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Colonialism, Caste, Class and Cultural Memory: Narratives of Myth and Folklore as Resistance in Jithin Laal's *A.R.M.*

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Abstract

In postcolonial contexts, cultural memory refers to the way societies and communities collectively remember, preserve, and transmit their shared history, traditions, and experiences across generations. The present study "Colonialism, Caste, Class and Cultural Memory: Narratives of Myth and Folklore as Resistance in Jithin Laal's *A.R.M.*" tries to analyze how Jithin Laal's 3D Malayalam movie, *A.R.M.* (2024), masterfully blends genres, offering a film that is rich in folklore, historical consciousness, adventure, romance, and magic. The seamless integration of these elements provides audiences with a multi-dimensional viewing experience that transcends conventional genre boundaries. By weaving together personal and collective histories, the film reflects on postcolonial class and caste issues of social justice, identity, and resistance, while also delivering a thrilling and emotionally engaging narrative.

Key Words: *Cultural Memory, Narratives, Myth, Folklore, Postcolonialism, Colonialism, Orientalism, Hybridity, Subaltern, Hegemony, Graded Inequality, Chronotope, Memory and History*

Cultural memory is not merely about individual memories but is embedded in cultural practices, symbols, narratives, and institutions that shape a group's identity. It helps sustain a community's identity and influences how its members view their past, present, and future. The key aspects include shared history that defines a community's identity, symbols and practices — rituals, festivals, monuments, folklores and myths — that encode and express shared memories; its transmission through generations via storytelling, education, and cultural institutions; and construction of a group's identity by linking the present to a meaningful past.

In postcolonial contexts, cultural memory often reflects the tensions between indigenous memories and the legacies of colonial domination. There are many instances from history, literature and media which show how cultural memory functions within societies. The present study "Colonialism, Caste, Class and Cultural Memory: Narratives of Myth and Folklore as Resistance in Jithin Laal's *A.R.M.*" tries to analyze how Jithin Laal's debut movie presents a complex socio-cultural commentary by integrating theories from postcolonialism, narratology, myth studies, folklore, class and caste.

Released on 12th September 2024, *A.R.M*, officially titled *Ajayante Randam Moshanam* (*Ajayan's Second Theft*), presents an amazing amalgamation of multiple genres, weaving together action, adventure, history, myth, legend, folklore, and romance into a cohesive narrative. This 3D film balances magical realism and supernatural elements with the abundance of myth and historical references, creating a uniquely immersive experience.

From a postcolonial perspective, *A.R.M* explores the themes of cultural conflict, identity, and resistance, which are central to the legacy of colonialism. The film's setting in 3 different historical periods — with Mr. Tovino Thomas in triple roles — from the point of view of Kunjikelu, Maniyan

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and Ajayan, reflects the struggles of postcolonial societies to define their identities amidst the remnants of colonial rule. Kunjikelu, a heroic figure from Haripuram, desires to create a temple free of caste distinctions, reflecting the postcolonial aspiration for an egalitarian society. Despite his noble intentions, the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy in Haripuram prevents the realization of his vision, leading to his tragic death. This serves as a commentary on the social stratification that continues to divide postcolonial societies, where political independence has not necessarily translated into social equality.

The central artifact of the *Chyothivilaku* symbolizes power and ownership — concepts deeply intertwined with colonialism. Just as colonial powers took control of indigenous cultural and spiritual assets, the theft and reclamation of the *Chyothivilaku* serve as metaphors for the ongoing postcolonial reclaiming of indigenous identity and sovereignty. Ajayan's quest to restore the original lamp can be read as a postcolonial act of resisting appropriation and reclaiming cultural heritage from both foreign — British archives — and internal caste-driven forces. Ajayan's lineage — descending from Maniyan, who is labeled a thief — places him in the shadow of colonial constructs of criminality. The British legal system often criminalized native resistance as "thievery," much like how Maniyan's defiance of societal norms leads to his outcast status. Ajayan, therefore, grapples not only with his family's history but with a larger historical narrative of postcolonial identity, challenging the lingering effects of colonial categorizations.

Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism" (1978) highlights how colonial powers constructed the East as the exotic "Other," which justified their dominance. In *A.R.M.*, the British colonial presence, particularly their control over local treasures mirrors this exploitation of cultural artifacts and spiritual resources, framing them as objects to be possessed by Western powers through intermediaries like *Naduvazhis*, the feudatory aristocratic Nair princes within Hindu caste system of Kerala and in this neocolonialist period through people like Sudev who wants to sell it off to the British archives. Ajayan's journey of resistance to retrieve the real *Chyothivilaku* (*Chyothi* lamp) signifies a postcolonial reclaiming of indigenous culture, identity and autonomy.

Gayatri Spivak's "subaltern" theory (1988) explores how marginalized voices, especially from colonized societies, are often silenced. In *A.R.M.*, the lower-caste characters reflect the subaltern, as their struggles are often overlooked in the dominant historical narratives. The character of Chothi, Kunjikelu's love interest from a lower caste, highlights the tension between personal desires and social constraints. Chothi's exclusion from the temple and later to Nagercovil after Kunjikelu's death represent the ongoing marginalization of oppressed classes, where their voices and actions are erased by those in power. In the second timeline too, Maniyan and his beloved Manikyam are excluded. Though Maniyan is portrayed as a superhuman character resisting the entire society, he too is hunted. Ajayan who woos Lakshmi from the high caste is haunted by the stigma of thievery. The eventual exclusion of lower castes from the temple mirrors the broader exclusion of marginalized groups from social, political, and economic power in postcolonial contexts.

Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" (1994) examines the interaction between colonizer and colonized, resulting in a "third space" where new cultural identities emerge. Ajayan, navigating his family's history across generations, embodies this hybrid identity, caught between the historical

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colonial legacies and contemporary struggles to reclaim indigenous identity. His role as a modern, postcolonial hero — part tradition bearer and part modern-day treasure hunter — represents Bhabha's notion of the postcolonial subject, constantly negotiating between past and present.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of "hegemony" (1971) explains how dominant classes maintain power through both force and consent. In *A.R.M*, the control exerted by the upper-caste over the temple and the community illustrates the hegemonic control of cultural and religious spaces. Kunjikelu's vision of an egalitarian temple is thwarted by the entrenched upper-caste dominance, signifying how cultural hegemony reinforces social hierarchies.

B.R. Ambedkar's critique of caste (1936), especially his concept of "graded inequality," offers a framework for understanding the caste dynamics in the film *A.R.M*. Kunjikelu's tragic death and the exclusion of lower-caste characters reflect the persistent inequalities Ambedkar critiqued in his writings. Ajayan's quest for justice and equality echoes Ambedkar's call for the annihilation of caste, as the film critiques the systemic oppression of marginalized groups. In Ajayan's timeline, this conflict manifests in class terms, with his family being ostracized due to his grandfather's label as a thief. This stigma of criminality becomes a metaphor for the broader postcolonial experience of marginalization, where those who resist societal norms are often branded as outlaws or rebels. Ajayan's quest to restore his family's honor parallels Maniyan's attempt to reclaim his dignity, making class and caste an ongoing thread across generations. The film also subverts traditional ideas of heroism and villainy. Maniyan, Ajayan's grandfather, is portrayed as a thief by society, but his theft is driven by a desire to restore his wife's honor and challenge the town's blind faith. In contrast, Sudev, posing as a documentary maker, represents a modern villain, driven by greed and devoid of any higher purpose. Through these characters, the film critiques societal norms that often judge actions without understanding their deeper motivations.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (1984) helps explain how Ajayan's family's loss of social standing impacts their access to power and respect. Maniyan's branding as a thief strips the family of their cultural and symbolic capital, much as lower castes are denied cultural legitimacy. Ajayan's quest is not just to restore the physical *Chyothivilaku* but to reclaim his family's cultural capital and dignity within a system that has historically excluded them.

From a narratological standpoint, the film's structure mirrors the fluidity of time and history, a feature often explored in postcolonial narratives. By shifting between past and present, the film emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual and collective histories. The grandmother's storytelling device serves as a framing narrative, positioning the audience within a folktale-like atmosphere, yet the film repeatedly disrupts this sense of mythical timelessness by grounding it in real historical events and societal struggles. This oscillation between myth and realism blurs the boundary between historical truth and narrative fiction, echoing the postcolonial use of history as a contested space. Stories, myths, and histories are reinterpreted and retold, just as postcolonial societies must reinterpret their own narratives in the aftermath of colonization. The past is not static but informs and interacts with the present, making Ajayan's journey not just a personal adventure but a re-engagement with the myths and legacies of his ancestors.

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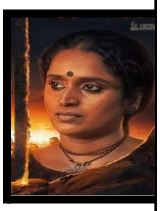
The film's use of multiple timelines and interwoven narratives aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotope" and Gérard Genette's theories of narrative discourse. Bakhtin's "chronotope" (1937) refers to the intrinsic connectedness of time and space in narrative. In *A.R.M.*, the use of past and present timelines, with the mythic past colliding with Ajayan's modern quest, creates a narrative structure where different historical periods influence each other. The film's chronotope allows it to explore how past injustices, such as caste oppression, continue to shape the present, making time an active player in the narrative.

	TIMELINE 1		**TIMELINE 2**		**TIMELINE 3**	
Character	**Kunjikelu**	**Chothi**	**Maniyan**	**Manikyam**	**Ajayan**	**Lakshmi**
						
Caste	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	High
Colour	Fair	Dark	Dark	Dark	Dark	Fair
Occupation	Warrior	NIL	Thief	NIL	Mechanic Tuition Teacher "Thievery Stigma"	NIL
Martial Arts	*Kalaripayattu*	NIL	*Kalaripayattu*	NIL	*Kalaripayattu*	NIL
Chyothi Vilaku **Dark (Real) Golden (Fake)**	Brings lamp (Fake)	Able to see fake one	Takes fake lamp and retrieves the real one from the *Naaduvazhi*	Able to see both	retrieves the real one from Aamathuruthu and defeats Sudev (high caste) who wants to sell it off to the British	Guides Ajayan regarding Aamathuruthu
Temple	Desire to create free of caste	Desire to enter	Desire to create free of caste	Desire to enter	Desire to place the real lamp	Highly privileged to enter
Aim	A temple even Chothi can enter	Agrees to her beloved's opinion	A temple even Manikyam can enter	Agrees to her husband's opinion	A temple even mother can enter	Sees people irrespective of caste

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

Live/Die	Saves Chothi from small pox, but dies affected by it	Leaves for Nagercovil after the death of Kunjikelu	Caught by the people with the fake lamp and hides the real one Falls to waterfalls Death: ? Beyond the 5 elements with superhuman powers	Longer life Story-teller to little Ajayan	Caught by the people Falls to waterfalls Near-death experience (Third Man Syndrome- May be Maniyan's) Goes for "second theft" (robbing Lakshmi's heart) after retrieving the lamp	Lives

Genette's "narrative levels" (1972), particularly his exploration of "diegesis" and "metalepsis" — narrative breaks — is evident in *A.R.M. 's use* of the grandmother's storytelling as a framing device. Her narrative exists in a "diegetic" realm that eventually merges with the main narrative timeline. This shift from the folkloric storytelling to the "real" world of Ajayan highlights how personal histories and cultural memories are inextricably linked to broader historical narratives. The voice of the cosmic creator through the articulation of Mohanlal adds further more to the narrative aspect of the movie.

The *Chyothivilaku*, a mystical object, embodies the intersection of myth and fantasy, allowing the film to explore cultural narratives surrounding power, spirituality, and justice. The lamp's origin — being forged from a meteor under the command of a king — places it squarely within the realm of myth. It transcends the ordinary world and becomes a cultural object imbued with supernatural power, representing not just spiritual light but the light of truth, equality, and justice. Kunjikelu's vision of equality, Maniyan's defiance against societal norms, and Ajayan's struggle for identity are all tied to the central object of *Chyothivilaku*. The lamp symbolizes the unbroken link between generations, the unresolved social tensions, and the need for personal and communal redemption.

In cultural studies, myth often serves to reflect the values and conflicts of a society. The struggle for the *Chyothivilaku* — across generations — parallels real-world struggles for justice, equality, and power within postcolonial societies. Ajayan's quest for the lamp can be viewed as an allegory for reclaiming agency — both personal and cultural — in the face of historical subjugation. The presence of supernatural elements adds layers of complexity to the plot, signifying that the resolution of social and historical wrongs is not merely a rational process but involves an almost spiritual redemption of the past.

ISSN: 3107-748X (Online)

The film's mythic elements — especially the *Chyothivilaku* as a mystical object — can be examined through the lens of Joseph Campbell's monomyth and Roland Barthes' mythologies. Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey" (1949), or the monomyth, provides a structural framework for understanding Ajayan's quest. Like many mythic heroes, Ajayan embarks on a journey to restore balance, encountering trials, mentors, and eventual redemption. His quest mirrors Campbell's stages of the hero's journey, including the call to adventure, initiation, and return. This journey is not just personal but cultural, as Ajayan seeks to restore the honor of his ancestors and reclaim a symbolic object from both colonial and caste oppressors.

Roland Barthes' "mythologies" (1957) explores how modern societies construct myths to naturalize cultural values and ideologies. In *A.R.M*, the *Chyothivilaku* serves as a mythic symbol not only of spiritual enlightenment but also of power, justice, and equality. The quest to reclaim the lamp functions as a cultural myth that represents the reclaiming of indigenous values from colonial domination. Barthes' theory helps decode the film's symbolic use of the lamp as more than just an object; it becomes a myth that legitimizes the postcolonial struggle for identity and justice.

Folklore plays a crucial role in grounding the narrative within the lived experiences of a specific cultural group. The grandmother's storytelling draws from Kerala's rich tradition of oral histories and folktales, in which local legends are passed down through generations. By beginning the story with a bedtime tale, the film taps into the idea that history and culture are not only preserved in written texts but are embedded in the memories and stories shared among communities. This emphasis on folklore also positions the film as a critique of colonial historiography, which often dismissed indigenous oral traditions in favour of the written European narratives. The film, by presenting both written and oral histories — as seen in the secret letter to Kunjikelu and the grandmother's narration — reinforces the idea that folklore holds equal validity in shaping cultural memory. Folklore and storytelling, central to the structure of *A.R.M*, can be analyzed through the theories of Jan Vansina and Paul Ricoeur. Jan Vansina's studies on oral tradition (1965) emphasize the importance of oral narratives in preserving cultural memory and historical consciousness, particularly in societies where written history is secondary. The grandmother's storytelling at the film's outset reflects the role of oral tradition in shaping collective memory. Her tale not only passes down cultural knowledge but also serves as a form of resistance against dominant, written histories, which often exclude marginalized voices.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of memory and history (2004) offers insight into how personal and collective memories shape identities. In *A.R.M*, the storytelling blends personal family history with the broader historical narrative of Kerala's caste and colonial struggles. Ricoeur's concept of "narrative identity" applies here, as Ajayan reconstructs his identity through the retelling of his family's history, merging the personal with the collective memory of oppression and resistance.

To conclude, *A.R.M.* is a complex and multi-layered narrative that draws from postcolonial theory, myth, folklore, and issues of class and caste to create a rich, textured film. The film's exploration of personal and collective histories, its use of mythical and supernatural elements, and its critique of social hierarchies position it as a critical commentary on the lingering legacies of colonialism, caste oppression, and cultural memory. Through its blending of genres, *A.R.M.* offers a nuanced reflection on Kerala's past and present, making it a significant contribution to both cinema and cultural discourse.

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This careful balance makes *A.R.M.* a standout work in contemporary Malayalam cinema, appealing to both local and global audiences.

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