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WHEN MYTH BECOMES A SPECTACLE: THE AGHORI FIGURE IN POST-2000 TAMIL CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Post-2000 Tamil cinema witnesses a considerable transition in the Aghori figure, whose practices are rooted in the traditions of Shaivism. Mainstream Tamil film research has focused on socio-political and realistic film analysis; yet, there exists an important research gap, as the available literature has not adequately studied how ancient myths were transformed for use in modern visual entertainment. The study compares four essential movies: Naan Kadavul (2009), Sowkarpettai (2016), Pottu (2019), and Aghori (2023) with respect to the mythic reception theory of Jose Manuel Losada and the archetypal criticism method of Northrop Frye. The study designates Naan Kadavul as the main location where myths return, which serves as a benchmark to evaluate how the Aghori archetype became popularised through the movies Sowkarpettai, Pottu and Aghori. The research thus shows how mythic reception in Tamil cinema moves between spectacle and substance, while maintaining deeper philosophical meaning and moral uncertainty. The research also demonstrates that Aghori mythology needs to be studied through myth criticism in order to trace how its beliefs have changed in cultural value over time.

KEYWORDS: Aghori, Myth, Archetype, Shaivism, Tamil Cinema, Commodification

1. INTRODUCTION

The Aghori ascetic represents one of the most uncommon and least understood figures who exist within Hindu tradition. The Aghoris practice their beliefs through Shaivism, which includes its non-dualism philosophy. They achieve their goal of crossing beyond perceived distinctions of pure and the impure by performing their rituals at cremation grounds. According to David N. Lorenzen, the historical and religious identity of these types of individuals is often defined by their 'monistic doctrine', or the belief that everything in the physical world, including the macabre, is a manifestation of the divine (Lorenzen). In utilising the Kapala (skull cup), and in smearing their bodies with human ash, the Aghori stands for the mythic figure of Lord Shiva in Bhairava form, acting as a living bridge between the physical world and the metaphysical void. These practices not only manifest a rejection of society; it is an intense pursuit of advaita (non-duality), where the distinction between the self and the universe is entirely dissolved.

The Aghori myth has been presented in Tamil movies through two opposite approaches which show either extreme theatricality or deep philosophical exploration. The Aghori character has become a visible part of horror movies since the year 2000 and appears in the films *Sowkarpetai* (2016) *Pottu* (2019) and *Aghori* (2023). These films use transgressive visuals to create fear and discomfort which leads to their portrayal of Aghoris as mere visual representations of black magic and supernatural evil. Bala's *Naan Kadavul* (2009) however, represents a pivotal counter-narrative to this trend. By situating the Aghori within a context of social marginalisation and moral ambiguity, *Naan Kadavul* moves away from spectacle to engage with what Northrop Frye identifies as the 'archetypal power' of the mythological figure (Frye).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have studied Tamil cinema regarding the political and social aspects which includes its portrayal of caste systems and urbanisation, and nationalistic movements, according to Baskaran's findings. The medium shows few myth-critical studies even though Shaivite Aghori characters provide researchers with an excellent opportunity to explore how culture develops through time. Ethnographic research supplies essential background information that enables people to comprehend Aghori practices because mainstream media and films present Aghori practices through misleading portrayals. Ronald L. Barrett's foundational research,

Aghor Medicine: Pollution, Death and Healing in Northern India (2008) describes Aghoris as individuals who practice an essential life philosophy which focuses on personal evolution, healing and social relationships. Barrett shows that Aghoris devote their time to supporting people who face social rejection and health issues, including leprosy sufferers, which results in the discovery of an ethical dimension to their ascetic traditions. Barrett demonstrates that cremation-ground rituals, which people see as disgusting or violent actually represent an ongoing battle against death, pollution and social isolation because it does not involve pointless violations of social norms. Barrett uses his ethnographic research to show that Aghori sadhana has both religious value and community importance while he warns people to avoid understanding Aghori practices through their shocking aspects. The ethnographic research method emphasizes research elements about ethics and philosophy which filmmakers frequently ignore in their movie depictions.

The Indian cinema especially Tamil cinema, uses visual shortcuts together with known storytelling patterns to show religious and ascetic characters according to their ethnographic studies. Researchers observe that filmmakers use well-known costumes and locations along with rituals to create immediate links between the audience and the concepts of alienation, threat and hidden information (Nakassis 2022; Damodaran and Gorringer 2017). The methods which filmmakers use to tell their stories in films create cinematic experiences, but they reduce complex characters into basic stereotypes because they use narration to create fictional characters who lack full human development (Nakassis and Weidman 2018).

The film *Naan Kadavul*, which Bala created in 2009 presents a completely new approach to storytelling which exists in current film industry practices. As described by Ramayan (2015), Aghori characters are shown not as frightening figures, but as complex individuals with morals, although not as principal characters. There is no overriding display of horror elements, keeping it real. Interviews reveal that what is foregrounded here is not a drive towards sensationalism, but Bala's deliberate restraint, which preserves realism to convey the ethical dimensions of Aghori ascetic practices (Behindwoods, 2009; Film Companion, 2017). With this storytelling method, *Naan Kadavul* leaves the typical trademark of commercialised Indian cinema behind.

The Aghori community has been treated as a secondary topic by religious studies because it exists

outside established academic boundaries. The existing knowledge gap has been addressed through recent research efforts. Thematic analyses of Naan Kadavul show that the movie presents an exceptional, authentic depiction of Aghori culture through its examination of both spiritual beliefs and disputed traditions (Ra). The studies demonstrate how the film introduces audiences to Aghori culture while showing the viewer experience discomfort because of its realistic depiction of events. Scholars have noted its subversion of the traditional Tamil film hero, with Rudran embodying an 'anti-aesthetic' figure that challenges mainstream sensibilities and the dominance of Brahmin vigilante narratives (Ramesh). In contrast, Sowkarpetai, Pottu and Aghori have received less scholarly attention, with most analyses appearing in popular reviews on websites.

Moving beyond the domain of cinema, the present-day media continues to have a considerable impact on the public perception of Aghoris. The news channels and videos present these characters through their portrayal as both aggressive and dangerous while showing their negative impact on society, but fact-checking websites like Factly have proven multiple claims about their behaviour to be false. The content which has been proven to be false continues to spread in public spaces while instilling visual fear, and the existing regional films and media reports maintain their usage of established storytelling conventions (Times of India, 2023; Deccan Chronicle, 2024). The researchers maintain that digital platforms transform social identities into marketable products through their use of visual exaggeration and selective editing and their establishment of narrative structures which present social identities as consumable spectacles (Media Technologies and Digitally Mediated Reality, 2020). The current media landscape demonstrates why filmmakers must analyse their movie representations because films like Naan Kadavul break established patterns of representation through their refusal to use exaggeration and their active challenge against stereotypes.

Although ethnographic scholarship has provided comprehensive insights into Aghori practices and philosophies, particularly through Barrett's work (2008), academic examination of their representation on screen, especially within Tamil cinema, remains limited. The Aghori identity in mainstream Tamil movies gets reduced to basic visual elements which create a visual display system that controls how people view Aghoris. The existing gap demands research into both Aghori cinematic techniques and

storytelling methods, used to depict Aghoris. The gap needs research because it requires indefinite investigation of films that present different ethical and philosophical representations (Ramayan, 2015; Pillai, 2024).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses qualitative secondary data and draws on multiple established sources to examine the representation of Aghoris in select Tamil movies released after 2000. The methodology combines Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism with Losada's theory of mythic reception to interrogate Aghori representations across Post-2000 Tamil cinema. Guided by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the analysis treats cinematic signs, including power, ideology, and 'othering', as negotiated between filmmakers and audiences (Hall). Northrop Frye's typology of the tragic-transgressive archetype provides a structural frame for locating the Aghori within the broader mythic spectrum, facilitating an evaluation of whether the figure functions as a moral disruptor or a conventional monster (Frye). Jose Manuel Losada's distinction between primary and secondary mythic reception further refines this reading by assessing whether a film preserves the Aghori's philosophical roots or degrades the myth for spectacle (Losada). Naan Kadavul is positioned as the baseline text because it foregrounds an Aghori character with moral ambiguity and visual realism, thereby offering a benchmark of nuanced 'primary' reception against which later, more sensationalised portrayals can be measured.

The study compares Naan Kadavul with Pottu, Sowkarpetai and Aghori through its study of Aghori elements which appear in three films released after Bala's work. The thematic content analysis of the four texts discovers cinematic tropes which appear in ritualistic gestures and symbolic costuming and 'otherness' narrative functions. The film-style analysis studies cinematography, editing and sound design to show how aesthetic decisions create visual effects or deliver moral messages. The research reveals how Aghori characters appear in Naan Kadavul through ethical complexity which transforms into simple narrative devices in the later films. The research shows how contemporary Tamil cinema represents peripheral spiritual identities through visual and storytelling methods.

The study has certain limitations that shape its scope. Aghori representations in Tamil cinema remain incomplete because the study depends on its narrow selection of feature films. The study omits short films, television shows and new digital content

which now starts to use mythological imagery in innovative ways. The study lacks direct interviews with directors and writers and practising Aghoris which hinders confirmation of interpretative assertions about directorial intent and cultural authenticity. Scholars should expand their research framework to examine films and analyze primary ethnographic evidence which will support their textual results.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In Naan Kadavul, director Bala constructs a cinematic space where the Aghori is a philosophical subject rather than a visual attraction. The protagonist, Rudran, lives on the edges of society. Rudran fits Northrop Frye's description of a 'tragic' or 'transgressive' archetype. He moves between the sacred and the profane (Frye). Unlike the usual Tamil film hero, Rudran operates outside established moral frameworks. His 'anti-aesthetic' disposition goes against mainstream sensibilities and disrupts the narrative conventions of commercial Tamil cinema (Ramesh).

Through Losada's theoretical lens, Naan Kadavul can be seen as a film that offers a 'primary reception' of the Aghori myth. It preserves the metaphysical roots of Shaivite asceticism while simultaneously reshaping these ideas for a contemporary audience. As Ra points out in her thematic analysis, the film's focus on the advaita-vedanta (non-duality) shapes how violence is shown. Rudran's violent acts are not presented as cruelty. The Shaivite concept of dushta nigraha (elimination of evil) leads to the interpretation of these practices as spiritual freedom from evil. The film Naan Kadavul uses Aghori belief systems as its main theme because it interrelates with their actual practices instead of using their visual symbols.

Naan Kadavul uses its narrative structure to support its philosophical beliefs through subtle yet persistent methods. The central Advaitic mantra Aham Brahmasmi (I am Brahman) which Rudran uses repeatedly serves as a main element that explores divine existence and ethical principles and paths to freedom (Ra). Bala's choice of adopting a realist visual language emphasises the mundane reality of Aghori life. His approach rejects the gothic aestheticisation, common to horror cinema. Ash-smeared skin is presented as a material practice rooted in Shaivite rituals. The dreadlocks, cremation grounds and the begging bowls are all contextualised within the actual lived experience of Aghori identity rather than becoming objects of stylisation for a visual effect. This anti-aesthetic approach aligns with what

film theorist Andre Bazin termed 'cinematic realism', wherein the camera functions as a transparent window onto reality rather than as a tool of stylistic manipulation (Bazin).

Within the narrative structure of Naan Kadavul, Rudran's role as the saviour of beggars operates paradoxically. He achieves justice through violence that is both 'dangerous and harmful' (Ra). This ethical ambiguity is crucial to understanding the film's mythic reception. Rudran operates outside any legal or moral framework, as he does not function as a conventional hero who restores order through righteous action. Nor does the film ask the audience to judge Rudran's actions as simply right or wrong. It only presents the conditions that make such transgression intelligible. By grounding Rudran's violence in the Shaivite concept of dushta nigraha, the film suggests that spiritual liberation may require the elimination of those who perpetuate suffering. Importantly, this theological justification situates violence within a coherent philosophical system that demands ethical discomfort and does not excuse it.

In contrast to the foundational depth of Naan Kadavul, the films Sowkarpetai, Pottu and Aghori represent what Losada terms 'secondary reception' or 'mythic degradation'. In these texts, the Aghori archetype is systematically stripped of its philosophical grounding and repurposed for the 'horror-comedy' genres. This process of genre commodification reflects what cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes as the 'encoding/decoding' of cultural meaning. The original 'encoded' meaning of the Aghori myth, rooted in Shaivite philosophy and ascetic practice, is 'decoded' by filmmakers and audiences through the lens of contemporary genre conventions (Hall).

Visual signifiers like unkempt hair, bodies smeared with ash, skull jewellery, and habitation around cremation sites tend to be highlighted in these films, while the traditions and philosophical bases of Aghori practices are not investigated. Such physical characteristics tend to be used to add intensity or momentum to stories, thereby treating Aghoris only as props to add physiognomy to characters, instead of presenting Aghoris as fully realised individuals with ethical or spiritual depth. Through this process, ascetic identity becomes instrumentalised as a cinematic object rather than a meaningful subject of inquiry.

Sowkarpetai provides a strong example of how sensationalism is used in its presentation. Sreekanth, the main character, walks through a cemetery after he takes on the role of an Aghori character in the pre-interval sequence. The scene shows powerful winds

that create moving leaves and rapid jump cuts which build up excessive dramatic tension. His unchanging stare towards the camera creates a threatening atmosphere which makes viewers feel confronted. The combination of cinematographic elements with sound and motion creates Aghori as an entity who terrifies through his supernatural powers. The visual elements here fail to create a connection with Aghori's philosophical and ethical and spiritual foundations because visual effects serve as visual elements that serve their single purpose of creating visual impact.

The Aghori iconography in *Sowkarpettai* uses three distinct elements for fear-based performance and sensationalism through ash-smear skin and dreadlocks and intense gazes. According to *The Times of India*, actor Srikanth is said to have spent time with a few mystic men and real Aghoris to understand their body language and lifestyle, yet this research is deployed only to enhance the authenticity of the horror performance (*Times of India*). The Aghori myth transforms into a supernatural threat which uses Aghori elements for jump scares instead of showing their authentic spiritual practices. This transition reflects what Losada identifies as the degradation of mythic substance. The archetype retains its visual markers but loses its metaphysical significance (Losada).

Pottu turns the Aghori figure, embodied by actress Namitha, into a sensationalist "ruthless witch" as reviewed by P. Sangeetha for *The Times of India* (Sangeetha). The background sounds create disturbing effects while the film shows continuous yelling, which results in viewer confusion about understanding the deeper meanings of its witchcraft visual elements, according to her assessment. The character transforms into a horror-comedy stereotype because the character lacks any characteristics that represent Aghori spiritual dedication. The film uses loud sound effects together with rapid editing to create chaotic sound patterns, which maintain an authentic Aghori depiction in the actual Aghori representation. The film received negative reviews from viewers who gave it a 2.7 rating on IMDb because they found the movie to lack any meaningful story content according to IMDb.

The 2023 film *Aghori* presents the Aghori character as an evil force who exists within a typical haunted-house storyline that forces five student filmmakers to complete lethal assignments from a malevolent ghost. The title of the film fails to show any Aghori ascetic path or their ceremonial activities. The Aghori character functions as a narrative element that creates suspense and terror while Pottu uses sensationalist methods to present Namitha's character. Aghori uses traditional horror elements from Pottu which include ghost enemies, jump scare moments and life-

threatening situations while failing to connect its supernatural elements to any cultural or spiritual heritage. The *Timesnownews* review of the film commends its 'sinister narrative' and 'visual spectacle' which showcases the actors' performances and the director's combination of horror elements with psychological thriller components but it does not examine the more profound aspects of Aghori traditions. The two films use shocking elements to attract viewers while they depict Aghori characters as exotic horror stereotypes.

The audience functions as a consumer of spectacle through their experience of *Sowkarpettai Pottu* and *Aghori*. The films present their audience with specific generic cues through their horror soundtrack, along with jump scares and gothic cinematography which lead to specific emotional responses. The Aghori character serves as a dangerous threat which people should fear, instead of a character who needs comprehension. The difference in audience positioning reflects what theorist Guy Debord describes as the 'society of spectacle', wherein meaning is increasingly determined by visual imagery and emotional affect rather than intellectual engagement (Debord).

In contrast, Bala's *Naan Kadavul* goes against this societal trend of the cinematic medium by adopting a less flashy visual language and a subdued tonal approach where the need for empathy and, consequently, philosophical support outweighs the need for showmanship (Ramayan, 2015; Pillai, 2024). The film keeps the ascetic ideals of the Aghoris within the context of society, where realistically created settings like ghats, roads, and slums provide the setting where life and death, rituals and living, merge as a natural whole. The symbols of the ascetic rituals of an Aghori, like human skulls and ritual instruments, are also used as symbols of the environments where the characters exist and breathe, and not as symbols of fear and dread. The film highlights Varanasi's historical and religious importance because the city has deep connections to Aghori traditions which the film establishes through its opening scenes which connect to both ascetics and sacred locations (Behindwoods, 2009). *Naan Kadavul* creates a unique cinematic experience through its stylistic elements because it uses extended shot durations, dimmer light conditions, and slower film editing methods to create an entirely new visual style. The aural aspects of this film centre a great deal around real sources of sound, the flow of water, chanting, as well as city sounds, as opposed to conventional sources of aural dramatic tension, the use of ominous music. This is because the aural aspects of the film allow the viewer to comprehend the ritual as a kind of social activity rather than as a

form of theatre (Film Companion, 2017).

At the centre of the film is Rudran, the Aghori protagonist, whose character is strongly marked by moral and spiritual complexity. As deeply committed as he was to ascetic discipline, Rudran remained entangled with social realities in issues such as suffering, injustice, and exploitation. Bala does not present him as a supernatural or terrifying figure; rather, his acts create difficult questions of ethics, thus encouraging reflection instead of fear (Ramayan, 2015; Barrett, 2008). In interviews and journalistic accounts, it has been stated that this representation was an attempt to focus on grounding the representation of Aghori in philosophical queries and moral tussle rather than shock elements (Behindwoods, 2009; Film Companion, 2017).

This aestheticisation reflects what theorist Jean Baudrillard describes as 'hyperreality'- the substitution of signs and images for actual reality (Baudrillard). The Aghori's appearance becomes a costume, a visual effect designed to trigger specific emotional responses in the audience. As The Times of India notes, the production of Aghori involved 'nearly 150 real aghoris' in an action sequence, yet their presence functions primarily as background spectacle rather than as subjects of genuine enquiry (Times of India). Filmmakers and audiences now perceive the archetype in a different way through the transition from realistic depiction into aestheticized representation. The Naan Kadavul film establishes its mythological foundation by using authentic visual elements from actual life while the other films in the analysis choose to use visual stylization methods which create separation between myth and actual existence.

The four films demonstrate different thematic structures and different philosophical foundations when analyzed through a comparative study. Naan Kadavul constructs its narrative around the central philosophical question: What is the nature of liberation (moksha) and what actions are justified in its pursuit? The question originates from Advaitic philosophy and the Shaivite belief about dushta nighraha. The film develops its thematic unity through active exploration of these philosophical ideas. The philosophical framework establishes the context for understanding Rudran's violent behaviour, his

ascetic way of life and his interactions with beggars. In contrast, Sowkarpettai, Pottu and Aghori construct their narrative around the central question: How can we generate fear and excitement through the deployment of transgressive imagery? What matters here is the visual and emotional impact of the archetype rather than a philosophical enquiry. The difference in thematic architecture reflects what Losada identifies as the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' mythic reception. Primary reception preserves the myth's original meaning and significance while adapting it to the contemporary context, whereas secondary reception strips away the myth's meaning and repurposes it for popularised purposes (Losada 44).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The above study demonstrates Aghori's journey through post-2000 Tamil cinema and reflects the broader pattern of mythic degradation and commodification. The process of degradation develops because of particular decisions which the filmmakers, producers and audiences select. Naan Kadavul establishes an ascetic character as the central figure which avoids all forms of sensationalism while presenting ethical conflicts and story limits. The film diverts from standard cinematic norms by showing the ethical and philosophical outcomes which arise from asceticism. The public now associates Aghori through repeated movie portrayals which follow a specific visual pattern as they represent Aghori characters, but fail to show their actual philosophical beliefs. Aghori practice derives its identity from particular external elements which include costume, body decoration and setting elements instead of its complex belief systems and their peculiar order of ascetic discipline. The question that emerges from this analysis is whether the Aghori archetype can survive in contemporary Tamil cinema without being reduced to a mere spectacle. Filmmakers face the challenge of transforming archetypes into commercially viable elements while they develop deep understanding of these archetypes. The answer to these questions will depend on whether audiences continue to demand substance alongside spectacle, and whether filmmakers are willing to take the risks necessary to provide it.

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