavu, instrumentalised its ritualistic traditions and environment to conjure visual spectacles. The films utilise the religious institution of kavu to reinforce hegemony through the representation of caste and gender relationships. Instead of using the popular medium of cinema as an eco-sensitization tool in the representation of kavu, Malayalam cinema stringently represents sacred groves without addressing the socio-political threats that this system faces.

Key words: Kavu, sacred groves, nature, culture, Malayalam cinema, caste dynamics, gender equations, patriarchal ideology