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**Of Grove and Lore: Dichotomic Spaces of Sacred Grove in *Ananthabhadram***

Monisha Mohan and Gigy J. Alex

**Abstract:**

The paper explores the dichotomic spaces of the Sacred Grove, Sivakavu, in the Malayalam movie *Ananthabhadram* (Santhosh Sivan, 2005). The article intends to study the reason for and the reason of the creation of the sacred space. “Of Grove and Lore: Dichotomic Spaces of Sacred Grove in *Ananthabhadram*” refers to the polarity of existence with reference to space and identity contestation in relation to the sacred grove. The paper attempts to argue that Sacred Grove, a holistic space is manipulated by Digambaran as it is a powerful centre of social control and dominance. It will also analyse the relationship between women and sacred groves and its representation in the movie. The study contributes to the debate on the creation of sacred/sacrilege spaces, the identity politics and gender roles with respect to sacred groves.

**Keywords:**

Sacred Grove, identity, space, women, gender.

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**Introduction**

Sacred groves are patches of thick vegetation at the foot of a hill or river. Often looked upon with reverence and fear, these groves, believed to be the abode of deities are left undisturbed by human intrusion. Sacred grove in Kerala is known as Kaavu, roughly translated as a group of trees. J.R. Freeman defines kaavu “as a piece of garden or forest land, but what culturally defines it is that it is dedicated for the exclusive; use of a particular deity: it is ‘guarded’ (*Kavu – kakk-*) in their interest” (261). Raghavan Payyanad in the seminal essay *Keraleeyaparamaya Nadodi Mathaparambaryam*, exegesis kaavu as the temporary abode where the independent deities, are invoked by the devotee(s) when required and propitiated to escape their wrath and to attain prosperity. Kaavu thus acts as a platform for such ritualistic performances and has acquired sanctity, establishing a direct relationship between the deity and the devotee (75-77).

The kaavu of the region can be broadly classified as *Ammakaavu*<sup>i</sup>, which worships mother goddesses and *sarpakavu*, dedicated to the serpent deities- *Nagaraja* and *Nagayakshi*. *Sarpakavu* is maintained predominantly by elite (Brahmin and Nair) communities who worship serpents as the tutelary deity. E. Unnikrishnan exegesis “serpent worship as one of the oldest and most prevalent forms of nature worship in the world<sup>ii</sup>”, Kerala excels as the exclusive region where it is worshipped within the sacred groves with “distinctive way of worship, rites, rituals and art forms” (Murugan 455-56). These are forest zones protected by local people based on spiritual beliefs with reverence.

Sacred groves entered the academia and began to be studied from the ecological and anthropological perspective from late twentieth century. Scholars and environmentalists such as Madhav Gadgil, M.D. Subash Chandran, Ramachandra Guha, J. Donald Hughes etc., “valorised sacred groves as an instance of indigenous biodiversity management and sought to glorify the eastern tradition over the west” (Uchiyamada 107). Anthropologists such as J.R. Freeman, Yasushi Uchiyamada, and Gilles Tarabout critique the nationalist ecological histories for their lack of understanding of the cultural significance of sacred groves. Uchiyamada exegesis the ancestral worship among the *Malayas*<sup>iii</sup> stirred and sustained the kaavu tradition (112) which represents both the “life-force (Shakti) and fault (doosham)”. Traditionally, Malayalee rites of passage practised the burial of the dead in their household garden succeeded by planting seeds on the pit in lieu of cremation<sup>iv</sup>. The present death rite is an amalgamation of the new-fangled practice of cremation of the deceased within the household compound and the immersion of bones in sea/river, in contrast with the customary system wherein a coconut sapling is planted in the pit filled with soil on the spot corresponding to the navel of the deceased. The soul of the deceased is then moved to a lineage kaavu. Particularly in case of the lower castes’, the ancestors are believed to move in and out of the lineage kaavu, intervening with the everyday life of their descendants, which points towards a continuity between agricultural practices and funeral rites. Thus kaavu transcend as the “liminal place connecting the social and the superhuman, enabling the transformation of life into place and death into life” (114-116). Thus, intrinsically linked to the religious renditions and the socio-cultural aspects, sacred groves find its depiction in literature such as novels, poetry and films. The celluloid, particularly during the late twentieth century, has a myriad representation of kaavu, specifically as a regional icon which was either rendered on screen or alluded to by the characters or through the songs. However, a majority of the cinematic representation focused only on *sarpakavu* or groves dedicated to serpent deities.

### **Sacred Groves in Malayalam Celluloid**

The movies often depict the serpent groves as a part of the upper-class elite tharavad of Nayar (*Rathinirvedam* (1978), *Ennenum Kannettente*(1986), *Mayamayooram*(1993)) or the mana<sup>v</sup>of Brahmins (*Paithrukam* (1993), *Anubhoothi* (1997), *Sufi Paranja Katha* (2010)). When the traditional practice among the Brahmin and Nair community involves the eldest female member who is free from pollution<sup>vi</sup> as the performer of daily worship, the celluloid substitutes young unmarried women who shares strong nexus with the serpent deity. In the movie *Paithrukam*, Gayathri (Geetha), an atheist fearing the wrath of serpent deities for clearing the grove, lights lamp and prays for the safe delivery of her child whereas Bhadra (Shobana) in *Mayamayooram* and Radha (Vani Vishwanath) in *Anubhoothi* (I.V. Sasi, 1997) converse with the deity and finally request to grant death and deliver from mortal misery. Both the movies depict the presence of the snake, often cobra which grants wish fulfilment. Later movies (*Mayamayooram*, *Mayilpeelikkavu* (1998)) depict the grove as a place of seclusion which offers space for undisturbed interaction for the young couples. However, the

movie *Kakkothikavile Appopppan Thadikal* (Kamal, 1988) breaks the trend and depicts the grove as the other side of the civilized rich society where the tramps reside in seclusion

However, *Ananthabhadram*(2005) distinguishes itself as the first regional cinema which has sacred grove as its key trope. Adapted from Sunil Parameshwaran's novel of the same title, *Ananthabhadram* set in the locale of Sivapuram, centres around Sivakavu, a dark mysterious grove dedicated to the worship of serpent deities. A gripping tale of myth, magic, and fantasy, the movie opens in a flashback mode with Gayathri (Revathi) nostalgically narrating her lineage to her little son Anandan (Prithviraj Sukumaran) who is enthralled by the tale and visualizes the same. The movie revolves around Sivakavu and depicts the ensuing conflict between Digambaran and Anandan to retain and reclaim it.

### **Spatial Turn: Creation of the sacred space**

Kaavu, a public domain gains sacredness through community practices of co-existence and surpasses the realm of religiosity as an inclusive whole. Deemed as a seat of reverence, experts asseverate its association to myriad myth and taboos which ensures its protection and sustenance. However, a common belief thrives that utmost “purity of mind and body are of importance in the *sarpakavu* for pleasing the deities” (Murugan 458). Located amidst a dense grove, Sivakavu, a *sarpakavu*, consecrated on a cemented platform is discernable as the sacred space where the villagers gather at dusk to offer their worship by lighting the lamps.

According to Mircea Eliade, space is non-homogeneous for both religious and non-religious men. While a non-religious man nurtures his private space of significance which breaks the homogeneity, the religious man engages in the creation of the “sacred space which involves a hierophany<sup>vii</sup>, an eruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (26), demarcating sacred space from its surrounding and tracing his identity and existence from this point of reference or centre. In a traditional society, the kaavu represents the “system of the world” inseparably connected to the religious conception and cosmological image (37). Owing to its topography, Sivakavu breaks the spatial homogeneity and distinguishes itself as a ‘sacred space’ from the ‘other space’ for the religious man.

An open space surrounded by tall trees, creepy climbers and water pool, Sivakavu, a shrine within a pit, corresponds to the “navel of the earth” (Eliade 37). It exists simultaneously as an axis and imago mundi, the pole (tall trees) connecting the earth and heaven and the reiteration of the cosmic order there, functions as a socio-political space of faith and togetherness. As the centre which reveals the “absolute reality,” it enables orientation by fixing the boundaries and establishing order from chaos (Eliade 30). In the movie, the trees at the foot of which the serpent deities are consecrated act as a centre connecting the earth and heaven. It is, therefore, an axis

mundi, centre of the world as far as the residents of Sivapuram is concerned, the threshold “through which the gods could descend and humans could ascend the divine world” (Eliade 26).

Eliade argues that man created the sacred space by the imitation of the cosmogony to build an orientation from chaos (22). Digambaran annexes this space for his exclusive use which creates chaos and breeds fear and superstition at Sivapuram. By conquering and occupying a territory already occupied by other human beings, he ritually takes possession of the kaavu by repeating the cosmogony. Eliade asserts “a territory can be made ours only by creating it anew, that is, by consecrating it” (32). Digambaran redefines and recreates the sacred space of Sivakavu and ascertains his monopoly by manipulating the folk myths and tradition and indulging in desecration. The open inclusive space actuated exclusively by blood and death pollutes the order of purity established by the villagers and evokes fear. The movie renders defilement through instance such as Anandan encountering a pool of blood, Maravimathai’s account of witnessing a man’s head rolling in the mud, discovering Srin’s corpse at the centre of the grove etc. This ritualistic defilement turns it into an abject space where one encounters the repulsive and bodily experiences such as blood, corpse, death, decay, etc., which threatens the distinction between the self and other. Sivakavu thus materializes into a space of abjection “where the meaning collapses” (Creed 65). Moreover, Sivakavu prefigures the life at Sivapuram, the fully lit kaavu symbolizes the social amity of the village whereas the prohibition upon villagers to enter or to light the lamps represent the darkness and dread existing in Sivapuram. Restriction upon the sacred space for individual use and gains eliminates its sacredness and the performance of sacrifice, including blood and sorcery, destroys its sanctity and converts it into a defiled space and the villagers are compelled to contest for their hierophany which precisely created the sacred space (Eliade 29). Thus, Sivakavu emerges as a dichotomic space which is at once sacred and sacrilegious, manipulated by Digambaran as a space of abjection.

A symbiotic relationship exists between kaavu and the village. Kaavu emanates only when people irrespective of gender, caste and creed gather to socialize. Sivakavu is a harmonious space of co-dependence where the devotees directly commune with the deity without priestly mediation. The intervention of Digambaran disrupts this inclusivity and co-existence associated with the kaavu. Literally, the village defines and impute meaning to kaavu proselytizing to a holistic cultural unit. Kaavu, the imago mundi renders meaning to the life of people. Thus, Sivakavu is at once both real and imagined space, a third space<sup>viii</sup> that constructs their identity. Hence, they contest for the space as it is impossible for the religious man to dwell in illusion and he resorts to live in objective reality as the sacred represents the absolute reality, “which is at once power, efficacy and the source of life and fecundity” (Eliade 28). Anandan’s and Digambaran’s identities at contest are invariably linked to Sivakavu.

### **Kaavu and Identity**

Anandan, the hero, as well as Digambaran, the anti-hero, seek identity by establishing legitimacy over Sivakavu. According to Stuart Hall identity is an ‘incomplete product’, constantly engaging in the process of production constituted within representation (222). *Ananthabhadram* is an artistic representation of identity quest where in Anandan traces his roots and identity through Sivakavu, while Digambaran attempts to retain his identity and enhance his power. Accordingly, the kaavu equates to power, the possession of which bestows the protection of the divine by the human.

Anandan is a migrant in search of his identity. Dissevered from his native land and fascinated by his mother’s tales, Sivapuram is the private universe he nurtures as a little boy. The toy train circumambulating the lamps in Anandan’s memory connects him to the present as he arrives at Sivapuram in a steam engine train. The past and present are linked through the slithering train which also represents his desolate journey after his mother’s death. The rendering of ‘tunnel’ is of significance as it depicts Anandan’s ingress into his private universe. Eliade defines threshold as that which “separates the two spaces and also indicates the distance between two modes of being...it is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds-and at the same time the paradoxical place where two world communicates, where passage from profane to sacred world becomes possible” (25). The tunnel acts a threshold, an entrance which discerns his past from present, memory from reality and regresses from modernity to the tradition.

Unlike the residents of Sivapuram, Anandan, the non-religious man secretly cherishes Sivapuram as his private universe and barely distinguishes it from Sivakavu. This perception of homogeneity helps Anandan to dispel the superstitious warning associated with Sivakavu and subdue the fear by scrutiny. As Anandan pursues his journey into the kaavu, he associates coconut to a human head and fantasizes yakshi. Next, he encounters a pool of blood and a moving object covered by a sack. Prompted by curiosity, he mitigates the fear and unwraps the sack to discover a lamp within. Relieved to find a living being he laughs at his own stupidity and imitates the lamb’s cry which alerts Digambaran who is engaged in sorcery. Anandan who has entered Sivakavu finds a woman in attire similar to that of the yakshi he has fantasized. Yakshi is a voluptuous female who wanders after dusk and lures men to death. This nocturnal being is believed to reside in trees and forms a part of the folk tradition of Kerala particularly associated with the fertility cults. P.K. Yasser Arafath exegesis yakshi as immortal tree bound spirit who protects the environment along with supernatural beings (102). The popular literature delineates yakshi as the ghost of an unhappy woman who gets murdered young, a supernatural figure of feminine power whose victims are lusty men and leaves the women and children unscathed. A figure created out of patriarchal fear yakshi demonstrates the patriarchal injustice of the higher caste. The yakshi in *Ananthabhadram* is a guardian of the sacred relics and stone. By evoking innate fear, the concept of yakshi guards it against the prying men. Anandan’s incredulity flouts the fear and capacitates to survey the scene. It would have been impossible for an ordinary villager who believes in the myth and rumours of Sivapuram to enter the kaavu. Besides

Anandan, it is just Chemban (Kalabhavan Mani) who dares to enter Sivakavu. Unlike the villagers, Chemban is devoid of fear. Blindness, the deprivation of the sense of sight, provides insight to Chemban. Paul de Man exegesis insights occur at the “cost” of blindness. Akin to the blind prophet Teiresias who could “see” the reality, Chemban is the only character in the movie who looks beyond the darkness manipulated by Digambaran, when the visually sound villagers lack insight and are blinded to the reality. The movie through the metaphor of blindness questions blindness and critiques the superstitious society.

The name Digambaran, synonymous with Siva, means “one who has nature as his clothes, naked, darkness etc.”<sup>ix</sup> (Sreekanteswaran 1001). Digambaran shares a strong tie with Sivakavu, and restores the darkness or the natural order associated with the primitive forest. In commune with nature, he has adorned Sivakavu as his attire and lives in close harmony with space, his prudence and surveillance ascertain his monopoly over Sivakavu which stigmatize his identity as a terrific sorcerer. Through keen surveillance, Digambaran intimidates those who dare to tread through the grove. The emergence of Digambaran as a sorcerer establishes his supremacy over Sivakavu and curtails the legitimacy and access of the members of Madampi tharavad into the kaavu resulting in a shift in the power position whereby the once powerful clan fear to tread into the Sivakavu. Instead of labelling kaavu as a sacred space, Uchiyamada exegesis it as good/bad space, of which the sacredness depends upon the cultural significance attributed by the people belonging to specific castes. People belonging to the lower strata of caste hierarchy trace their lineage to the kaavu, whereas the elite Brahmin approaches it as the other space<sup>x</sup> (119). The lower caste people as well as the Nair community used to bury the dead at the kaavu forming a part of endo-cannibalism where the dead becomes the manure for the crops. Though *Ananthabhadram* is silent about the caste politics it is clear by the name itself that the Madampi<sup>xi</sup> tharavad is presented as a Nair family who once ruled the locale. Gayathri’s wish to perform her final rights at Sivakavu before burying the ashes at her ancestral home also asserts the argument that the inhabitants of Madampi trace its lineage to Sivakavu, the threshold where dead and living meet.

Anandan arrives at Sivapuram in search of his root and identity, with his mother’s ashes in a *kalasham*<sup>xii</sup>, with the purpose of fulfilling her final wish to rest with her ancestors. Thus, lighting the lamp at Sivakavu attains new meaning to Anandan, he attempts to reclaim his rights over the space by spreading light at Sivakavu. To quote Uchiyamada, Sivakavu is thus a “tempo-spatial place connecting the world of the living and the netherworld” creating an endless cycle of birth and death (118). Sivapuram influenced by the tide of changing religious trends subconsciously retains the traditional belief system of endo-cannibalism in which the dead and living exist harmoniously forming a continuum. Thus, a shrine amidst thick vegetation, Sivakavu encompasses both nature and culture. The grove symbolises the primitive forest whereas the shrine with its stone lamps signifies the mastery of civilization. The movie renders Sivakavu as a ‘space of dichotomy,’ by depicting the nature-culture contestation through

Digambaran and Anandan. When Digambaran symbolises everything dark, negative, cruel or death; the uncertainty associated with wilderness, Anandan is the quintessence of truth, light, hope and refinement. The word Anandan traces its origin to “*an-antha*” meaning ‘one without end’, another name of Shesha, the serpent associated with Lord Vishnu who bears the universe upon his head. Anandan, the supposed ‘bearer/guardian’ of the universe, redeems Sivakavu and emerges as the representative of the youth and civilized modern society which is supposed to guard and deliver the wisdom of tradition to the succeeding generation. Thus, Anandan through Gayathri trace his roots and gains his identity by contesting for Sivakavu. His ties with the land get reaffirmed in his relation to Bhadra. Gayathri and Bhadra, who is undoubtedly linked to Sivakavu and Sivapuram thus stand as the representatives of tradition and serve as the modern Anandan’s link to his roots. By juxtaposing the nature and culture, the movie glorifies ‘the tradition’ created by civilization through Anandan and condemns the ‘natural/wild’ via Digambaran. Anandan by spreading light reclaims Sivakavu from Digambaran and reinstates the order and happiness once prevailed at Sivapuram which represents the victory of civilization over the primitive.

### **Tradition v/s Modernity**

Commencing with the steam engine train by which young Anandan arrives at, to the first soundtrack “*Shivamalli kaavil koovalam poothu...*”<sup>xiii</sup> the movie depicts the antiquity of Sivapuram. The film proffers radio as one of the key political tropes to sketch the conventional village untainted by the technological influx of privatization of the nation. By presenting different types and makes of radio, different socio-political spaces are portrayed in the movie. A contrast between economic, social, political, cultural hierarchies is revealed in the movie. The radio is a nostalgic rendition of the public social spaces of interaction shared by the society of Kerala before the advent of television which confined the individuals within the household. Anandan witness several sites of social gathering including homo-social spaces. The songs demarcate the public from the private space and endorses the social space. Approximately every scene depicts cow, a symbol of weal and sustenance; and bicycle, as the only vehicle used in the village, succinctly, the song renders a conventional society in contrast to the modern society (America) from where Anandan arrives.

The Sivapuram that Anandan witnesses is rather primitive, therefore it is easier to conjecture the society in which Gayathri lived. It is Gayathri who is born and brought up in Sivapuram, believes in its myth and tale and nostalgically narrates it to Anandan. Ripped apart from Sivapuram, she resorts to preserve the memories which serve as her only link to her heritage. Yakshi, commonly a figure of horror is fondly recollected as a guardian of the sacred stone and relics in Gayathri’s narrative. She fantasizes that the lamps lit by the villagers at Sivakavu communicate with each other, which is questioned by the young critical Anandan. Conventionally, the lamps lit by the villagers acted as the kernel of Sivakavu, Gayathri also lights lamps during Karthika at the places she lived be it in India or the flat in America, as she believes that “lamps are the grace of a locale”<sup>xiv</sup>.



Anandan, although influenced by his mother's tales, is an educated modern man who sceptically challenges the superstitions prevailing at Sivapuram. Unmistakably, the movie has portrayed America as an emblem of modernity, a land of dreams, and the other side of the world which every Malayalee desire to migrate at least once in a lifetime. Furthermore, his attire, mastery over the English language and the possession of modern gadgets such as the headset, handy-cam physically distinguishes him from the villagers as the 'outlander' who enters the traditional village enmeshed in myth and fable, rationally, and attempts to assimilate, the dichotomy of which is represented by the soundtrack, "*Shivamalli kaavil koovalam poothu...*". Anandan in his jogging attire takes a trip across his village, curiously observing the everyday activities of villagers and attempts to acculturate.

Anandan wears the talisman around his neck from his childhood. Apart from this his knowledge of the *nagamantra*<sup>xv</sup> and the reverence towards the serpent deities represent how he is unknowingly tied to the traditional legacy. A deeper look at the character portrays the ensuing conflict of identity. Anandan recognises Maravimathai from his mother's tale and develops an affection while his identity immediately switches to the land where he grew (America) once he start conversing eagerly to the foreign co-passengers. The tradition, claiming its antiquity 'prohibits' questioning and 'encourages' its blind observation. Once possessed and subjected to split personality by Digambaran, it is his access to the English language that enables the spectators to identify the real Anandan from Digambaran. Even though he is linked to modernity he is connected to the tradition through his mother and Bhadra.

### **Gendering through the lens: Women in *Ananthabhadram***

Compared to the novel, the cinematic representation of women is remarkable. Circumscribed by the patriarchal regime, the women exercise limited power and position. The patriarchal ménage of Madampi tharavad practiced deification of the young girl within the family, identified as divine, at the age of twenty whose propinquity is prerequisite in order to see/acquire the *nagamanikyam*<sup>xvi</sup> and *thaliyola*<sup>xvii</sup> from the *Mantrikapura*<sup>xviii</sup>. Impelled to become the goddess, the life and narrative of Gayathri and the repugnant situation of Bhadra divulge their limited choice. Subsequently, Siddhayogi as well as Digambaran attempt to steal it through little Gayathri and Bhadra. The rituals performed by Digambaran also necessitates the presence of a female, for which he employs Bhama who becomes a marionette once possessed by him. Compendiously, the male hegemony exerts the woman ascribed with sancto-sanity to retain and attain power.

The two prime sacred but forbidden spots, Sivakavu and *Mantrikapura* are accessible to the women. Intimidated by myth and superstition ensnaring Sivakavu and *Mantrikapura* the men hesitate to transgress into these realms whereas Bhadra and Bhama enter without fear. Gayathri's reminiscence of the time expended at Sivakavu, illustrates the magnitude of affinity and admiration she extends towards it. If it is Gayathri's fantasy that animates the inanimate (lamps) at Sivakavu, Bhadra shares a

pragmatic relationship. Being an eminent herbal physician, she extends treatment to the villagers particularly, the women. It is her immense knowledge of the flora at Sivapuram that abet her ability to cure and accredits authority. She renders assistance to a consultant when the latter is publicly assaulted by her drunkard husband, Chodala. Unequivocally, a space of hegemonic masculinity, Bhadra gains command over Chodala when she impedes from drubbing his wife further while the men are intimidated by his macho figure. The movies also render Bhadra as the guide and guardian of Anandan, who escorts him to *Mantrikapura* and protects *nagamanikyam* him from Digambaran. The filmic techniques thus, try to make a patriarchal compromise by capturing the courage and timely intellect of Bhadra.

Fundamentally, Bhadra is the only woman character who is rewarded in the movie. The patriarchy punishes Gayathri with exile for infringing its norms by renouncing to be the ‘goddess’ and for opting a worldly life. She dies as an expatriate away from the land she adores. Bhama who demolishes Digambaran is castigated with death for violating her chastity. Whereas Bhadra who complies with the patriarchal norm is requited with a promising conjugality. By contrasting Bhadra and Bhama, the movie also attempts to render its endorsement for tradition, through the two romantic soundtracks “*Pinakkamano ennodinakkamano...*” and “*Thiranurayum churulmudiyil...*” which instrumentalizes the female bodies to depict the sensual and sexual. The film showcases six of Ravi Varma paintings in which Kavya Madhavan, the heroine comes to life from the frames. The director and cinematographer Santhosh Sivan in his interview with Hindu put it as a tribute to the master-craftsman who being influenced by the Victorian morality drew heavily from the classics and framed the Malayalee psyche. The paintings selected with taste represents tradition, modernity, nature and culture. The frames of domesticity juxtaposed to the natural background are a dichotomy. The director claims that the heroine “fitted to the women in the painting with her large expressive eyes, innocence and Malayalee looks”<sup>xix</sup>. Much attention was given to the detailing of the painting which highlighted the resemblance, added clarity, and beauty to its representation on the celluloid. It has to be observed that Ravi Varma through his painting moulded rather than representing the Malayalee women. Ravi Varma. Saree, the so-called traditional attire of present-day Kerala is, in fact, a contribution by Ravi Varma through his painting that resembled the long gown of the Victorian times. As a work of art, the sequence is a majestic representation which is of a novice but it must be noted that the concept of ‘ideal Malayalee woman’ still lingers in the cinematic representation. The careful detailing, the fondness and nostalgia attributed to the crafts depicts the fondling of the ‘newly created female identity of Malayalee women.’ The woman framed and projected through the male gaze is a spectacle representing the ‘desired’ tradition and stands as an icon of nostalgia. The “to-be-looked-at-ness” of the female from the male perspective is thus highlighted by the movie. Ironically the celluloid dominated by the patriarchal ethos renders the modernity painted by Ravi Varma as the ‘tradition’ creating new histories. When Bhadra represent the ideal Malayalee women Bhama represents the voluptuous. The film represents Bhama as the silent, to be looked at ‘the female’ for visual pleasure. As

Bhadra the once powerful physician stands as a hapless heroine who has to be rescued by the powerful hero, Bhama once she gains control over her mind uses her body as a tool to annihilate the antihero. While patriarchy resort to possess and dominate the centre of power, the women who is the “bearer of meaning”<sup>xx</sup> share an innate bond with it. Both Sivakavu and these women are oppressed and exploited by the patriarchy to wield power and identity.

### Conclusion

Intertwined with myth, taboo and religiosity, Sacred Groves are ancient widespread cultural space, forming the mainstream worship system of Kerala. A symbol of local autonomy sacred groves are created from non-homogeneity by the reiteration of cosmogony. It acts as axis mundi which offers orientation to the religious man. Digambaran by annexing Sivakavu spreads chaos, attain the control of the village and establishes his identity and monopoly through it. Digambaran and Anandan contest for this sacred spot to establish their identity. *Ananthabhadram* through its cinematic representation presents the dichotomic space of Sivakavu, the intrinsic connection of the inmates to its lineage kaavu and how the access to kaavu brings in order and orientation. The traditional Kerala society revered kaavu and it formed a part of their household where the ancestors resided. Anandan is an embodiment of modern Malayalees quest to unearth his maternal roots and re-establish his identity. The term *bhadram* in regional language means ‘safe’ thus Anandan holding firmly to his roots is safe at his ancestral land and he emerges as the saviour of Sivakavu from the clutches of Digambaran. Thus the sacred grove is safeguarded and restored to its former glory by Anandan. This reciprocal relationship aptly justifying the title *Ananthabhadram*.

Yet, the movie is an advocate of civilization, clearly demarcating between couth and the uncouth, dark and light, knowledge over ignorance, though it nostalgically mourns for the pre-modernised era. *Ananthabhadram* portrays Digambaran as vicious being with limited humanity, he is portrayed as the emissary of the primitive rather than the traditional, which has to be reinstated with the modern. Critically it is, in fact, Digambaran who maintains the Kaavu in its natural order by prohibiting human intrusion. The innate bond shared and darkness spread by Digambaran turns Sivakavu as a primitive forest and corresponds to the primitive man’s harmonious existence with nature. The fear induced by superstition sustains kaavu better than the modern means which has resulted in the drastic decline of sacred groves. The movie has thus politicized the concept of ‘sacred groves’ and ‘modernity’ paradoxically.

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NOTES:

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- <sup>i</sup> Otherwise known as *Kalikavu*, worships mother goddess such as Kali, Bhagavathi etc.
- <sup>ii</sup> it is practised in countries such as Egypt, China, Sri Lanka, Japan and Java
- <sup>iii</sup> mountain dwellers
- <sup>iv</sup> is a recent phenomenon practiced in Kerala
- <sup>v</sup> the residence of a Brahman
- <sup>vi</sup> involves birth, death, and menstruation
- <sup>vii</sup> Mircea Eliade defines hierophany as the manifestation of the sacred. For a traditional man, myths describe "breakthroughs of the sacred (or the 'supernatural') into the world"
- <sup>viii</sup> Concept developed by Edward Soja, it refers to the spaces that are both real and imagined, the space experienced by an individual
- <sup>ix</sup> translated by self
- <sup>x</sup> space of ghosts and spirits
- <sup>xi</sup> Shabdhakosham defines Madampi as an interim lord; a Nayar holding a prominent house in a particular region
- <sup>xii</sup> , an earthen pot which symbolically represents the womb
- <sup>xiii</sup> "In the sacred grove of Sivamalli, the bael blossomed", translated by self
- <sup>xiv</sup> dialogue translated by self "deepam naadinte aishwaryam aane"
- <sup>xv</sup> Chants dedicated to Naga deity
- <sup>xvi</sup> a precious stone (ruby) believed to form on the hood of a serpent (Sreekandeshwaran, 1406)
- <sup>xvii</sup> sacred texts written on the pre-treated leaf of an Asian Palmyra tree
- <sup>xviii</sup> Magical Cave
- <sup>xix</sup> Article in Hindu, Nov 19, 2005.  
<http://www.thehindu.com/thehindu/mp/2005/11/19/stories/2005111900920300.htm>
- <sup>xx</sup> Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 1. 1975. pp. 6-18.

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**BIO NOTE**

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Monisha Mohan is a Research Scholar from the Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, working on the cinematic representation of the sacred groves in Malayalam movies. Her area of interest includes Folklore, Eco criticism, Gender Studies and Psychoanalysis.

Dr Gigy J. Alex is an Assistant Professor from the Department of Humanities, Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Her area of interest incorporates Resistance Literature, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, Genre and Gender Studies.

E-mail id: [monishamohandas11@gmail.com](mailto:monishamohandas11@gmail.com)

