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Representations of Gothic and Spectral Identities in the Global South: A Study of *Manichitrathazhu* and its Adaptations

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Abstract
Gothic as a genre in literature took its form in Europe but has existed within and outside Europe in various forms and formats. In nations like India, the colonial impact has influenced the way one imagines the supernatural and the uncanny. This paper studies the evolution of an 'alternate gothic' in the movies from India, focusing on the Malayalam movie *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and its Tamil, Kannada, and Hindi adaptations. The paper examines how each version incorporates the regional culture, rituals, and social norms of the respective linguistic and geographic setting, thereby creating an 'alternate gothic' unique to the subcontinent. Through this lens, the film is read as an act of cultural negotiation, where local myths and social structures are embedded within a colonial framework of reason.

Keywords: spectral identities; Indian gothic; film adaptations; alternate gothic; European gothic; South Asian gothic

Representations of Gothic and Spectral Identities in the Global South: A Study of *Manichitrathazhu* and its Adaptations

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Introduction

Gothic as a genre evolves and adapts, fitting into different timelines as well as cultures almost seamlessly. The genre has its structural origins in 18th century romanticism but has evolved to manifest in not only the most contemporary literature but also across various genres, languages and cultures, ranging from Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* written in French to the works of the most contemporary writers like Haruki Murakami, Gothic is seen to grow and evolve. Gothic, though developed initially as a genre of art, has bifurcated into being both a genre as well as an aesthetic. The aesthetic relies heavily on the past of Gothic, as the word Goth was used to describe anything barbaric and savage- a reference to the Germanic Goth tribe that invaded the Celts of Britain in the past (Punter and Byron, 2004). To define the Gothic is tedious, for not only is it dynamic, since it emerged in the eighteenth century, but more so due to people's attributions of various connotations to it. Nevertheless, Ellen Moers' definition offers certain context that forms the crux of Gothic: "In Gothic writings fantasy predominates

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over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare" (Moers, 1976).

One of the most effective ways of conveying a gothic aesthetic is the visual mode, and numerous paintings and movies have featured this. Typically, this is done utilising either dark colour palette or using grotesque and/or eerie imagery. The advantage a movie has over other mediums is the way it incorporates both visual and auditory elements to imbibe a realistic experience. This becomes useful especially when it comes to portraying the uncanny. The movie '*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)' serves as a great example for this, as it not only uses the typical horror imageries, but also incorporates novel cinematographic techniques, thereby giving birth to German Expressionism.

The expansion of Gothic into various cultures and contexts has initiated discussions on not only the dynamic nature of Gothic, but also how Gothic serves as a metaphor for potential critique of the power imbalances and the marginalisation, and the collective fear it generates. Such imbalances could be gender, class, and region specific, and Gothic has functioned as a vehicle to bring such issues to the limelight, for a very long time. Representation of Gothic in other regions, especially the global south, proves vital in understanding indigenous cultural traditions in tandem with resistance narratives against colonial appropriations.

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Gothic in the Global South

Walter Mignolo identifies the inception of the concept of Global South with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the replacement of the term 'third world' with a nuanced concept that embodies the economic, political and epistemic dimensions (Mignolo, 2011). In the general sense, the global south refers to developing nations from Asia, Latin America, Oceania and Africa that may have a history of colonisation. More than a fixed geographical entity, Kloß refers to Global South as a discourse that could potentially reverse the colonial epistemologies. (Kloß, 2017). In the academic and cultural studies context, critical and methodological frameworks originating from the global North often face the criticism of having assumed a universal applicability (Watson, 2016). The Global South thus represents a critical stance towards knowledge production, advocating for a decolonized and diversified form of intellectual discourse exchange (Dutta and Pal, 2020).

The larger political and power imbalances within the Global South and the rest of the world is imperative in understanding the underlying meanings within the cultural productions of these nations. In the context of Gothic literatures, global and regional representations of Gothic narratives thus become imperative in understanding the collective apprehensions and fears of society. Despite being frequently linked to its European roots, the Gothic genre has a longer worldwide history, with parallel and unique traditions across worldwide, especially the

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South. This development demonstrates how similar narrative motifs, frequently derived from indigenous mythology, folklore, and historical experiences, have appeared separately or in localized versions of the Gothic. For example, In Latin America, Diaz argues that the existing 'pre-hispanic myth' has influenced the Gothic imaginations of that area (Diaz, 2018). Similarly, folk narratives from India most often feature indigenous spectral characters like Yakshi, Bhoot, Chudail, and other region-specific spirits, and have references of ancient curses, and/or legends. However, there have been records of folktales and Gothic stories in indigenous languages like Malayalam, namely the *Aithihyamala* (Garland of Legends) which was compiled by Kottarathil Sankunni in the early 20th Century. A similar work exists in Bengali titled *Thakurmar Jhuli* written by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in 1907.

The history of narratives that have elements of Gothic in South Asia may seem daunting to trace, as most of them were orally circulated. Nations like India from the South Asian context have a rich history of sculptures and local art forms that celebrate the supernatural and the spectre.

Gothic in Indian Context

Unlike the Western notions, India believes in the Knowledge within than without. Hence literature and all art forms that spring in this land are produced from within. To quote the Upanishads, '*Sa Vidya Ya Vimuktaye'* which meant it is knowledge, that liberates one, i.e, the

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knowledge of the inner self. The very essence of life is understood from this perspective. This is the tradition that has been coming down since ages. India is the land of Rishis, who were 'seers'. Indian aesthetics believes that literature and art forms are for the soul's sake, not art for Art's sake. Therefore, literature and any artform, according to ancient teachers is the vehicle of divine expression.

> The One, for fulfilling His desire to be all-pervading, infuses in each and every one an abundance of creative energy which in its turn demands release in the projection of finite forms. Thus the artist also makes the creation of a piece of art into a complete act of divine efflorescence. As such he creates a form, a name to proclaim to the world the glory of Divine Art. He has no other longing than to touch this divine source of life: his joy, and his bliss lie in this eternal search alone. (Sharma, 1957).

Contrary to the West, believing in the knowledge within than without and the pursuit for the ultimate bliss, the artist does not give any room for mundaneity, viz., personal likes and dislikes. In the process of unveiling the incomprehensible, the realm of the unseen, the eternal, and the infinite to bring down to earth, the artist devotes his entire time and energy. (Sharma, 1957). Further, drawing an indigenous parallel to the Western Gothic from the Global South context. V. N. Sharma, in his work, identifies that Indian art, like Gothic, expresses an inner intuitive feeling (*Samadharana*) (Sharma, 1957).

Sharma writes:

> In this respect we can find a companion, a fellow pilgrim to him in the Gothic art. As a matter of fact, his Gothic brother is no stranger; is he not also on the same path to tackle the dynamic, divine consciousness in his creative art? Even though its form is the outcome of the Western environment, Gothic art-

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> consciousness is universal. The Gothic artist is more emotional at times, more sentimental, but the Indian artist is not satisfied with these spheres of expression, as he considers them mere passing life's streams. He goes beyond these; he appeals to the imagination and intuition *(Buddhi, Jnana)* and places, before us an abstraction of a superterrestrial sphere, rather than mere bodily griefs and sufferings. (Sharma, 1957).

It is understood from the aforementioned discussion, India believes in co-existence. The Brahmanda Purana of the Indic knowledge tradition lists out fourteen worlds where non-human beings exist, classifying them as the upper region (including *Satya loka, Tapoloka* etc.), the middle region which is the earth, and the netherworld, (including the *Atala, Vitala, Sutala* etc.), asserting the harmony between natural and supernatural.

This shows that South Asian Nations already had an existing framework of both imagining and understanding the Spectral elements and horror motifs, which was rooted in a cultural parameter. With the Colonial interference and replacement of Indigenous knowledge and literary traditions, such tales and narratives lost their prominence. However, with the popularity of movies and the visual medium post the colonial era, Gothic was embraced yet again, since the visual and material manifestation of Gothic worked well with the audience.

The resurgence of the Gothic aesthetic within the Global South is symbolic of a trauma that is rooted in a sense of 'false modernity', especially in colonial Asia (Choi, 2017). However, South Asian forms of Gothic have received far less academic attention, and as Ancuta and Valančiūnas (2021) asserts, Asian gothic should be read in the light of intra-asian connections

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and cultural influences and an alternate methodology should be proposed that acknowledges the non-western conceptual framework of Gothic.

Gothic Movies of Global South

Gothic movies are not an innovative genre when it comes to the cinema culture of the Global South. Armed with folktales, myths and local legends, Gothic embraces a completely new form here with an amalgamation of both European features and South Asian structure. Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valanciunas therefore identifies 'Gothic' as a fluid concept, and "as a conceptual framework through which distinctive local cultural practices, historical formulations, national and regional traumas, anxieties, collective violent histories, and diverse belief systems are expressed" (Ancuta and Valanciunas, 2021). This 'negotiation' with the past within the Gothic structure/ aesthetic gives the global south an opportunity to consume, appropriate, translate, transform and even resist conventional Gothic tropes and the coloniality it embodies (Ancuta and Valanciunas, 2021). The potential of South Asian movies in subverting both the Eurocentric structure of Gothic and assimilating regional folklore and legends to a larger audience (who are familiar with Gothic) is revealed here. Among South Asian countries, India becomes an important location for the sheer amount of cultural diversity it embodies, all the while using it to forge a singular culture that is distinct from its colonial past (even though it cannot deny its influences).

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Manichitrathazhu directed by Fazil and written by Madhu Muttom, released in 1993, is a Malayalam movie from the state of Kerala that tells the story of Nakulan and Ganga, a newly wed couple who have come to stay at Nakulan's ancestral house called Madampilly. The story unfolds as they encounter the ghost of Nagavalli, a dancer who was murdered by the head of the house years ago, and the havoc she wreaks. They suspect Nakulan's cousin as being mentally unstable, and his friend from USA, Dr. Sunny Joseph who is also a psychiatrist is called to their home. His investigations reveal that the uncanny events that happened were the acts of Ganga, who was secretly suffering from multiple personality disorder, and that her second personality was that of Nagavalli of the old legends. In a series of events that unfold, Dr. Sunny cures Ganga of her mental disorder, utilising the help of Pullattu Parambu Brahmadathan Nampoothirippad, an astrologer, priest and an exorcist. The movie, released in 1993 created repercussions in not just malayalam movie industry but also across India since it dealt with an unusual topic - of that of a mental illness as the reason behind an uncanny event. *Manichitrathazhu* as a movie was so influential in redrafting the Indian Gothic and Gothic Horror that it was remade into several Indian languages, each catering to a different language, and thereby different culture. It aptly portrays the Indian challenge of being caught up between rationalism and superstitions (Raj, 2024).

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When an already successful movie is adapted into other languages, questions will arise as to the subjectivity of the content of the movie and the original charm being maintained. Such questions become even more complex when it deals with integrating a foreign genre like Gothic and catering to a highly specific local culture, all the while trying to redefine the genre. In the case of *Manichitrathazhu*, the movie was adapted in Tamil, Kannada, Hindi and Bangla, which are all similar yet starkly different cultures owing to the difference in language and social-geographical variations. The fundamental question which this paper aims at analyzing is how does each of these variations situate the storyline of *Manichitrathazhu* within their distinct culture and whether such attempts have been successful in doing so. The Tamil movie *Chandramukhi*, Kannada Movie *Apthamitra* and Hindi movie *Bhool Bhulaiya* are analysed in an attempt to answer this.

Literature Review

Gothic as genre in literature encompasses myriad forms, and it has evolved both synchronically and diachronically. What one understands to be Gothic at this point in time is a result of various revisions and additions in terms of its content and structure, and it has become almost impossible to define Gothic now. Horace Walpole, who wrote the first ever Gothic story *The Castle of Otranto*, wrote the following lines, which also primarily instrumentalised in defining Gothic: "A kind of story, which may be called a Gothic story, being, as it is, an attempt

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to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (Walpole, 1995). Among the widely accepted definitions of the Gothic, David Punter's is the one that captures the essence of the Gothic, in its most classical sense:

> An emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant. (Punter, 2014).

The attempts at defining Gothic mostly focuses on the structural aspects of it and the key aspects of content one should be looking out for. Gothic assumes various forms across the world, and scholars have tried to locate the gothic outside Europe, where the key elements, such as supernatural, old houses, darkness, and a general sense of fear, prevail. The major areas include America (there are references to both a general American Gothic and Southern American Gothic), Mexican Gothic, East Asia, the Middle East (Lloyd-Smith,2006; Cutter, 2021; Balmain, 2017; Alkhayat, 2022).

Gothic in South Asian context offers myriad critical frameworks to understand not just how the local cultures (each different owing to the various religious backgrounds) are incorporated into the Gothic, but also in identifying the colonial influence and/or appropriation. Nalini Pai is perhaps the most influential in delineating an Indian Gothic, by understanding the dak bungalows as sites of Gothic thereby incorporating both colonial and Indian culture into a distinctively Indian form of Gothic. (Pai,2016). Khair, deconstructs the vital features of

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European gothic such as the Vampire, in an Indian context, in what perhaps is an original attempt at understanding the colonial 'living gothic of India', as opposed to the Gothic remains (Khair, 2014).

Among the popular and accessible forms of media, films are by far the most successful in disseminating Gothic and they don a unique style to portray it. South Asian Gothic thrives in the visual format, especially after the later 20th century, owing to the emergence of technical effects. However, by then, South Asia, particularly India, had already developed its own format of films, in both commercial category and the category that is deemed as 'art'. Gothic and horror movies were a part of this, and most often featured in the commercial category. As Dhusiya opines:

> Unlike Hollywood and most western cinematic traditions, horror films produced in India incorporate romance, song-and-dance, and other elements of the masala format. In this sense, they move beyond the generic expectations of a conventional Western horror film. (Dhusiya, 2018)

Gothic in South Asia, be it in the form of literature or visual format, always had subtle questions towards the hegemonical structure of the society. More often than not, it tried to assimilate and subvert the 'European' genre of Gothic, into the larger South Asian culture. One of the key arguments that connects the colonial history with the genre of Gothic is that Gothic has always been post-colonial (Hughes and Smith, 2003) and the word "post" complicates the popular understanding of it since Gothic has recorded the imperial tendencies

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and practices of Othering while it happened (Khair, 2014). Gothic and Postcolonialism focus on the fear of 'return of the repressed', and Hughes and Smith identify this trope in the major Gothic texts of the Victorian Era like Heathcliff and Dracula being 'alien', and their return scaring others (2014). In the contemporary era, when Gothic narratives emerge from post-colonial nations, there is the presence of something that was repressed in the past, likely during the colonial times.

Gothic and colonialism worked (and continues to work) on the basis of binaries, where one part of the binary is portrayed as an atrocious entity. The Gothic genre reflects the colonial tendencies of creating a metaphor out of the relations between the foreign and the domestic, and Sheri-Marie Harrison identifies the 'foreign' being portrayed as a source of horror that invades the domestic (Harrison, 2022). This fear becomes crucial in understanding both power structures and hegemonic interpellations, as the fear is always arbitrarily attributed rather than being inherent.

Spatiality of the Gothic and Cultural Dynamics

The family of Nakulan in *Manichitrathazhu* is an upper caste and upper class Nair family, and with the curious and unique social hierarchy of Kerala, it follows a matrilineal custom. The larger Nair community of Kerala, which includes a spectrum of subcastes that include royals to martial artists, underwent a succession pattern where women were given prominence and they

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inherited the property, as opposed to men in other communities. This matrilineal custom meant that the head of the family was the oldest member, be it male or female. The elder brother had more rights over his sisters as opposed to their husbands, since, according to matrilineal customs, the sister's children did not belong to her husband's caste or family, but rather her own. Economic and social conditions peculiar to matrilineal communities like that of Nairs, often result in an overt sense of agency for women, since they experience economic and social liberty (Pillai, 2016).

In the larger genre of Gothic, the role played by the mansion is titanic, since it spatially embodies the Gothic. However, the cultural difference in both the architecture and inheritance in South Asian cultures make it strikingly different from the European Gothic castle-like settings. While spectral characters are seen in the attic in European Gothic, the ghost of *Manichitrathazhu* is locked up in the *Thekkini,* literally meaning the Southern room. In the cultural context of India, South is a metaphor or death and anything death related as it is connected with posthumous rites, creating a new distinctively Malayali Gothic setting. In *Manichitrathazhu*, the ancestral mansion of Madampilly belongs to Nakulan's mother, and since she was not home the custodianship was given to her brother Thampi (played by Nedumudi Venu). There are references to a family dispute when Thampi says his custodianship

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to the house was transferred to his brother-in-law Unnithan due to some rumours (*Manichitrathazhu* 13:48). The power Thampi has over the whole family as the uncle is representative of a typical Nair family.

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Manichitrathazhu*.

An entirely different paradigm can be seen in the movie *Apthamitra* as it takes place in Karnataka, a state with a different language and culture. While the concepts of hindu religious exorcism and a dancer from another state are similar, the fundamental difference that happens in the movie is that it happens in a palace as opposed to a feudal manor as seen in *Manichitrathazhu*. The narrative of *Apthamitra* unfolds in the old princely kingdom of Mysore and it is known for being a dynasty. While *Manichitrathazhu* tells the story of a feudal landlord system that has its own rules owing to the matrilineal feature, *Apthamitra* delves into the royal protocols and customs that are specific to Mysore. Starting with the location itself, Apthamithra

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happens inside a palace that Ganga and Ramesh purchases, in contrast to the ancestral house in *Manichitrathazhu*.

Figure 2: Screenshot from *Apthamitra*.

In the Tamil version of the movie *Chandramukhi*, one can see a social aspect as well. The childhood of Ganga was stricken with a lot of social issues like caste-based discrimination etc. Ganga faced a lot of discrimination because of such social issues, leading to her mental rhythm being disrupted. The history of Tamil Nadu has witnessed countless resistance movements against the discriminatory natures of Caste under the leadership of various leaders including Periyar. This has caused a difference in the way the culture of Tamil nadu has evolved. In the movie, Ganga grows up during the cusp of the social revolution, and therefore embodies ideologies of the changing times. Her parents had an intercaste marriage and suffered socially for this (2:19:08). This had a profound impact on how Ganga viewed the marginalised and *Chandramukhi* being the oppressed according to the tale, struck a chord with her mind (refer

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figure 3).

Figure 3: Screenshot from *Chandramukhi*.

The Hindi version of the movie *Bhool Bhulaiyya* (2007) directed by Priyadarshan, takes place in North India, with an entirely different set of cultural codes at play. In this movie, Sidharth (equivalent of Nakulan) comes back to Varanasi as he is the titular king of a small kingdom there, with his wife Avni. In *Bhool Bhulaiyya*, Sidharth and Avni are not only moving into the old palace, but Sidharth also assumes the titular role of the King. He then becomes a modern day parallel or reiteration of the old King who killed Manjulika, the spectral character in this movie. *Bhool Bhulaiyya* has elements that were added deliberately to make it more appealing to a pan Indian audience. In the movie, Sidharth and Avni owns the palace or the Haveli contradicting *Apthamitra* where they buy the palace (but similar to *Manichitrathazhu* where they inherit the property). The plot happens in Varanasi, which is a holy city for Hindus,

especially because rituals related to death is performed in Varanasi. According to Hindu belief, if the posthumous rituals and rites are done on the Ghats of Ganga in Varanasi, Moksha or Salvation will be received (Fouberg and Moseley, 2017). In most narratives, the relation between Death and Varanasi is seen through a religious angle, but Bhool Bhulaiyya uses it to induce a Gothic aesthetic. The family can be seen performing penances and rituals to appease the spirit of Manjulika (31:15). The ritual and holy atmosphere adds on to the Gothic by utilising the Tantric and exorcism part of Hinduism.

Figure 4: Screenshot from *Bhool Bhulaiyaa*.

The axiom of all the four movies is based on an oppression a dancer had to face in the hands of a male power figure, either in the form a feudal lord or king. In medieval India, dancers belonged to various castes (mostly lower), and the predominant community that practiced it was that of Devadasi as they were not strictly a 'caste' rather a group (Srinivasan, 1985). Although they received much respect and honour in the medieval times, this changed in the

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colonial times, where their profession and community were downgraded to derogation. The legend that is told in all the four movies belong to the past in their own respective timelines, and a story of oppression from the past becomes the cause of the Gothic in them. Derrida, in his Spectres of Marx, coins the word hauntology which denotes the study of the haunting of something or an event from the past in the contemporary era (Derrida, 1994). In the movie(s), the actual space of the mansion/palace represses the memory of an oppression of a subaltern, and the return of the repressed is in the form of a spectral character. What 'haunts' is in fact the memory of a past that was rooted in a system of oppression, and the cultural memory of the past is repressed through the veil of modernity put on by Nakulan and Ganga. The room of Nagavalli /Manjulika being dilapidated, yet being frozen from a time and culture that the modern owners of the rest of house wish to overwrite is a cue that helps the viewer understand the semiotic function of the house within the narrative. The manor house therefore becomes an 'apparatus' of hauntological materialism, where the space in itself possesses the agency in retelling the story of a past that is being repressed (Crockett, 2017).

Language of the Spectre

Spectral characters portrayed in most fiction tend to be from the past, and the authors /auteurs often make those characters speak in an archaic way, to let the readers/audience feel the temporal gap. Perhaps the most interesting feature these four movies uses in common to

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build the spectral character is them having speak another language, which both the audience and the other characters in the movie can identify as belonging to another state. The details of this is given in Table 1. The key aspect here is while the ghost character of *Manichitrathazhu*, *Apthamitra* and *Chandramukhi* speaks entirely in a different language, Manjulika of Bhool Bhulaiyaa mixes both Bangla and Hindi alternatively. Since the target audience of the Bollywood movie is pan Indian, not many will be able to understand Bangla, which may create an issue in conveying the message. Instead of giving subtitles, the director and scriptwriter have chosen to make the character of Manjulika to codeswitch between Bangla and Hindi, as an attempt to make it understandable and appealing to a wider audience.

The second language spoken in all the four movies are languages spoken in neighbouring states/ regions. The people in the narrative have learned to accept English (when the psychiatrist and Nakulan speaks it), but are terrorised after listening to the dancer's language (2:07:10). This is reinforced in the final scene when Ganga is asked who she is during the hypnotising state, she replies "I am Ganga, Ganga Nakulan" (2:23:45). The same character of Ganga becomes 'possessed' when she speaks in Tamil, but is considered normal and sophisticated to an extent when she speaks English, revealing how colonial rule has influenced the way we Indian see English and other Indian languages. This feature is repeated in the adaptations of the movie as

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well.

Sl. No	Movie	Primary Location	Ghost's place of origin	Primary Language	Language spoken by Ghost (Nagavalli)
1.	Manichithrathazhu	Kerala	Tanjore	Malayalam	Tamil
2.	Apthamithra	Mysore	Andhra Pradesh/ Telangana	Kannada	Telugu
3.	Chandramukhi	Tamil Nadu	Andhra Pradesh/ Telangana	Tamil	Telugu
4.	Bhool Bhulaiyya	Varanasi	Bengal	Hindi	Bangla/Hindi

Table 1: Linguistic differences among the movies.

One other interesting scene that happens in all the movies is when the psychiatrist confronts the ghost behind the closed door and converses with it. In hauntology, the spectre is always a manifestation of something that was repressed and it now haunts the psyche of the community in general (Derrida, 1994). In the narrative, the ghost of Nagavalli represents victims of various types of marginalization- based on caste, gender and even profession. But what strikes the audience the most is when Nagavalli and/or *Chandramukhi* speaks in their

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native tongue, the psychiatrist speaks back in their language, hinting at a rudimentary form of dialogue exchange where both are equal and most importantly, *heard*. Conversing with the spectre is not a unique feature as one can point at countless examples from Hamlet to Dracula, but conversing with a ghost in their language is not only literal in this context, but rather metaphoric for engaging with the past and not fearing/ or pushing it into oblivion. The only exception for this is the scene in Bhool Bhulaiyaa where both Manjulika and Dr. Aditya speaking in Hindi. This, as mentioned above can be viewed as the result of two different reasons- one being the director's choice to cater to a wider audience or the fact that most Bangla speakers can speak Hindi with ease.

Language being used as a tool for setting the Gothic tone have been used in other movies and literature as well. In Dracula, the readers are first introduced to the Romanian Count, who fluently speaks English, and other languages. While this initially puts the other characters in the narrative at ease, it slowly brings tension as they realise what the Count is, and his plans to move to London. Stephen Arata understands this in context of the larger colonial and imperial mindset, and states the Dracula enacts a narrative of reverse colonisation (Arata, 1990). If one is to look at the language used in Manichitrathazhu, Bhool Bhulaiyaa and *Apthamitra* through a similar methodological framework, it can be definitely concluded that the spectral characters

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in them, like Dracula, embodies elements of the fear of the dominant hegemonical culture and communities, and uses their language to contest them.

Spectrality and Colonial Influences

Ghosts, Yakshis and paranormal beings are a staple to Indian folklore- be it malayali or any other state (thereby any other Indian language and/or culture). In *Manichitrathazhu*, the ghost of Nagavalli is said to be that of a yakshi, famous for their diet of human blood and nightly travels. One can trace back the inception of Yakshi in both Hinduism and Jainism. In Kerala however, Yakshis are treated as a fiery spirit in Kerala, who could be appeased and revered along with the other Gods.

Viewers are first introduced to the ghost of Nagavalli as creating problems like breaking glass and scaring the housemaid, but nobody ever really sees who Nagavalli is up close. There are instances where the family members see the ghost partially, owing to the legend that the ghost is locked up in the *thekkini* (southern room) and she dances and sings from there.

One important factor that needs to be studied at this juncture of the narrative is how the spectrality of Nagavalli is constructed. A Tamil dancer who was brought from Tanjore to the mansion by the karanavar (head of the house), Nagavalli already is the 'Other' in the legend in comparison to the Malayali family. Her linguistic and occupational difference made Nagavalli stand apart from the rest of the crowd in both generations. In a way, the artistic background of

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dance and music, along with the language she speaks have been used as a tool to Other her in both generations. Dhusiya in his study on the movie identifies Ganga similar to Nagavalli, due to the fact that Ganga herself is the Other in Nakulan's family, having had an upbringing away from her roots in Kerala (Dhusiya, 2014). Additionally, the Yakshis of Malayalam folklore are all quintessentially Malayali, and yet here we can see the people attributing the 'title' or spectral persona of a Yakshi to Nagavalli who is culturally and linguistically a non-Malayali. This sense of blending the familiar with the unfamiliar builds the Gothic aesthetic within the movie. Historically, Ghosts were seen as the 'Other' not just for corporeal reasons, but also religious as well. Spectral beings transcended the human condition, but they never really reach/ attain what was promised after death. Depending upon faith this may be salvation or rebirth, heaven or hell. Ghosts thus occupy a space that can be identified as liminal in the cultural space across locations. This feature of Othering the spectral stems from various social and cultural reasons, but all generally points toward the idea of 'fearing' something that is alien to themselves. As Smith and Hughes rightly point out:

> One of the defining ambivalences of the Gothic is that its labelling of otherness is often employed in the service of supporting, rather than questioning the status quo. This is perhaps the central complexity of the form because it debates the existence of otherness and alterity, often in order to demonize such otherness. (Smith and Hughes, 2003)

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This statement divulges the imperial approach of using Gothic as a method and metaphor for accentuating fear of the Other- cultures, nations and even languages, and more often than not spectral characters in European literature became more than symbol for the collective fears and prejudices they held.

Nagavalli/ Chandramukhi/ Manjulika is the quintessential 'mad woman in the attic' characters of the movie hinting at the Gothic framework and yet the script asserts a unique Indian retelling of this trope, by making it the dancer in the attic. The Ghost of Nagavalli is given a convincing backstory, which denotes oppression in the name of gender and the then prevailing feudal system. In the movie, Nagavalli, is a dancer who is brought to the Madampilly manor by the old Karanavar from Tanjore. When he knows about her romantic liaison with a fellow dancer Ramanathan, he murders her. The character of Bhasura, recounts the story and tells Ganga that Nagavalli became a 'Yakshi' and attempted to kill the old Karanavar, who eventually committed suicide by drinking poison. Here one can identify the phenomenon of ascription, where people associate the known folklore of Yakshi with an uncanny event they are unaware of. Characters of the movie, including the aunt and the psychiatrist all refer to the events of the manor as the result of the actions of the 'yakshi', whereas, as seen in the movie, Nagavalli is a real person who was murdered. When the uncanny events are vernacularised through the ascription of Yakshi identity to Nagavalli, the narrative is culturally framed.

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However, when one delves deeper into the identity of Nagavalli as a dancer and female who faced injustice, it becomes a trope that reimagines Gothic, freeing it from the stock representation of supernatural characters. In the movie, the history and the events that happened in the past is essentially spectralised, hinting at how the colonial past has been haunting.

The predominant binary in these movies is the dialogue between western science and Eastern (Indian) beliefs. Dr. Sunny and his counterparts in the other language adaptations, are all representations of the western science through their psychiatry background. In the context of postcolonial Gothic, these western educated doctors become metaphors for the European ideals of rationality as they 'intervene' in a problem that happens in a location/culture distinct from their own. The local culture and beliefs therefore become the savage and monstrous (almost literally) and therefore needs the help of western rationale. But the movie skilfully builds up to this expectation and negates this towards the end when the psychiatrist says he'll have to go beyond the conventional concepts of psychiatry (*Manichitrathazhu* 2: 03: 40). In a dramatic and perhaps unscientific way, he combines both psychiatry and tantric exorcism rituals to treat Ganga/ Avni. One can argue that this is reflective of Homi. K. Bhabha's idea of hybridity, where Indians accept western rationale of empiricism, without letting go of the cultural and religious practices that makes a significant part of their identity.

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The spectrality of Nagavalli as manifested in Ganga, as discussed above can be looked through various vantage points, but the most obvious one is shown in the movie itself- of that of her (Ganga's) past. Depending on each variation of the movie, Ganga/ Avni grew up in a troubled atmosphere, lacking parental figures except of that of her grandmother, and undergoes events that scars her psyche. While the creators of the original movie and the adaptations do not divulge the details of the events and whether they caused clinical 'trauma', it becomes the premise of how Ganga/Avni's psychological issues are manifested for the first time. Even during her life in the mansion/palace, the episodes of her psychological illness that are perceived to be hauntings are actually the return of her repressed illness and de facto, her memories of a troubled childhood. The old legend of a dancer who was oppressed ignites the imagination of Ganga/Avni and she loses sight of the reality (*Manichitrathazhu* 1: 58: 24), thereby blurring the boundaries between the imagined and the real. Sigmund Freud's concept of uncanny rightly points out this tendency, where the uncanny effect may blur the distinction between the imagination and the reality (Silver, 2007).

Conclusion

Ghosts and gothic are a genre that have been used and is still used by authors and auteurs across the world to not only look into one's psyche of fear but also into how the society functions on collective fears. It becomes both a tool and aesthetic to assert individual, collective

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and regional identity, especially in the context of postcolonial nations. The wider audience range and visual prowess it embodies makes movies a preferred choice of disseminating Gothic in the contemporary era. In the South Asian landscape, Gothic takes on another form as the culture in itself has its own indigenous ethos of viewing the spectral, and auteurs blends it with the larger European framework of Gothic. This deliberate action, becomes an act of asserting identity and subversion of the European Gothic aesthetic.

Like all gothic novels, the immediate space where the story unfold, holds much importance in building the overall gothic tone even in movies. In the popular European Gothic, castles and abbeys played this role. But when one locates a gothic narrative within Indian perspective, it adapts according its respective locations' culture and ecology. Castles and abbeys are adapted into feudal mansions and palaces of small princely states in the movies chosen, and the culture that surrounds it is distinctively belonging to that particular region. In the global perspective India may be a homogenous culture, but up close it is diverse and contains multitudes of belief systems. Even when one takes one story and adapts it into various other languages within India, the delivered result is entirely different to each other. This cultural heterogeneity is partly due to the varied linguistic, social, and geographical differences each region has within India. It is also because of the different types of colonial rule India was under

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including British, Portuguese and even Dutch. This assimilation, or rather adaptation not only reveals the dynamic nature of Gothic as a genre, but also the conscious attempts of the auteurs in creating an alternate gothic that is Indian in its context and utilises the cultural codes found within the nation. These cultural codes are reliant on the folklore of India, varied cultural differences found within India and above all, the linguistic variety of the nation as well.

Language plays a major role in creating the Gothic ambience, according to the movies that have been studied closely. In all the four movies, the ghost or possessed person speaks another language that shows the existence of the ghost as a real human (or rather posthuman) entity. One's own mother tongue gives its speaker a sense of comfort (Baker, 2011). The fear in these movies develop when the rest of the characters sense an entity speaking a different language is living among them and 'performs' its existence (even though through creating havoc). This fear of a distinct language is colonial at its root, as Indian culture was always multilingual, where the society spoke different languages based on their caste, class hierarchy and because of the cultural exchanges in the past. Derrida's concept of hauntology comes to play here, as the fear of another language (and de facto the speaker of the foreign language) was repressed after the colonial era in India but it manifests as a collects fear in the movie. As Sharma asserts, "All themes, as the Gothic ones, are impersonal" (Sharma, 1957). The impersonal nature of Indian Gothic, brings forth the collective nature of Indian society in the

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way one experiences fear and horror. The movies prove to be vital in understanding the larger Gothic imagination and its contemporaneity in the global south, where there is a constant friction between the modern rational thinking (often influenced by the colonial past) and tradition. Manichitrathazhu and its adaptations offer an 'alternate gothic' that utilizes local myths, legends and folktales that are uniquely South Asian, and blends them with the larger European framework of Gothic to bring light to the other forms of Gothic that exist in the world, thereby decentering it from its Euorcentric origins.

This study focuses on analyzing *Manichitrathazhu* and its adaptations in Tamil (*Chandramukhi*), Kannada (*Apthamitra*), and Hindi (Bhool Bhulaiyaa). Although there are other adaptations, like the Bengali film Rajmohol, they are not included in this analysis and could serve as interesting topics for future research. Furthermore, this study does not delve into the influence of Indian classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi, or the incorporation of classical music, both of which play a crucial role in creating a uniquely Indian Gothic aesthetic in these films. Future research could investigate how these artistic traditions enhance the spectral and psychological aspects of the narratives, reinforcing cultural identity while engaging with Gothic themes of haunting, possession, and historical trauma. A more extensive comparative study that includes these elements would enrich our understanding of

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how Indian adaptations of the Gothic interact with local traditions and global influences, ultimately crafting a distinctive cinematic language for the genre.

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