

## The Archetypal Reincarnation of Kaliyankattu Neeli

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### ABSTRACT

Malayalam theatre and drama became active during the 19th century. Among various genres, horror plays were something that made a silver lining to the stage. It blended elegantly with the gothic ambiance of Kerala. The Story of Neeli made shivers among Keralites. Kaliyankattu Neeli was a Yakshi/Ghost that pretty much had the resemblance of a vampires. Her story has been made and remade by various theatre companies to suit the contemporary stage. But, the actual story is hidden somewhere between the myths and archetypes. This paper is going to scrutinise and validate the gender role of Neeli and the archetypal events which happened through the horrific name of Kaliyankattu Neeli. The paper also deconstructs this mythical creation and how she is being redrawn by various theatre producers to stand out from the obvious blood sipping vampires. Kaliyankattu Neeli is still seen as a blood sucking vampires and also as a calm, serene goddess who went through the samsara of death and rebirth. The paper concludes by comparing this horrific character with C.V Raman Pillai's narration of the actual Kaliyankattu Neeli depicted in his book *Marthandavarma*.

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Malayalam theatre and drama became active during the 19th century. Among various genres, horror plays were something that made a silver lining to the stage. It blended elegantly with the gothic ambiance of Kerala. The Story of Neeli made shivers among Keralites. Kaliyankattu Neeli was a Yakshi/Ghost that pretty much had the resemblance of a vampires. Her story has been made and remade by various theatre companies to suit the contemporary stage. But, the actual story is hidden somewhere

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Kerala is known for its enchanting mythical legacies and undoubtful chivalry. But when it comes to the society of extra-natural histories, it is pure natural for everyone. Here, families and lineages are tied with a tightrope of mystical superpowers. This power influences the basic living of every Keralite. For the outsiders, this power of the unseen can be vaguely called as Fear. Therefore, a portion of every Hindu Malayalee still believes that the rising and the setting of the sun is a play which the unseen force is controlling.

Instead of calling this a fabricated, invalid myth, I would like to look beyond the truth and dissect the very history of such a theme that later became an archetype in a very broad manner.

During the early seventies to the late nineties, Kerala was following a straight trajectory in reasoning myth and mythical creatures. *Maha Bhagavata* and *Ramayana* were too conventional for that era. The villages and agrarian settlements were behind Odiyan otherwise known as Covert Assassins. It was the rich class who invented the so-called ghost figures with a certain gender background. Kshatriyas and Brahmins were few among these inventors/creators. Neeli was one among these creations which later became a linchpin inside the history of Malayalam epic histories. Her name created a panic inside rural towns and

villages. Her attire and figure became a nightmare for everyone. Above all, men never got out of their house after sunset. Nobody knew where she is coming from and why she is hunting men. After years of conjuration, it is said that Neeli is now resting peacefully on a banyan tree in a position where an iron nail is tacked on her forehead. This very character has gained a lot of appreciation and popularity because of modern-day theaters and publications. So, what made this an archetype? Is it history? Or is it the media?

Every story will have different narratives. These divergent narratives are the ones which make the content illustrious. Instead of breaking it into a hot discourse, the source of the content should be revamped and scrutinised for better transparency. As for Kerala myths are concerned, stories are just a platform for uniting people to a single strand. The history of Kaliyankaattu Neeli can be also pictured in such a way. Some historians say that such gothic stories are just an offshoot of the traditional ruling class and their attempt to regain popularity among the villagers. During the late seventeenth century, Kerala was under the reign of different kingdoms and was divided into several territories. One among was the Travancore Kingdom. Marthanda Varma was the king. The story of Neeli began spreading during this time. It was C.V Raman Pillai who popularised this name through his book *Marthandavarma*.

In his book, Neeli is portrayed as a traditional yet beautiful lady who lived in a small town in Nagercoil. One day, she met a trader who came to her place for exporting spices. She fell in love with that person and they both decided to get married. While coming from her place, they both relaxed inside the forest known as Panchavankadu. When she became so tired, she slept on his lap under a thorn bush tree thinking that he will wake her up after some time. But the trader very gently stood up and made her head rest on a rock. He then took another huge boulder and smashed her forehead. Waking up in excruciating

pain, she saw him lifting his hands once more. Before getting hit, she said to that thorn bush, “Kalli, you are the only witness”. (Varma 153). After killing Neeli, he took all her ornaments and ran away.

With this incident, Neeli’s ghost got turned into a ferocious vampire and started to kill every man who passed through Panchavankadu Forest. One day, the same trader who killed Neeli got allured inside the forest by a woman. Her kid was beside her. Thinking that she is a prostitute, the trader went near her and sat under that same spot where he killed Neeli. Suddenly, the weather started to change and the sun got shadowed by the dark rain clouds. The woman figure stood up and her appearance started to change. Her eyes became red and her teeth started to bulge out. Her hair touched the ground and smoke came from her nostrils. She slowly turned into Kaliyankattu Neeli. The blood-sucking vampires sliced him into two pieces and drank his blood. This place where Neeli killed her enemy later became known as Kaliyankaadu.

This narration by C.V Raman Pillai is just one among the many Neeli stories. Some say she was the daughter of a King who ruled the Malabar region of Kerala. Others say she was a Brahmin girl who got killed by a thief. Whatever be the case, her stories still linger around the natives of Kerala. It’s a bad omen to say her name during evenings. Pretty much everyone respected her identity and her conditions of killing men who don’t deserve a place on this earth.

Kerala was going through its dark age during the reign of Marthandavarma. Even though he was an honorable ruler, the society and its residing patrons were not so ethical. Bribery and sexual harassments were at its peak. Proper family life was something very sectional to see. People were trying to meet the two ends of a family by praying and crying. During this time, the elders often used certain horrific words to make the young ones stable in their routine. Some of these words were Neeli,

Vampire, and Ghosts with white sari and so on. This systematic conditioning of children by instilling fear inside them slowly transformed into the construction of a specific archetype. This archetype-ing later became a day to day thing in building stories and plays. Soon, the story of Neeli became a popular myth inside the state. Everybody started to hear about Neeli at their local places. Some even saw figures imitating Neeli during full moon nights. This system of creating the perfect Neeli for the Keralites continued till the late eighties.

It was Vaikom Muhammed Basheer who finally redid this canvas of lady vampires to a perfect, romantic yet stylish character. His lady ghost Bhargavi stood out from the conventional ghosts in many orders. Bhargavi had two personalities. The first was a traditional, calm, beautiful lady with a white sari and black eyebrows. The other one was the meanest, blood-sucking, horrifying vampire who hates injustice. She comes during the full moon night singing songs about her past. When Basheer made this character public, Kerala started to believe the unreal. The four walls of mythical creations shattered to its forceful destruction. Everybody saw Neeli through Bhargavi. Some believed that Bhargavi is the reincarnation of Neeli. Very slowly, the myth and archetype of Neeli and Bhargavi interlaced to restructure as a new piece of nineteenth-century drama.

Staging supernatural genre drama at that time was something inconceivable for the production houses. More effort and techniques were needed to make the characters real and believable. Simple and ambient lightings were not enough to make Neeli the actual vampire. Therefore, stages got rebuilt to picture frame style, included dark colored lights to throw at the character's face, touchups were used to create blood dripping effects. Finally, the idea of making a ghostly figure totally rested upon woman artists. Women artists who constantly got the role of Neeli maintained a proper weight and skin tone. They

practiced special vocal tones such as growling and howling. And by nineties, there came a specific ideology for lady ghost actresses which proclaimed, if a lady ghost appears on stage, the collection will increase by thirty percent (...)

To the question why men can't play the character of a ghost? The dramatist society had a very clear answer. "Female actresses are malleable, even if she plays an important character; remuneration will be very low, can change the overview of the entire play through their unique gender roles" (...) *Yavanika*. Directed by K.G George, Carolina Films, 1982. Even though such statements are very sexist, drama productions once followed such deeply rooted superstitions without giving proper importance to the female actresses. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the importance and star value of female stage actresses expanded. They started to receive better pay and competed with equal value male actors. To make the character of Neeli stand out from other lady ghosts, the production houses made her story more realistic by bringing serious changes to her history and family. Some screenplays witnessed serious changes while comparing with C.V Raman Pillai's original one. Some production companies relocated Neeli to the broad history of Ramayana. Finally, when popular drama companies made the ghost of Neeli a part of Ramayana, people really started to change their overview of this bloodthirsty ghost to a calm, serene, goddess. By introducing such a massive shift inside the story, production companies united the all-time favorite epic Ramayana with Neeli by removing her prefix Kaliyankaattu. Slowly, the myth of Kaliyankaattu Neeli transformed into an archetypal epic inside the story of Ramayana. Even though Ramayana never told such an incident, Keralites visualised Neeli as a ghost who transformed into a goddess.

The fixation of an archetype through the mode of drama and dramatic societies made the residents of Kerala rethink seriously about Neeli as a goddess. Finally, the dual discourse of

Neeli as a ghost and as a goddess ended up in constructing temples around the state. Now, there are five to six Neeli temples inside the state. One is inside Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple at Trivandrum. According to temple myths, Neeli is one of the temple protectors of Padmanabha Swamy temple. This is where the paper scrutinises the identity of Kaliyankaattu Neeli. For C.V Raman Pillai, Neeli was just a side character inside his work. When dramatists and production companies redid the history, Neeli became a dramatic character. Her archetype started to spread in and around Kerala state. Whenever someone saw a lady with a white sari with her hair untied, they called it as Neeli. Whenever people heard sad hymns during full moon nights, they called it as Neeli is coming. People residing in Kerala really got affected by the construction of Neeli through dramas and stage plays. The myth and archetype of Neeli even killed several innocents by forwarding the notion 'Neeli did it'. There were even several man missing cases in the name of Neeli. Slowly, people started to deviate their interest from Neeli dramas to not to get affected by the Neeli vibe. It was during the late nineties when the name Kaliyankaattu Neeli got heard once again. This time, Neeli's story got mixed up with another famous name Kadamatathu Kathanaar. Kathanaar was a priest who was famous for capturing and destroying ghosts and other malevolent spirits. His legends say that Kathanaar once encountered with Neeli and transformed her into a good spirit making the state back to its serene, peaceful condition. This very story has been made into several theatre plays and short dramas in the name of Kadamatathu Kathanaar. There had a time when both the Hindu tradition as well as the Christian tradition took this subject to a very religious level. People really got agitated just because of a simple myth and its recreation in drama. Till now, there is no final judgment to the story of Neeli. Still, dramas and plays are being shown in the name of Kaliyankaattu Neeli. Even in this post-truth era, Neeli and her story is still seen as a horrific, nightmarish character. Instead of calling the journey of

Neeli under the category 'art for art sake', Keralites are making this pure, mythical archetypal story into a political one. One day, this archetype of the quintessential archives might get a rebirth of its own in a very self-styled way making it more political and explosive. It's all up to the viewers to make it an archetype or not.

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