COLONIAL SHADOWS AND SUPERNATURAL REALMS: A POST-COLONIAL READING OF RAHUL SADASIVAN'S *BHRAMAYUGAM*

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Abstract: Rahul Sadasivan's *Bhramayugam* (2018) stands at the intersection of magical realism and post-colonial discourse, offering a rich narrative that explores the lingering effects of colonialism on identity, culture, and power structures. Set against the historical backdrop of 17th-century Malabar, a period marked by Portuguese colonial influence and indigenous resistance, the film intertwines elements of supernatural horror with the psychological and social struggles of its characters. At its core, *Bhramayugam* reflects the ongoing complexities of post-colonial existence, where the remnants of colonial domination continue to shape personal and collective identities. The narrative centres on characters such as Thevan, Koran, and the supernatural entity Chathan, whose experiences parallel the broader post-colonial discourse surrounding identity and resistance. The film's depiction of Thevan and Koran's escape from colonial forces, only to encounter indigenous supernatural threats, underscores the duality of survival in a world marked by colonial legacies. The Chathan, a powerful demon servant subjected to torture, serves as a metaphor for the subjugation of colonized peoples, mirroring the trauma and eventual resistance that arises from colonial oppression.As the protagonist grapples with both colonial and traditional forces, the film underscores themes of existential dread, cultural dislocation, and the indomitable quest for self-discovery. The film transcends the boundaries of conventional horror, offering a meditative reflection on life, death, and the complexities of post-colonial identity formation. This research article provides a post-colonial reading of the film, analysing its intricate layers of tradition, modernity, and the psychological impact of colonialism on individual and collective identities. By examining the interplay of power, resistance, and identity in *Bhramayugam*, this study aims to highlight the film's contribution to the evolving narrative of post-colonial Indian cinema.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Psychoanalysis,Identity, Cultural dislocation, Magical realism, Colonialism, Psychological trauma.

Introduction:
In an era where the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur, Rahul Sadasivan's *Bhramayugam* emerges as a cinematic tapestry woven with the threads of post-colonial identity and cultural dislocation. This 2018 film not only captivates audiences with its magical realism but also serves as a profound commentary on the complexities of contemporary Indian society. As viewers embark on a surreal journey alongside its protagonist, they encounter a narrative that challenges conventional notions of self and belonging, reflecting the ongoing struggle for identity in a post-colonial landscape. With its rich visual aesthetics and thought-provoking themes, *Bhramayugam* invites us to delve deeper into the psyche of a nation grappling with its colonial past while yearning for an

authentic future. This research article aims to unravel the multifaceted layers of Sadasivan's work, offering a post-colonial reading that highlights the interplay between tradition and modernity, reality and illusion, and the indomitable quest for self-discovery in a rapidly evolving world.

The film unfolds in the 17th century Malabar, a historical backdrop rich with colonial implications, particularly concerning the Portuguese slave trade. The narrative centres on Thevan and Koran, who escape the clutches of colonial oppression only to encounter new forms of tyranny and existential threats. This duality reflects the post-colonial discourse surrounding identity, power, and the complexities of survival in a world marked by colonial legacies. As the film opens, Thevan and Koran find themselves in a desperate flight from the Portuguese, whose slave trade not only uprooted individuals but also sought to dismantle entire cultures. Their initial escape symbolizes a universal struggle against colonial domination, where the desire for freedom is met with relentless pursuit. However, the duality of their experience unfolds as they confront new existential threats in the form of indigenous supernatural forces, represented by the Yakshi. This encounter with the Yakshi serves as a metaphor for the unpredictable dangers that emerge in the post-colonial conditionwhere traditional folklore becomes intertwined with the harsh realities of colonial rule.

Upon reaching a seemingly abandoned mana, Thevan's subsequent entrapment introduces a nuanced examination of power dynamics within post-colonial societies. The lord of the mana, Kodumon Potti, embodies the remnants of feudal authority that have been complicated by colonial influences. Here, the narrative delves deeper into the intricacies of identity, as Thevan navigates a space where traditional hierarchies clash with the repercussions of colonial intrusion. A language of subjugation towards lower castes was prevalent, ingraining them to accept their subordinate status, particularly in their interactions with Brahmins. Paanan (court singer) represents this sense of subordination through his physical and verbal expressions in the film. However, the child born from a Brahmin father and a sweeper's mother harbours a desire for revenge while also inheriting a sense of superiority from his Brahmin lineage. He lays claim to ritualistic or tantric powers to confront the Brahmin antagonist, who openly insults and exploits subordinates for Brahminical needs and convenience.

This setting acts as a microcosm of post-colonial identity formation, where individuals must confront the remnants of a colonial past that continue to shape their present and future.The story of the Chathan, a demon servant tortured into madness serves as a poignant metaphor within *Bhramayugam*, paralleling the complex experiences of colonized subjects. The concept of Chathan in Kerala folklore is deeply rooted in the region's rich tapestry of mythology and cultural beliefs. Chathan, often depicted as a mischievous spirit or a trickster, plays a significant role in various folk tales, embodying the complexities of human nature. Traditionally, he is portrayed as a marginalized figure, often associated with the lower castes and rural communities. His character transcends mere folklore, symbolizing resistance against societal norms and injustices.

Chathan is known for his cleverness and cunning, frequently outsmarting the powerful and privileged. He serves as a vehicle for social commentary, critiquing the rigid caste system and the inequities embedded within it. His narratives often involve themes of deception, humor, and irony, illustrating the struggles of the underprivileged against the dominant forces in society.In many tales, Chathan's encounters with gods, kings, and other figures highlight his role as a challenger of authority. He often employs wit and guile to turn situations in his favor, making him a beloved figure among the people. Celebrated in various forms of folk art, including dance and theatre, Chathan's stories resonate with audiences, reflecting a

collective desire for justice and equality. Ultimately, Chathan embodies the spirit of resilience and adaptability, reminding us of the importance of humour and cunning in navigating life's challenges. His enduring presence in Kerala's folklore underscores the region's rich cultural heritage and the complexities of its social dynamics. The demon, originally a powerful and supernatural being, becomes a victim of the cruelty inflicted upon it by its master, Kodumon Potti. This transformation from a being of power to one of torment embodies the trajectory of many colonized peoples who were once vibrant and autonomous but were systematically oppressed by colonial forces.

Chaathan's incarnation as Varahi, his association with madness, affinity for Sakthi, women, liquor, and death, render him a mythical figure deeply embedded in the everyday reality of the people. One prevalent version of the Chaathan myth, as transmitted through oral traditions, suggests his origin as an adopted child of a Namboothiri family. However, as he matures, he exhibits preferences for behaviours and practices deemed non-Brahminical, such as consuming local liquor, socialising with lower castes, and consuming meat, contrary to the norms of Brahminical life. This deviation from Brahminical norms leads the Brahmin family to attempt to control and subsequently inflict cruelty upon him. Despite numerous attempts to eliminate Chaathan, he manifests in countless forms with formidable powers capable of destruction. Chaathan thus represents a subaltern subject and subjectivity, challenging dominant Brahminical narratives. However, *Bramayukam* seeks to depict Chaathan as residing within a deceased Brahmin body, acting through it. This portrayal suggests that while Chaathan may have dismantled Brahminical dominance, it persists through Brahmin bodies, perpetuating the tragic and traumatic experiences of lower castes.

The Chathan's torture can be interpreted as a reflection of the psychological and physical violence that colonial regimes imposed on indigenous populations. Just as the Chathan is subjected to relentless cruelty, the colonized are often stripped of their dignity and identity, forced to conform to the oppressive norms of their colonial rulers. This systematic degradation leads to a profound loss of agency, as the colonized are denied the right to define their existence and navigate their destinies. The madness of the Chathan symbolizes the psychological trauma experienced by those who are subjugated, highlighting the internal conflict that arises when individuals are forced to live under oppressive systems that seek to erase their cultural identities and historical narratives.

Main Analysis:

In *Bhramayugam*, the Chathan's eventual emergence as a powerful force upon being released from its confines mirrors the potential for reclamation and resistance among colonized subjects. It suggests that beneath the layers of trauma and oppression lies a deep-seated strength, waiting to be awakened. The film emphasizes that while colonial powers may seek to dominate and dehumanize, the spirit of resistance persists, rooted in the very cultural narratives that colonialism attempted to suppress.Chathan's struggle for liberation parallels the post-colonial quest for identity and self-determination. As the Chathan seeks revenge against its oppressor, it echoes the desire for justice and retribution that often accompanies the post-colonial narrative. This interplay between the Chathan and its master signifies the broader conflict between colonizers and the colonized, illustrating the inevitable resistance that arises from oppression.

Moreover, the Chathan's madness serves as a commentary on the consequences of unchecked power and violence. The cycle of torture leads not only to the degradation of the Chathan but also to the moral decay of Kodumon Potti, who becomes ensnared in the very corruption he perpetuates. This dynamic reflects the idea that colonial power ultimately

corrupts both the oppressor and the oppressed. While the oppressor may initially wield control, the inherent chaos and violence of colonialism destabilize all parties involved, leading to a cycle of suffering and retribution.Through the Chathan's narrative, *Bhramayugam*invites viewers to reflect on the lasting impact of colonialism on individual and collective identities. The character embodies the struggles of those marginalized by colonial rule, emphasizing the themes of trauma, loss, and the quest for empowerment in the aftermath of oppression. By illuminating the Chathan's plight, the film underscores the importance of reclaiming agency and redefining one's identity in the wake of historical injustices, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in post-colonial existence. In this way, *Bhramayugam* transcends its narrative to become a broader commentary on the ongoing struggles for identity, dignity, and justice in a post-colonial world.

The film centres around the three characters, Thevan, Chathan and the cook whose internal struggles reflect larger cosmic dilemmas. Through the use of suspense, psychological horror, and mythical allegories, the movie crafts a narrative where the boundaries between reality and illusion blur. It taps into the primal fears of existence, death, and the unknown, positioning these as the focal points of its storytelling. Set against the backdrop of 19th-century Kerala, a period marked by caste hierarchies, superstition, and the interplay of colonial and traditional forces. The film delves into the psychological and supernatural realms, blending horror with psychological drama in a way that Malayalam cinema has rarely explored. The existential dread in *Bhramayugam* is palpable throughout the film. From its slow-burning narrative to the protagonist's increasingly disjointed sense of reality, the film reflects core existential themes. The protagonist's journey is marked by moments of isolation and self-questioning, with his consciousness slowly unravelling as the story progresses. Much like Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, *Bhramayugam* questions the meaning of existence, drawing its characters into a confrontation with the inevitability of death and the fear of oblivion.

The psychological depth of the film emerges from its ability to merge horror with philosophical questions. The characters are not merely victims of external forces but are haunted by internal demons, guilt, and unresolved traumas. This intricate psychological layering allows this film to transcend the conventional boundaries of the horror genre, offering a meditative reflection on life and death. The protagonist's journey through a surreal landscape symbolizes the broader struggles of individuals navigating the complexities of post-colonial identity. The film employs magical realism to challenge the constraints of reality, echoing the experiences of many in contemporary India who find themselves in a cultural limbo.

The theme of cultural dislocation is central to the film, reflecting the fragmented experience of individuals in post-colonial societies. The protagonist's journey through fantastical, surreal realms operates as a metaphor for the profound disconnection from cultural roots experienced by many in post-colonial India. This dislocation is not merely geographical or physical; rather, it is deeply psychological and emotional. The protagonist, like many in post-colonial societies, navigates a world where the values and beliefs of a colonial past clash with the reality of a modern, independent nation, creating a space of identity confusion and cultural fragmentation.The protagonist encounters with bizarre and mysterious characters reflect his internal disarray, which stems from an inability to reconcile the traditional cultural heritage with the rapidly shifting influences of modernization and globalization. As he moves between worlds—both literal and metaphorical—he struggles to locate a stable sense of self. This mirrors the experience of many post-colonial subjects, who

often feel alienated not only from their pre-colonial cultural heritage but also from the new social order imposed by colonial rule and the subsequent pressures of modernity.

The film's use of magical realism allows it to explore post-colonial identity through a narrative that blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy. The supernatural serves not just as a tool for horror but also as a way to critique power structures, both colonial and traditional. Characters like Thevan and Koran are caught between these forces, highlighting the dual oppressions of colonial domination and indigenous systems like the caste hierarchy. Through its interplay of myth and history, *Bhramayugam* reflects on the continuing impact of colonialism on individual and collective identities in Kerala, offering a nuanced exploration of cultural dislocation, survival, and resistance.

Moreover, the psychological toll of this dislocation is evident in the protagonist's inability to find a permanent anchor in either tradition or modernity, a tension that underscores the broader post-colonial struggle. His sense of belonging becomes fluid and fragmented, symbolizing the challenges faced by those who must reconstruct their identity in the aftermath of colonial rule. Thus, *Bhramayugam* portrays cultural dislocation as a pervasive issue, raising questions about the complexities of identity in a world shaped by both colonialism and post-colonial realities.The film serves as a poignant critique of the enduring impacts of colonialism on Indian society, deftly illuminating how historical legacies continue to shape contemporary identities and social structures. The film's narrative is intricately woven around characters who grapple with the expectations imposed by both colonial ideologies and traditional societal norms, reflecting the complex interplay between heritage and modernity.

The protagonist's journey is marked by encounters with a range of figures, each embodying different aspects of authorityboth traditional and colonial. For instance, he interacts with characters that symbolize the vestiges of colonial power, such as bureaucrats and educators whose values are rooted in a colonial past. These figures often impose rigid expectations that conflict with the protagonist's quest for self-discovery, highlighting the tension between adhering to inherited norms and forging an individual identity. Through these interactions, the film underscores the ongoing negotiation between the past and present, as characters attempt to reconcile their colonial history with their desire for authenticity in a rapidly evolving society. The protagonist's struggle becomes emblematic of a broader societal challenge faced by many in post-colonial India: the need to critically engage with the colonial legacy while striving for a renewed sense of self. This critique not only serves as a commentary on individual identity but also reflects the collective consciousness of a nation in search of empowerment, ultimately calling for a re-evaluation of cultural narratives that continue to shape contemporary life.

Conclusion:

Bhramayugam vividly illustrates themes of resistance and empowerment, intricately woven into the protagonist's journey. As he navigates a surreal landscape fraught with challenges, he is compelled to confront his deepest fears and the societal constraints that have long dictated his existence. This confrontation is not merely a personal struggle but a profound act of defiance against the remnants of colonial legacies that continue to shape identities in contemporary India. The protagonist's journey symbolizes the collective quest of post-colonial subjects striving to reclaim their agency in a world still influenced by historical oppression.Throughout the film, the protagonist encounters various characters and situations that embody traditional authority and colonial remnants, each serving as a metaphorical representation of the expectations and norms imposed on individuals. His resistance against

these forces becomes a powerful narrative of empowerment, highlighting the significance of self-discovery. As he rejects the limitations set by both society and colonial history, he embraces a path towards authenticity, forging a new identity that reflects his values and aspirations.

This journey of empowerment resonates with many viewers, particularly those who have felt marginalized or constrained by societal norms. It underscores the idea that true empowerment arises from the courage to challenge inherited narratives and assert one's individuality. In this way, *Bhramayugam* transcends its fictional narrative, becoming a beacon of hope and inspiration for audiences seeking to navigate their own journeys of self-discovery and resistance against oppressive structures. Through the lens of the protagonist's experience, the film powerfully articulates the transformative potential of reclaiming one's identity in the face of adversity.

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