

**THE SCORNED DANCER AND THE PSYCHIATRIST: A CASE STUDY OF
FAZIL'S *MANICHITRATHAZHU* (1993) AS A SOUTH INDIAN POSTCOLONIAL
GOTHIC FILM**

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Abstract

From *Nosferatu* (1922) to Elia Kazan's adaptation of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), within the vast terrain of Gothic cinema is effervescent, academic discourse. However, since the genre's genesis, the discourses have focused on works created by and featuring white, cis, men. Therefore, in an effort to diversify the ongoing expansion of the Gothic canon, it is pertinent to travel back in time and visit the South Indian film *Manichitrathazhu* (1993). Directed by the critically acclaimed Fazil, the film follows a family's dispute about a ghost named Nagavalli whose spirit allegedly wanders the ancestral bungalow Madambally. With the arrival of psychiatrist Dr. Sunny Joseph whose been tasked to solve the case, both the characters within the film and the audience watching it all unfold must contend with the question: is our buried past truly all that buried away? Through a postcolonial lens analysis of *Manichitrathazhu*, readers of this paper will gain a better understanding of South Indian Gothic cinema, an unexplored alcove hidden deep within the larger Gothic genre. Expanding the cultural paradigm to include South Indian stories means challenging the notion that Gothic cinema is a Eurocentric institution and emphasizing how it is, in fact, a globally interconnected, literary paragon.

Introduction

South India's history and art are both rich and heavy with intrigue, which makes exploring the culture and its artifacts a fascinating experience; the history also has to reckon with its violence against women, along with Victorian imperialism's manipulation and erasure of its traditional culture. Modern South India still struggles to confront and address the issues from their colonial history. Effectively, these historic frustrations manifest through the medium of

cinema alongside traditional art forms as music, dance, and painting. Director Aleksa Muhammed Fazil, professionally known and referred to as Fazil, speaks back to the phenomenon of Western imperialism and its attempts at cultural erasure, through the medium of Malayalam cinema.

Fazil's debut film *Manjil Virinja Pookkal* (1980), which translates in English to *The Flowers that Bloomed in the Snow*, was a massive success with both critics and audiences. Critics were impressed with Fazil's experimental, yet poetically charged storytelling, which represented a shift from the kind of films that were being made at that time. The popular films of the 1960s and 1970s celebrated all-powerful, swoon-worthy, grandiose heroes who fought villains, saved the people, and won the damsel-in-distress. Fazil subverted such tropes by presenting a story about flawed, down-to-earth people who resonated with the audience, as opposed to valiant, superhuman characters. The audience liked watching characters like them, characters with whom they could connect. The film further impressed the audience with its soundtrack which married on-trend sounds with classic Indian melodies and experimented with music serving as a thematic motif. With just his first film, Fazil won six Kerala State Film Awards including Best Film with Popular Appeal and Aesthetic Value.

Three years later, he again won Best Film with Popular Appeal and Aesthetic Value for his film *Nokkethadhoorathu Kannum Nattu* (1984)—or *Gazing as Far as the Eye Can See*—which tells the story of lonely, cynical septuagenarian Kunjoonjamma Thomas whose granddaughter Girly returns to her years after her daughter's death. The return of Girly teaches Kujoonjamma to love life and adopt a sense of optimism, until she finds out that Girly is actually dying from a brain tumor and came to spend her last moments with her grandmother. With *Nokkethadhoorathu Kannum Nattu* (1984), Fazil took inspiration from the anxieties, taboos, and

oppressive happenings that exist in Kerala, wove them together, and created a story with depth. He draws on archetypes like the estranged foreigner who returns home to connect to their roots and the woman who—in an attempt to gain agency or control—is isolated or punished by men and society for her hubris. In gothic fashion, Fazil takes inspiration from the real, oppressive realities, even the taboo, unspoken ones. In doing so, he directs a film that aesthetically, theatrically, and emotionally resonates with his audience. His other films such as *Ente Mamattukkuttiyammakku* (1983), *Manivathoorile Aayiram Sivarathrikal* (1987), *Pappayude Swantham Appoos* (1992), either went on to become critically acclaimed or cult classics, but no film of his compares to his best work to date, the cinematic tour de force *Manichitrathazhu* (1992).

Manichitrathazhu begins by introducing the audience to the Madamballi bungalow and the spirits that haunt the place. As the legend goes, the place is haunted by a violent court dancer by the name Nagavalli who was murdered by a feudal lord named Karanavar Sankaran Thampi—or so the village and Sankaran Thampi's descendants believe. Superstitions run high within the traditional town and traditional family as Hindu seances and rituals are annually conducted in order to keep the spirits pacified. Things seem calm until recently married Nakulan returns from Bangalore (a Northern metropolitan city) to officially introduce the family to his new wife Ganga. The young couple trivialize the legend as a meaningless, old myth, and move into the mansion anyway. Despite warnings from Nakulan's family members against going near the thekkini¹ where vehement spirits allegedly reside, Ganga, Nakulan's new wife, opens the room that had been shut for years. Consequently, chaos ensues in the house, leading the family to believe that Nagavalli has been awakened. Nakulan, however, believes his cousin Sreedevi is

¹ The southern room of Madambally

causing the ruckus because of his mental ailments. He calls his psychologist friend Sunny, much to the chagrin of his family who find Nakulan's trust in Western medicine and disbelief in Hindu ideology toxic and negligent. The story continues with Sunny taking on the role of a detective to uncover what is actually haunting Madampally. The climax of the movie reveals that Nagavalli, in actuality, is Ganga herself. As it turns out, she has been wreaking havoc on the family for the duration of the movie without her own knowledge, due to her undiagnosed split personality disorder.

The impact of *Manichitrathazhu* is unmatched by any movie released then. It was the highest-grossing Malayalam film of its time is hailed as one of the best Malayalam movies of all times. My mother remembers the day she skipped school with her friends to watch the film. The whole ride there, her stomach bubbled with anxiety about her irresponsible decision, only to find her teachers in the row right behind her. Needless to say, *Manichitrathazhu* was all people could talk about at the time, so going to the theaters and watching it for themselves was nonnegotiable. An instant classic from the day it was released, the film is entrenched in Keralite culture. The soundtrack is consistently covered by singers, dancers, and musicians alike; the dialogue—both dramatic and comedic—is quoted both in stage productions and at house parties; the cast and crew are still asked about the film to this date, and new movies are inspired by, or pay homage to, the film.

In many ways, *Manichitrathazhu* set the standard for creators and viewers alike in that cinema should be both technically striking and artistically awe-inspiring. The film's legacy continues with remakes in different languages, and its dialogue is quoted and reiterated from social functions to cinephile discourses. But despite the accolades, the film has yet to be discussed in the context of cultural theory. Critics have overlooked Fazil's translation of a

predominantly Western institution like Gothic cinema into a South Indian artwork, and thus, the film has yet to be understood for its postcolonial overtone. The movie, being a commercial film, was meant to connect with the layperson. The film's screenplay played with the psychology of the audience and terrified people, leaving them in shock with the biggest plot twist of its time. Seeing the vivid images of a once-upon-a-time Kerala invokes something in people they themselves did not know how to describe.

This paper examines the Malayalam film *Manichitrathazhu* (1993), in order to identify and analyze some crucial elements of South Indian gothic art. Specifically, I explore the gothic elements of Bharatanatyam—a traditional, South Indian dance form—and the dichotomy of Eastern versus Western culture and ideology most overtly exemplified by the oppositional characters of a ghostly dancer and an American psychologist. Furthermore, I analyze other predominant gothic elements within the film, including the psychologized landscape that works in tandem with the traditional, Indian music to evoke a journey back in time for the audience. Essentially, this paper's aim is to bring *Manichitrathazhu* to an international audience and let the film add and speak back, in its own language, to the existing, western discourse of Gothic literature and cinema. Additionally, in addressing the film's significance to the academic realm, the paper acknowledges its commercial appeal while also recognizing its literary value.

Methodology

Postcolonial Theory:

Despite being a horror thriller film, the objective and artistic intention of *Manichitrathazhu* is a bit more cerebral. The film is more concerned with what the characters, in respect to their upbringing and belief system, make of Nagavalli, her legend, and her existence—both in spirit and historical account. The few instances in which Nagavalli creates havoc—prior

to her being revealed as Ganga—are few and far in between, given the duration of the film. Even when she is finally revealed as the “ghost,” Ganga and her split personality disorder² appear as frightening as a corporeal Nagavalli, if not more. Additionally, the real havoc Nagavalli creates is the heated debates and spiraling, coiling tensions within the home. Therefore, one can assert that the setting of *Manichitrathazhu* evaluates the state of national confusion and exemplifies the anxieties over a struggle for a homogenous national identity. Subsequently, the film’s objective is less about the expulsion of Nagavalli or whether the ghost of Nagavalli exists at all: it is more about using the central plot as an allegorical device to critique South India’s identity crisis. In order to further explore this idea, I will be analyzing *Manichitrathazhu* through a Postcolonial lens. Particularly, I am interested in applying Homi K. Bhabha’s work *Locations of Culture* (1994).

While giving a public lecture on his book *The Burdened Life: On Migration and the Humanities* at the Babbage Lecture Theatre in Cambridge, Homi K. Bhabha says, “alluding to what he calls the death-life metaphor, Emanuel Levinas suggests that it is in being answerable for the neighbor’s life that we’re already with the other in death.” He continues: “the imaginary of a proleptic death, a death that is in the future but has to be experienced today—that proleptic death—is the site from which thoughtful and concerned people write.” Though the lecture is rooted in the discussion about the current global atrocities that are violating the human rights of refugees and the subsequent bystander mentality, his ideas also apply to *Manichitrathazhu*—particularly the film’s treatment of the ghost Nagavalli and Ganga. In the introduction to his book *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that “increasingly, ‘national’ cultures are being produced from the perspective of disenfranchised minorities” (5). In this film, the

² The film does not officially diagnose Ganga as having what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders calls dissociative personality disorder (DID), but it is implied that she has something of the sort.

disenfranchised minority is constituted by oppressed and traumatized women, evidenced by the fact that the film itself is predicated upon the myth of a murdered woman. The time-travelling nature of the film allows Nagavalli and Ganga, two women who struggle with cultural norms, to metaphorically disrupt the space-time continuum and connect with each other as they both relive and exacerbate their trauma; the former was a victim in a violent, misogynist murder while the latter's mental health was stigmatized and hidden by neglectful parents. The film's focus on the past also forces the rest of the characters—and the audience—to reckon with the cultural and patriarchal oppression of women by forcing them out of their ostracizing, bystander space.

Locations of Culture lays out Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, describing the binary divisions which dominate postcolonial cultures. Postcolonial cultures, in trying to reestablish tradition, culture, and preserve a cultural, national identity, are also traumatized by a history that is haunted by imperialism. Imperialism, therefore, is seen as a cancerous tumor that mutated the DNA of their culture. In response, individuals work harder to preserve (what they deem) their pre-imperialistic culture, which Bhabha calls contra-modernity. As the text states:

Postcolonial contra-modernity may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with I, resistant to its oppressive, assimilationist technologies; but they also deploy the cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to 'translate,' and therefore reinscribe, the social imaginary of both metropolis and modernity. (6)

This phenomenon of contra-modernity works as a motif to drive *Manichitrathazhu*'s narrative as, in the film, Eastern traditions and Western philosophy are consistently at odds, heightening the film's tension, and creating problems as opposed to solving them. The film eventually ends on a note where the normative binary, though not collapsed, is certainly questioned.

Essentially, I want to explore and showcase how the film exemplifies Bhabha's argument about cultural change. As he writes, "The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present" (7).

In addition to Bhabha's work, Edward Said's *Orientalism* provides more context to the ongoing discourse about the East versus West dichotomy. Said points out how the issue with the dichotomy is that distinctions cement stereotypes: "the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other" ("Introduction," II). Hence, I will analyze how this tendency presents itself in the film and how it is subverted as the film comes to its conclusion.

Freudian Psychology:

Manichitrathazhu was highly acclaimed during its time of release and continues to be hailed as one of the best films due to its fresh take on psychological thrillers. With the help of the film's cinematographer Venu and editor T. R. Shekar, the screenplay comes to life as it utilizes Sigmund Freud's use of the uncanny. The uncanny is defined as a "class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 930). This particular class of fright and anxiety makes *Manichitrathazhu*'s story a daunting, visceral experience both for the characters and the audience. The story deals with the familiarity of South Indian relics, myths, and history while also exploring the unknown, the buried away, and the hidden from sight. This marriage between the former and latter exacerbates the uncanny, since "something needs to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny" (931). Essentially, the visual representation of the uncanny holds the film together, as seen in many different shots: creaking

furniture moving in an otherwise silent, still room, anklets being heard in the middle of the night though the wearer cannot be seen, and shadows that look human enough lurking behind corners.

Furthermore, the uncanny also appears in a body of work when “the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self” (940). In the case of *Manichitrathazhu*, the subject is Ganga, whose self is doubling, dividing, and interchanging, as she starts identifying with Nagavalli and her story. Freud writes that “the uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (950); Nagavalli’s story reanimates Ganga’s “infantile complexes” and harks back to so-called “primitive beliefs,” which subsequently triggers her own disorder. The evoked uncanny becomes uncontained as Ganga becomes more obsessed, and seemingly possessed, by Nagavalli, triggering the “dominance of the unconscious mind.” (942).

The uncanny, seen in both the film’s cinematography and the discourse on psychology, is integral to the film’s plot and theme, and my paper will explore it further in a later section, using sources that derive from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytical work alongside Julia Kristeva’s work about abjection.

Carnatic Music Theory:

To understand *Manichitrathazhu* as a postcolonial gothic film, the audience must also understand the significance of Carnatic music and Bharatanatyam. Music, dance, and the artistic principles of the two are integral when discussing South Indian culture and its history. In fact, the

film's composer M.G. Radhakrishnan is an accomplished Carnatic vocalist whose discography often employs Carnatic elements. Furthermore, the actress Shobana, who plays Ganga and Nagavalli, is a critically renowned and celebrated Bharatanatyam dancer. Therefore, based on concepts and key observations of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic (sometimes spelled Karnatak or Karnatic) music theory, I will analyze the aesthetic choices made by the film.

In her article "Coarticulation and Gesture: An Analysis of Melodic Movement in South Indian" (2016), Lara Pearson defines Carnatic music as "a genre of art and devotional music which developed in the royal courts and temples of South India over a period of many centuries and still enjoys popularity in India today" (280). Furthermore, she establishes how the "style comprises both compositional and improvisational elements" (280). Because of the way Carnatic music is structured and practice, there is a "tendency for theory to be created as a post hoc abstraction of existing musical practices" (285). The way in which Carnatic music is composed and performed is important to the film, as the songs performed by Nagavalli and the background scores used to create tension within the scene are done in the traditional Carnatic style.

Beyond the technical impressiveness of Carnatic music, in their article, "The Musical Language of Piety: The Semiotics of Visual Media in Shaping the Divine Status of Karnatik Music" (2020), Jayakrishnan Narayanan and Dhanavel Senkamalam Periyasamy assert how "spiritual transcendence is a characteristic factor that defines ideal music according to the ancient theories of Indian classical music" (1). They add that, regardless of the listener's religious beliefs, Carnatic music is expected to evoke "a devotional experience, if not a catharsis" (4). The ethereal quality of Carnatic music is exemplified in *Manichitrathazhu*; the music plays a part in emphasizing the uncanny, mystical, and gothic ambience of the Madambally bungalow.

Furthermore, Uttara Asha Coorlawala's article "The Sanskritized Body" (2004) provides insight into the traditional dance form Bharatanatyam, particularly on its contentious origins and practice. The title phrase "sanskritized body" refers to the work of dancer and choreography Rukmini Devi Arundale who revitalized Bharatanatyam from its *sadir attam* origins by claiming that "Bharatanatyam... [is] the quintessential dance described in the *Natyashastra*³" (53). In doing so, Arundale "established the dance as possessing an ancient spiritual and aesthetic heritage, and as an equivalent to status of classical as in western ballet" (53). While Arundale left a legacy as the figure who saved Bharatanatyam from complete oblivion, Coorlawala analyzes "the Orientalist representation of a 'pan Indian transhistorical' devadasi⁴" (50) and the canonized history that claims "linear deterioration of aesthetic quality and personal agency, from temple to courts and from courts to streets and to (deserved) abandonment from where the dancer and the dance must be rescued" (50).

Similarly, Amanda Weidman's historical analysis of Carnatic music in her article "Can the Subaltern Sing?" (2005) studies the cultivation of Carnatic music and the discourse around Tamil (the language Nagavalli speaks) that came about in the process. In understanding the history of Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music in the context of imperialism and a postcolonial society, one can achieve a more insightful and nuanced perspective on the fascination surrounding Nagavalli.

The Scorned Dancer and the Psychiatrist: A Case Study of *Manichitrathazhu* as a South Indian Postcolonial Gothic Film

The Ancient Ruins of Bharatanatyam:

³ The ancient, theoretical Sanskrit text which disseminates Indian art theory.

⁴ A dancer of *sadir attam*, the predecessor of Bharatanatyam.

Manichitrathazhu has many subplots and storylines, but fundamentally, the film is about the ghost named Nagavalli. Throughout the film, the characters contend with their own beliefs about the legend and whether she truly is real or whether her so-called apparition is illusory, representing superstitions gone awry. Regardless, the idea of her plagues every character, inciting their fears and frustrations.

At first called by the name *thamazhathi*, which translates to Tamilian Girl (but in a pejorative sense to emphasize contempt), the only thing the audience knows about the ghost Nagavalli is the fact that she was killed a long time ago and now haunts the house. In hearing murmurs about the mysterious *thamazhathi*, Ganga, unable to manage her curiosity, asks Bhasura, Nakulan's aunt, "who are these people who died?" (Fazil 29:27). In the style of an embedded narrative, Bhasura tells Ganga:

There was once a powerful Karanavar⁵ that ran this place then. He brought some dancer from Tanjavoor to stay here. Nagavalli was that *thamazhathi's* name. This *Thamazhathi* was in love with another person: a dancer named Ramanathan. He came in search of her and stayed in the house behind. Somehow, *Karanvar* came to know all this. That night, in the Southern room, he slayed and killed her. (30:01).

Other than a general idea of where she is from and her identity as a beautiful dancer, not much else is known about Nagavalli. Her mysterious origins and mystic permanence upon the cultural landscape are a reflection of the traditional, South Indian dance form Bharatanatyam. Similar to Nagavalli, Bharatanatyam and its dancers have been the subject of cultural erasure and myth creation. Though it is now considered equivalent to classical forms such as ballet, the history of the artform suggests that it was not always that case.

⁵ nobleman

Writing in 2004, Uttara Asha Coorwala takes issue with how, “thirty years ago, Indian "classical" dance was understood as some kind of mysterious ancient fossil from the second century B.C.E., [while] narratives now focus on invented traditions, and the modernist reconstructions of the Tanjavur court and the later Indian nationalist movement” (51). Her observation is on par with *Manichitrathazhu*'s exploration of Nagavalli, since the film portrays her both as a talented dancer who was once promoted to serve an audience of nobility and as a woman scorned for capitalizing on her body.

Upon first entering the thekkini, Ganga stumbles upon a portrait of Nagavalli. With a face to put on to the old tales of what took place in the room, Ganga gazes upon the portrait with wonderment (Fazil 34:28). The camera resonates with Ganga's awe as the film is as captivated by Nagavalli. The portrait captures her coy smile as she sits in a poised Bharatanatyam stance, wearing rich yellow and green silks and adorned with gold temple jewelry (Fazil 34:36). The portrait that Ganga sees evokes how Arundale's rebranded dance form emphasized “the use of authentic silk and gold costumes and real bridal jewelry [which] still denote a full and loving offering/sacrifice to the deity of the dance...One can only conclude that expensive sarees and jewelry are indispensable because they announce respectability and ensure visual pleasure" (Coorlawala 56). To Ganga, this is the true Nagavalli, who in no way resembles the stories about her wild apparitions. The only other person, besides Ganga, who sees the image of the beautiful Nagavalli is Sunny, the psychiatrist, who is given a tour of the thekkini when he arrives to Madambally. Similar to Ganga's first reaction, his mouth gapes open while his eyes dilate at the sight of Nagavalli (Fazil 1:20:24). Inspecting the portrait, he facetiously says, “Oh I get it. I get it now. That old *Karanavar* is just a misunderstood, poor thing...if this is truly that alleged lover of Ramanathan and the dancer named Nagavalli, I have no right to judge that old nobleman for

snatching her away. How can he not? What a structure, *ende ammachi*⁶!” Hearing his words, Ganga laughs along with him (Fazil 1:20:42). While joking is part of Sunny’s way of making sense of the situation (as seen many times in the film until things become dire), he more or less addresses what Nagavalli represents for most everyone else in the story, at least those who are preoccupied in the legend.

Nagavalli’s occupation is the least interesting thing about her to most everyone in the film. Instead, it is her relationship to the karanavar and dancer Ramanathan that is central to everyone’s obsession and concern. Coorwala would see this interpretation of Nagavalli’s existence as a reflection of what became of *sadir attam* dancers in post-colonial South India. These dancers were denigrated because of “Brahminical concerns...conflated with Victorian convictions regarding social purity, where women could be respectable only within monogamous heterosexual marriages (within patriarchy) or as celibate workers dedicated to worthy vocation” (Coorwala 52) in post-colonial South India. So, in the midst of reconstructing their new nation and attempting to revitalize culture, individuals like Arundale found it necessary to stigmatize *sadir attam*⁷ dancers as impure and a menace to society. Hence, Nagavalli’s identity as a vengeful spirit is a product of “the perception of exploited womanhood” (51). Her fate, similar to other devadasis, is to be forgotten for her work as an artist. Instead, she is remembered for her position in relation to men, which leaves her ostracized by society. As Ketu Katrak brings to light, the indictment of devadasis by reformers was no different from the objectification these dancers were subjected to by white, Victorian men. The latter sexualized devadasis by fetishizing *sadir attam* through their male gaze. Indian reformers validated the Victorian, misogynistic

⁶ Literally translates to “my mother” but comparable to exclamations like “good lord!” or “oh my god!”

⁷ Nagavalli would be considered a devadasi or a dancer of *sadir attam* considering Bharatanatyam technically did not exist until the early twentieth century.

falsehoods by cementing the notion that *sadir attam* is a sexually perverse institution. Between Victorian, patriarchal values and classist, Indian rebranding, devadasis who were never were in the business of selling their bodies were “forced into prostitution for survival when patronage for the devadasis decreased” (49). Essentially, society made the bodies of devadasis perverse and then followed it by claiming that devadasis who were perverting society.

As a result, Nagavalli is locked up for eternity in a room inside Madambally. Society’s attitude toward her, her story, and the response to her haunting are indicative of the practice of Sanskritization, a means to create a moral order with classist, casteist justifications.

Sanskritization is:

...a sociological process described by M.N. Srinivas in 1956, whereby lower castes emulated the customs and culture of upper castes in order to upgrade their social status (Srinivas 1956; V. Raghavan 1956). [It has now] come to denote a deliberate self-conscious return to ancient Vedic and brahminical values and customs from a new intellectual perspective, (often but not necessarily in response to 'Westernization')” (53).

As one of its victims, *sadir attam* undergoes the gentrification process and becomes the reformed and rebranded Bharatanatyam. “Claiming antiquity and sophistication” (53), Rukmini Devi Arundale introduces the new art form to “disassociate the dance from the stigma attached to its earlier name” (53). Left behind are devadasis told that they no longer belong. Subsequently, Nagavalli becomes the gothic figure buried alive alongside a history unreconciled and replaced with one that’s been revised. She becomes the scorned dancer, representing the erased and suppressed livelihoods of the marginalized performers who have been slandered by those with socio-political and/or religious agendas. Bharatanatyam, similar to Madambally’s thekkinni, is a Pandora’s box full of difficult truths, silenced voices, and a vacuum of unknown.

For the duration of the film, Nagavalli is only heard behind doors or through Ganga when she is Ganga's form. No one—the audience included—sees Nagavalli in her full until the musical number “Oru Murai Vanthu”⁸. This Nagavalli looks nothing like the Nagavalli who is captured in the portrait in the thekkini. Instead, this Nagavalli dances maniacally in a dark proscenium (2:18:08). She is wearing tattered, old remnants of a saree; kohl smeared all over her face; her hair in unkept tangles and adorned with wilting flowers (Fazil 2:18:27). She exemplifies the abjection felt by observers who reject aspects of themselves or their cultural traditions. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection results when “the clean and proper (in the sense of incorporated and incorporable) becomes filthy, the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame” (Kristeva 236). Nagavalli's abjection represents a myriad of anxieties and guilt. It represents the injustice that has been done in the name of nationalism as well as the culture's denigration and othering of women. It represents the history that has been ignored and revised, as well as the fear of revisiting this history.

As she is dancing, Nagavalli imagines the time in her life which predates her trauma. In this flashback, she looks far more similar to her portrait; she is wearing rich colors and meticulously placed jewelry which exude regality in her own right as a royal court dancer with an audience filled with affluent individuals (Fazil 2:19:28). The film visualizes the rest of the musical performance as a dream sequence made clear by use of jump cuts. The jump cuts move back and forth between Ganga's rendering of a Nagavalli who was once dancing in personal fulfillment and the Ganga who is dancing in Nagavalli's abject form. Though they both are performing the same choreography, one performs with grace, charisma, and delight while the other exemplifies urgency, anger, and torment. In seeing the two, antithetical miens of Nagavalli

⁸ “Oru Murai Vanthu” sung by K.S. Chitra is the musical number that appears in the climax of the film, not to be confused by the song “Oru Murai” sung by Sujatha Menon and functions as a motif in the film.

via Ganga's physical form results in a surreal experience for the onlooker. Nagavalli may be just a mere figment of Ganga's violent psychosis, but the gripping intensity of Nagavalli and Ganga's relationship evokes high anxiety. It is as if Ganga's clairvoyance has ripped the veil of order. As a result, the audience is now witness to the chaos of an unravelling time continuum. Julia Kristeva would aptly describe the abjection in question as:

...the ashes of oblivion...[which] serve as a screen and reflect aversion, repugnance... Then, forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth" (Kristeva 236).

Precisely, the dream sequence is indicative of how Ganga sees Nagavalli as a woman scorned. Unlike the beautiful Nagavalli of the past, the Nagavalli in abject form is mourning the love she violently lost—for whom should she be presentable? Accordingly, her vindictiveness results in abjection. It is emblematic of her rejection of the male gaze she performed for long ago.

The Anxiety over the East versus West Binary:

From the image of a chair rocking in the middle of an empty room (Fazil, 5:44) to the saree-clad woman walking in the dark within the woods (9:32), *Manichitrathazhu* plays with ubiquitous horror/gothic tropes. In particular, this film relies on the traditional scene where one character takes their superstitions about the legend in question seriously while the other belittles the legend in the name of pragmatism. In this film, Thampi, Nakulan's uncle and the patriarch of

the family, not only believes that Madambally is haunted; he sees it as his responsibility to maintain the natural order and protect the people in his family and town from the bungalow. Thampi justifies his belief on the traditions and legends of the past; he asks, “why should we challenge the dead?” (29:23). Nakulan, however, prides himself as a realist. Characterized as a modern, progressive young man who grew up in a city far from his hometown, he finds the legend to be outdated. He brushes off his uncle’s warning by saying what so many characters like him have said in so many different films: “These are beliefs from such old times ago. Who even cares for them these days?” (Fazil 18:59). As shown, Nakulan, despite his disregard for legend, attempts to remain as civil as he can for the sake of his and his uncle’s relationship. However, Nakulan’s annoyance exacerbates into frustration when it seems as though the town intends to bother him with their superstitions.

One night, a house servant screams saying she witnessed a young woman lurking around the house (implying they saw Nagavalli) (Fazil 46:28). To the servants, he warns, “Don’t make unnecessary issues for the rest of us...don’t make up stories that aren’t true only to lose your job” (47:36). Angry at the servants and the town’s belief in the Maadambally legend, Nakulan complains that about people like them exaggerate and keep alive these fake stories to instill fear in the town. He continues to rant until the clock behind him shatters; in a similar scene, the pot shattered when he was scolding the servants (48:16). Fear and confusion take over his face, but dead set on pragmatism and reason, he hypothesizes that perhaps it is his cousin Sreedevi acting out due to an undiagnosed mental ailment. Nakulan is an example of “the modern Orientalist [who] was, in his view, a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished” (Said II.I) His preconceived notions about the people of the town—that they are provincial and simple-minded—lead him to accuse the

innocent Sreedevi. Accusing Sreedevi of a mental illness fits within his schema, which rejects the existence of the paranormal, but assumes that he, with his civilized, modern education, has a superior understanding of what is going on.

Naturally, Thampi, insulted at Nakulan's idea that Sridevi is mentally-ill and should be seen by a psychiatrist, refutes the charge: "It's you and your modern-girl's [referring to Ganga] doing that is the cause of all of this!...but of course you won't admit to any of this...[I] saw that ghost in the attic with our own eyes. (Fazil 52: 37). "Oh, you saw it too?" Nakulan responds facetiously. "Well, then no one needs to doubt it." He is barely able to hold back his impulse to call everyone mad or barbaric: "Everyone here is...what do I even say..." (52:40) Their back-and-forth is a tempestuous one, and one can argue that it is less about finding a solution and more about establishing that the other person is wrong. It is an example of postcolonial discourse's construction of the Imaginary as Bhabha writes:

"...It assumes a discrete image which allows it to postulate a series of equivalences, sameness, identities, between the objects of the surrounding world. However, this positioning is itself problematic for the subject finds or recognizes itself through an image which is simultaneously alienating and hence potentially confrontational (110).

As evident in the scene, the aforementioned discrete image is Nagavalli as the implications of her actuality fuel an animosity that already exists between Nakulan and Thampi. In refusing to negotiate with their own schema, they indignantly distance themselves from one another, and their relationship becomes an oppositional one. It is easy for Thampi to alienate Nakulan and Ganga because they affirm his preconceived notions about modernity being destructive to the peace and stability of his home. Similarly, Nakulan feels as though he is left with no other option but to be confrontational when it seems that Thampi is more concerned with holding onto what

Nakulan assumes are primitive beliefs from which he has alienated himself. Hence, Nakulan—out of righteousness—calls upon the help of his friend Sunny, which cues the entry of the “psychiatrist” of this paper, the representative of Western thought.

It is hard to describe Dr. Sunny Joseph, the psychiatrist and friend of Nakulan, who comes to Madambally to treat and cure Sreedevi. His nonchalant demeanor and affinity for getting himself into embarrassing situations causes him to be a nuisance to most, if not all, the characters. The film introduces him as he is donning an all red, ascetic attire while detaining Nakulan’s other uncle, Unnithan, assuming he is the patient Nakulan called him about (Fazil 59:42). It is difficult to take Sunny seriously as a doctor, despite the alleged prestigious awards he has won for his work (1:01:59), because of his bumbling personality. He makes fun of himself, displaying clownish faces (1:00:12); he tells Nakulan about his pilgrimage across India (hence the ascetic attire) in a puckish, animated way which, of course, Thampi sees which cements his distrust in the American psychologist (1:01:29). The women of the household distrust Sunny just as much Thampi does as they see him as an American flirt with no values; for example, Bhasura is immediately suspicious whenever he is seen talking to Sreedevi (1:23:25). And it is not as if Sunny attempts to dissuade the opinions of the family; even the audience doubts his intelligence; in fact, Sunny seems to be a satire of American psychiatry—threatening to hypnotize people at the drop of a hat (1:33:35)—as opposed to a competent professional. In short, the film humors the audience through the figure of Sunny by mocking the “enthusiastic, even messianic European science, whose victories included failed revolutions, wars, oppression, and an unteachable appetite for putting grand, bookish ideas quixotically to work immediately” (Said, II.I).

The tides turn, however, when the Scorned Dancer and the Psychiatrist—the titular characters of this paper—converse. Sunny is the only character in this film to actually have a dialogue with Nagavalli without running for his life, and he does it in Tamil, Nagavalli’s own language (Fazil 1:29:36). He is no longer the playful Sunny, but instead, a deliberate and methodical Sunny who intently listens to Nagavalli as she speaks of coming back on Durgashtami to kill (1:29:47). The film subsequently follows him taking interviews from people and doing research (1:35:59); He saves Nakulan from drinking the tea that he deduces was poisoned (1:39:39); and ultimately, he tells Nakulan—and thus, the audience—that it is in actuality Ganga who is Nagavalli, which he knew all along (1:53:41).

With Sunny turning out not to be the bumbling character the film characterized him as until now, the audience now may think that perhaps it is the Hindu beliefs that should be pathologized. The local priest is an example of this; in the beginning of the film, he was immensely confident and took himself very seriously (to a comedic effect) as an expert on ghostly hauntings (10:39). But ever since being one of the first to hear Nagavalli (43:54), he is traumatized to the point of losing his sense of self. Coincidentally, he becomes the local idiot as people keep their distance from him, perplexed at how off-center he has become (1:08:33). Essentially, the characterization of the local priest seems to imply that a competent priest is nonexistent, and it is all pseudo-science. Accordingly, it seems that the film and the audience switched over to have full faith in Sunny and think of Western psychiatry as the true valid, superior science. Hence, when Namboothiri—the tantric expert Thampi called—arrives at Madambally, the audience expects a battle between cultures to ensue. Instead, Namboothiri not just recognizes him, but affectionately calls him “Sunny boy” and jumps up in joy to hug him (2:06:07). It is a surprise to say the least as shown by Thampi and Unnithan’s confusion

(2:06:20). Namboothiri not only praises Sunny, but he asks Thampi, “When he was here to help your daughter, what reason could have there been to see me?” (2:06:27). What is even more interesting is that in speaking about the international acclaim credited towards Sunny, the film makes aware of what a big deal Namboothiri himself is. In speaking about how he met Sunny, Namboothiri recalls how he was once invited by to hear a famous psychiatrist’s dissemination in America which shows that not only does he keep up with the school of psychiatry (2:06:48), but he is a well-respected part of the network. Thus, Namboothiri’s presence and relationship categorically opposes the viewpoints that Hindu tantrism is a primitive school only practiced and acknowledged in India and that it stands in opposition to western psychiatry. The film observes this novel concept which juxtaposes Nakulan and Thampi’s conversation. When speaking with Sunny about Ganga, Namboothiri identifies it as “psychosis,” (2:07:41) a term connotated with modern ideas about psychiatry while Sunny pushes against western scholarship as he asserts, “I am going to break all conventional concepts of psychology” (2:08:44). It is not about agreeing to work within the confines of one psychological paradigm over the other—and nor are they compromising by watering down their own practices to find a middle ground. Instead, they work together and create a new treatment plan. This signifies how “the questioning of the supplementary is not a repetitive rhetoric of the 'end' of society but a meditation on the disposition of space and time from which the narrative of the nation must begin” (Bhabha 223). In order to truly save Ganga, the notion that Hindu tantrism and Western psychiatry work in separate worlds has to be dismissed. While Sunny orchestrates the space to treat Ganga who is suffering from her psychosis, Namboothiri performs the exorcism to placate Nagavalli’s century-long vengeance. By working in tandem, the Sunny and Namboothiri are able to cure Ganga and make the expulsion of Nagavalli possible. Sunny and Namboothiri are able to accomplish what

Nakulan and Thampi could not because the latter were blinded with their anxieties rooted in colonial discourse:

It is not possible to see how power functions productively as incitement and interdiction. Nor would it be possible, without the attribution of ambivalence to relations of power/knowledge, to calculate the traumatic impact of the return of the oppressed—those terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust, and anarchy which are the signal points of identification and alienation, scenes of fear and desire, in colonial texts (Bhabha 104).

The Musical Haunting of Madambally Bungalow:

Said addresses the natural, gothic tendency of Orientalist discourse as it invokes “sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre-Romantic, pretechnical Orientalist imagination of late-eighteenth-century Europe was really a chameleonlike quality called (adjectively) ‘Oriental’” (II.I). These elements make the Madambally bungalow the quintessential gothic home and Ganga’s psychologized landscape. In the scene where Ganga is finding her way around the thekkini for the first time, sounds of a Saraswati veena play in the background. The bars of notes are broken up—playing a few strands which are followed by silence. Later, a few more notes play again only for silence to follow again. The veena echoes in the thekkini emphasize the gothic space of the room as the string instrument’s notes bounces off the archaic wall and reverberates back. It causes both the audience and Ganga, who already has a strong affiliation for legends and its antiquity, to time travel to another time, which essentially is the case. As Ganga is the first to open it in 150 years, the thekkini is—in the most possible sense—frozen in the time of the early 1800s. In effect, the

alcoves and shadowy hallways, creaking doors and cobwebs, cinematography makes for an uneasy viewing, sewn together by the antique, echoey rhapsody creates an ephemeral experience for the audience.

The tension of the Madambally bungalow resides in its efforts to be what Michel Foucault describes as "the utopia of a perfectly governed city" (Foucault 198). Until the arrival of Nakulan and Ganga, Thampi governed the house from the outside with Nagavalli being similar to the "leper[s]...caught...in a practice of rejection, of exile-enclosure...left to [her] doom in a mass among which it was useless to differentiate" (Foucault 198). And with Ganga opening the thekkini, Thampi urgently sanctions rituals claiming, "Until finishing the repentance rituals in accordance...and locking that door with the enchanted talisman, I will not get any rest (Fazil 36:25). The scenes that capture the gathering of priests conducting intense rituals under Thampi's provisions (36:27) exemplify Foucault's description of the consolidation of power, which he analyzes during a time of plague in Western Europe:

In order to make rights and laws function according to pure theory, the jurist place themselves in imagination in the state of nature; in order to see perfect disciplines functioning, rulers dreamt of the state of plague. Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder; just as the image of the leper, cut off from all human contact, underlies projects of exclusion (Foucault 198-199).

However, Thampi's rigorous attempt at restoring balance is too late and miscarries, which leads the once unnervingly silent Madambally to become alive and unruly. When Nagavalli comes out from the thekkini, Madambally becomes a place where she now traps the people who she believes once trapped her. Whether its chasing Nakulan's cousin Ambili into a closet with no air

(Fazil 1:04:14) or having Sunny follow her through the hallways barely lit through small opening in the wall (1:16:56), it is now Nagavalli who is “disciplining the non-disciplinary spaces” (Foucault 215) forcing the people residing inside bungalow to be on guard at all times. The Madambally bungalow's architecture assists Nagavalli in her endeavors through its "panoptic mechanism [which] arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately...it reverses the principle of the dungeon...it preserves [the function to enclose] (Foucault 200). The film showcases Madambally's panopticism with its use of windows such as the ones in Nagavalli's room rich in color but opaque and the windows from which Nakulan and Sunny watch Ganga dance as Nagavalli (1:21:18). The windows from which they watch Ganga, particularly, are a representation of the “history of the human mind” (Foucault 216). The proscenium where Ganga/Nagavalli dance was a place for “to render accessible to a multitude of men the inspection of a small number of objects [like]...architecture of temples, theaters and circuses” (Foucault 216). But “the modern age poses the opposite problem: to procure for a small number, or even for a single individual, the instantaneous view of a great multitude” (Foucault 216). Essentially, Madambally's panopticism deals with the concept of the heimlich⁹ which pressures one to "[conceal], [keep] from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, [withhold] from others” (Freud 933). Sunny's response therefore is "the concept of Unheimlich...everything ...ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (933) to Madambally's panopticism as the revelation that Ganga is Nagavalli and is suffering the mental illness Nakulan accused Sreedevi of is astounding to the characters in the film and the audience.

⁹ Not to be confused with the Heimlich maneuver

The song “Oru Murai,” sung by playback singer Sujatha Menon, functions as a motif for when Nagavalli is present or nearby, usually at the solace of her isolation. The first time the audience hears the song is when Ganga opens the thekkini. The music fades in slowly and Nagavalli—somewhere in an ether—sings in a siren-like quality luring Ganga into her room. The song follows the stylings of Carnatic music, and “[with the intent] of presenting [C]arnati[c] music as an art object...it surrenders to the mythological and cultural norms by frequently reminding the reader of its ancient and divine origins and its religious associations” (Narayanan & Periyasamy 15). In aesthetic accordance with the raagam¹⁰ Ahir—as told by Nagavalli when she taunts Thampi and the local priest by asking to sing in the said raagam (43:28)—the song “expresses sorrow” (Rao 12) as she sings, “without you / what am I? / Just like without water / what is a fish? / awaiting your arrival on someday / my eyes tire as the morning blooms” (Fazil 1:28: 19). Nagavalli’s eternal pining for someone who will not ever come back resonates with Ganga with her unresolved childhood traumas and unknowing of her own mental instability, leans into the old tales her grandmother told her (1:57:14). In the care of her grandmother, she spent her entire childhood waiting for parents who never arrived and, day by day, internalizing it (1:57:35) leading to her first mental breakdown when they, out of the blue, decide to take her back as a young teenager (1:58:22). As such, Sunny concludes that for Ganga, “her sympathy [for Nagavalli] became empathy... ‘I am like Nagavalli’ started turning into ‘I am Nagavalli’” (1:59:31). Similarly, Freud would describe this as a phenomenon where “the subject identifies [her]self with someone else, so that [she] is in doubt to which [her] self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for [her] own” (940). With a fixation on stories of India's prehistoric times, one of beautiful dancers and hubristic noblemen, Ganga’s id lends itself to be borrowed by Nagavalli.

¹⁰ Raagam refers to set of notes that make up a musical scale that ascribe the melody of a Carnatic music piece.

Consequently, we see the facilitation of exchange in identity between the two becomes uncanny to those around them.

The film brings the audience into the story by pointing out their own blindness as Sunny reveals Ganga as the real Nagavalli of Madambally. Through flashbacks and Sunny's voiceover, Sunny explains how Ganga was Nagavalli the whole time: when she was getting excited over Nagavalli's jewelry (1:54:08), when she was transforming into an angry Nagavalli over a dispute about anklets (1:55:05), when she is replicating Nagavalli's stance from the portrait with childlike curiosity (1:59:32). They are not typical flashbacks that are meant to simply remind the audience of a previous moment in the film or fill in part of the narrative that wasn't included previously. Instead, the montage of flashbacks Sunny presents functions as an embedded narrative that reveals a staggering, new plot that is—in fact—not new at all. The montage, by showing new angles of past scenes, unveils how the audience were present all along for the times Ganga was in fact Nagavalli, leaving the audience—much like Nakulan—dumbfounded. The feeling of astonishment and insecurity provoked from the new angles is an example of how "heimlich...develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich" (Freud 934). The new information forces the audience to confront the "infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (950). In essence, the audience is left vulnerable, and must reckon with the fact that they simply do not know as much as they think they do. Every character in the film wholeheartedly believed that they had the most grasp of the situation on hand. They believed that while those around them were victims to their unreliable mindsets, they had the sturdiest understanding due to the intrinsic clarity of their mind. However, with the revelation that Ganga was Nagavalli all along—a

conclusion no one had even suspected—every character has to re-engineer and reinterpret everything they know and belief. Additionally, it is not just the characters in the film that has to reckon with the fallacies of their mind; the audience must do the same as well as they recover from the ways in which the film has psychologically played tricks on them.

Conclusion

South Indian Gothic cinema does not end and begin with Fazil's *Manichitrathazhu*. The film *Anandabhadram* (2005) interacts with prehistoric legends, as the main character returns to his town and unleashes a spirit that had been entrapped within a cave deep beneath the village's waterfall. Similar to *Manichitrathazhu*, the film explores Indian folk forms of mysterious origins. Speaking of folk forms, *Kaliyattam* (1997), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, examines gender dynamics through the backdrop of the traditional folk dance Theyyam. *Chathikkatha Chanthu* (2004) parodies the genre by exploring how gothic and horror films are produced by the film industry. In its comedic endeavor, the film explores the dark history of tantrism, particularly its harm on women's bodies, similar to how early days of psychiatry further stigmatized and endangered those suffering from mental ailments. That being said, the cultural significance of *Manichitrathazhu* demonstrates the celebration of South Indian storytelling. Moreover, the film pushes back against the Western-dictated status quo of which Homi K. Bhabha speaks.

The immense success of *Manichitrathazhu* led to adaptations of the film in multiple languages. The respective Tamil and Hindi adaptations *Chandramukhi* and *Bhool Bhulaiyya*, among others, did commercially well for themselves and received appreciation as in its own right. However, every Malayalee and non-Malayalee knows that comparing any adaptation of *Manichitrathazhu* to the original is heresy. And the contention is somewhat warranted because

the adaptations lack what is integral to *Manichitrathazhu*: the incisive attention to the culture's ethos. *Manichitrathazhu* does not just ask itself, "what culture is available to me?" Adaptations of *Manichitrathazhu* seemingly limit themselves to the original screenplay that is an analysis of a culture that is not exactly applicable to them¹¹. As Bhabha asserts:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement [and] ...translational because such spatial histories or displacement—now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of 'global' media technologies—make the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, a rather complex issue (247)

As per Bhabha's assertion, *Manichitrathazhu*'s great accomplishment resides in its ability to reflect upon the cultural trauma experienced by contemporary South Indians. By presenting an impressionistic yet articulate narrative, the film is effectively a gripping entertainment that is also a commentary about the abjection present in a postcolonial society within South Indian culture. Subsequently, the film delves into the existing anxieties in contemporary South India and questions its whereabouts.

Award-winning director Bong Joon-ho said, "Once you overcome the one-inch-tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films." Joon-ho's point aptly illustrates the issue of the current Gothic canon being almost exclusively a Western institution. Despite the progress that have been made, the global literary and film academia still

¹¹ This is not to say Tamil films do not have a place when talking about South Indian Gothic cinema. While this paper focuses on the Malayalam film industry, the Tamil, Telegu, Kannada, and other respective South Indian regional film industries have produced great films that have further defined what is South Indian Cinema. This paper merely makes the observation about the practice of adapting a film without introspection of the culture into which it is being adapted. South India is not a monolith; it is a community made up of subcultures.

suffers cultural ethnocentrism as it prioritizes the recognition of Eurocentric art. To clarify, this paper is not an attempt at seeking validation from the Western gatekeepers of literary and film criticism as that would be contrary to the point. Instead, this paper's effort resides in expanding the global discourse and commemorate South Indian culture and artistry. In a culture that still endures the socio-political radioactivity of Victorian imperialism, director Fazil's originality and creativity shine through while inspiring those who follow him to continue the legacy of extraordinary storytelling.

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