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Spaces of Death and Structures of Power: A Necropolitical Reading of Hariharan's Malayalam Film *Aranyakam*

Dr. Athira Prakash

Associate Professor Department of English, NSS Hindu College Changanacherry, Mahatma Gandhi University. India
Email: *athiraprakashmadappattu[at]gmail.com*

Abstract: ***Hariharan's 1988 classic Malayalam film Aranyakam, written by the legendary auteur M. T. Vasudevan Nair, is frequently canonised for its lyrical eco-aesthetics, its evocative musical score, and the whimsical, adolescent romanticism of its protagonist. However, beneath its pastoral and pastoralist veneer lies a devastating critique of neo-feudal landownership and state-sponsored violence in pre-Emergency Kerala. This paper analyzes Aranyakam through the theoretical lens of Achille Mbembe's framework of necropolitics—an extension of Michel Foucault's biopolitics that explores how sovereign power manifests primarily as the capacity to dictate who matters, who is disposable, and who is allowed to die. By interrogating the intersections of feudal authority, state mechanisms, and Naxalite insurgency, this paper argues that Aranyakam subverts traditional eco-romantic narratives. It exposes the wilderness of Wayanad not as a pristine paradise, but as a heavily regulated "death-world" where subaltern Adivasi bodies and radical political dissidents are systematically stripped of political status and reduced to expendable, biological matter.***

Keywords: Biopolitics, Necro politics, Power, State Violence, Bare life

1. Introduction

The late 1960s and 1970s in Kerala were marked by profound socio-political volatility, characterized by the fractured emergence of radical Marxist-Leninist (Naxalite) insurgencies against an enduring agrarian feudal hierarchy. While historical archives and political memoirs often capture this era through ideological rhetoric, cinema provides an alternative visual register to examine the bodily and psychological costs of this conflict. Released in 1988, Hariharan's Aranyakam (The Labyrinth of the Forest), written by M. T. Vasudevan Nair, stands as a premier cultural artifact of this period.

The film follows Ammini, an imaginative, motherless adolescent girl who is treated as a social burden and relegated to the periphery of her tyrannical uncle's neo-feudal estate in the high ranges of Wayanad. Seeking solace from domestic alienation, Ammini escapes into the surrounding wilderness, establishing an eco-romantic relationship with the forest. However, her romantic sanctuary is violently punctured when she encounters Devan, an underground Naxalite revolutionary hiding in the deep canopy, and Mohan, an urban youth whose arrival triggers an unpredictable matrix of love, state surveillance, and bloodshed.

While existing scholarship frequently evaluates Aranyakam as a coming-of-age narrative or an ecological critique of environmental degradation, such readings run the risk of romanticizing the very space where historical atrocities occurred. To bypass this limitation, this paper utilizes Achille Mbembe's theoretical framework of necropolitics. Mbembe expands upon Michel Foucault's concept of biopower- the modern state's technology of "making live and letting die"- by arguing that under conditions of colonial, plantation, or neo-feudal capitalism, sovereignty is fundamentally expressed as the right to kill and the power to manufacture "death-worlds."

This paper argues that Aranyakam subverts the traditional romantic tropes of Malayalam cinema by framing the forest as a multi-layered death-world. Through a close textual and visual analysis, it demonstrates how the lives of indigenous Adivasis and political dissidents are subjected to the parallel necropolitical calculations of neo-feudal landlords (jenmis) and the post-colonial state, culminating in a tragic economy of disposability where non-aligned bodies become unavoidable collateral damage.

2. Theoretical Foundations

From Biopolitics to Necropolitics

To comprehend the structural violence embedded within Aranyakam, one must trace the shift from Foucauldian biopolitics to Mbembean necropolitics. In The History of Sexuality, Volume 1, Michel Foucault outlines the emergence of modern biopower, wherein the sovereign moves away from the archaic right to take life and instead focuses on the regulation, optimization, and administration of biological life:

"One might say that the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death." (Foucault 138). However, post-colonial theorists have argued that Foucault's biopolitical paradigm assumes a normalized, highly organized Western democratic welfare state that seeks to preserve its population. In post-colonial geographies characterized by structural inequality, deep-seated caste hierarchies, and insurgencies, state and parastatal power operates not through the gentle administration of life, but through the violent management of death.

Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe addresses this analytical gap by introducing necropolitics. In his seminal essay "Necropolitics". Mbembe asserts that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must

die" (Mbembe 11). For Mbembe, sovereignty is not about creating a healthy population; it is about the structural demarcation of human beings along lines of expendability. He introduces the concept of the "death-world," which refers to:"...new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions conferring upon them the status of living dead." (Mbembe 40).

Crucial to this formulation is Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's concept of homo sacer or "bare life"- a state of human existence stripped of all political and legal rights, wherein an individual can be killed by anyone without the act constituting a homicide or a sacrifice (Agamben 8). As systemic structures categorize populations into hierarchies of human value, subaltern and marginalized bodies are reduced to bare life, transforming their residential and natural environments into operational death-worlds. Aranyakam maps these theoretical dynamics onto the screen, illustrating how the post-colonial state and agrarian capitalism collaborate to enforce a deadly sovereign order.

Feudal Necropolitics and the Adivasi as "Bare Life"

In Aranyakam, the primary manifestation of localized, non-state sovereignty is represented by Ammini's uncle, Jagannatha Varma, a wealthy, upper-caste estate owner. Varma's estate is not merely a site of economic production; it functions as a micro-sovereign space where the rule of law is dictated entirely by feudal whim. Varma controls the territorial geography of the forest fringe, and through this spatial control, he exercises complete dominion over the native Adivasi (indigenous tribal) labourers who work his land.

The film visually and narratively positions the Adivasis as inhabitants of a profound death-world. They are portrayed as malnourished, silent, and physically exhausted figures fading into the background of the frame. In one telling sequence, an elderly tribal laborer is brutally chastised for failing to meet production quotas, despite his obvious physical frailty. Within Varma's sovereign gaze, the Adivasis are denied political subjectivity (bios); they are reduced to mere biological instruments of labour (zoe).

This dynamic perfectly mirrors Mbembe's description of plantation and slave logic, where a human being becomes a "biological tool" whose life is tolerated only as long as its physical energy can be extracted for economic profit. The Adivasis in Aranyakam exist in a state of permanent precarity; their bodies are pathologized by poverty, and their deaths from starvation, exhaustion, or physical discipline do not trigger legal investigations or moral outcries from the state apparatus.

By keeping wages below subsistence levels and controlling access to food and medicine, the feudal landlord exercises a form of passive execution- "letting die" through intentional deprivation. The structural violence of the estate establishes that under neo-feudal capitalism, the subaltern body is inherently disposable, providing the direct economic and ethical catalyst for the radical Naxalite movement that brews in the deep forest.

The Naxalite Uprising: Armed Counter-Necropolitics

The character of Devan, the enigmatic Naxalite revolutionary hiding in the dense Wayanad jungle, represents an armed attempt to break the feudal monopoly on death. Devan's ideology is rooted in the early Naxalite doctrine of the "annihilation of class enemies"- a strategy that sought to liberate the peasantry by physically executing oppressive landlords. From a theoretical perspective, Devan's radical insurgency can be understood as an act of counter-necropolitics. Mbembe notes that subaltern populations trapped within death-worlds often resort to adopting the sovereign's own violent grammar to reclaim their humanity. For the Naxalite, freedom is achieved not through legal reform, but through the sovereign act of killing the oppressor. Devan views the forest not through Ammini's lens of eco-romantic innocence, but as a zone of exception- a tactical, unmapped space where state law is suspended, allowing the revolutionary to exercise alternative sovereign violence. However, Aranyakam offers a critical, de-romanticized perspective on this counter-violence. While Devan is driven by a genuine, empathetic rage against the exploitation of the Adivasis, his adoption of the grammar of death ultimately binds him to the same necropolitical framework he seeks to destroy. The film illustrates how the revolutionary movement, in its single-minded pursuit of ideological warfare, begins to view individuals through the binary lens of allies or enemies, thereby reproducing its own logic of expendability. The deep forest loses its status as an ecological refuge and transforms into a militarized zone where human life is structurally cheapened by both sides of the conflict.

Tragedy, State Violence, and the Economy of Disposability

The narrative climax of Aranyakam exposes the horrific asymmetry of necropolitical warfare through a profound existential tragedy. Devan and his comrades plan an ambush to assassinate Jagannatha Varma, aiming to execute the ultimate symbol of feudal oppression. However, due to a catastrophic error in identification amidst the dark, chaotic foliage of the forest, they mistakenly shoot and kill Mohan—the innocent, gentle youth who loves Ammini and has no alignment with either the state or the landlords.

Mohan's death is a crucial thematic turning point that illustrates how the violent logic of necropolitics operates in practice. In the clash between state-backed feudal structures and radical insurgent forces, non-aligned, vulnerable bodies are swept into the vortex of violence as collateral damage. In Mbembe's framework, when a territory becomes a death-world, death escapes the control of its authors and becomes randomly distributed. Mohan is reduced to a casualty of a war he did not choose, proving that the currency of a death-world is always paid in disposable human lives.

Following this misdirected act of violence, the state unleashes its full, unchecked necropolitical might. The police force, acting as the ultimate arm of sovereign power, enters the forest to restore order. The state's intervention is not designed to distribute justice or investigate the socio-economic roots of the rebellion; its sole purpose is the physical erasure of the insurgent threat to preserve the capitalist status quo.

The film culminates in the hunting down of Devan. Rather than arresting him and subjecting him to due judicial process,

the state forces execute him in a "fake encounter"—a summary execution disguised as a firefight. Devan's corpse is left in the wilderness, emphasizing his status as homo sacer. The state exercises its ultimate sovereign "right to kill," demonstrating that anybody that challenges the established socio-political order is completely expendable and can be destroyed with absolute impunity.

Ammini's Psychical Flight: Witnessing the Death-World

To fully understand the emotional weight of this necropolitical landscape, one must look at the film's structural anchor: Ammini. Played with brilliant sensitivity, Ammini's character arc traces a tragic slide from eco-romantic innocence to profound psychological trauma. Ammini lives in a perpetual state of neglect; she is explicitly unwanted by her family, who view her gender and lack of financial inheritance as a double burden. To survive this domestic biopolitical exclusion, Ammini constructs an elaborate internal fantasy life. She writes letters to historical and imaginary figures, speaks to the trees, and seeks comfort in the wild, uncultivated areas of her uncle's property. The film's celebrated soundtrack, including the iconic song "Olithumbu" composed by Raghunath Panigrahi, scores these moments of ecological escape:

The lyrics celebrate the whispers of the wind, the rustle of leaves, and the pristine streams of Wayanad, creating a romantic illusion of a harmonious, living nature. However, as the narrative unfolds, the film systematically tears down this pastoral fantasy. Ammini's beloved forest is invaded by the realities of class war, state surveillance, and bloodshed. When she discovers Mohan's bloody corpse and later witnesses Devan being hunted like an animal by the state police, her romantic sanctuary collapses. The forest changes from a vibrant space of ecological life into a terrifying, silent crypt.

Ammini's subsequent descent into absolute psychological isolation—a silent, catatonic withdrawal from reality- is not merely an emotional breakdown; it is a somatic response to witnessing a death-world. Her "eccentricity," which was once a playful manifestation of a creative mind, hardens into a protective psychological fugue. She realizes that she is completely powerless in a world governed by the violent calculations of powerful men, landlords, and state forces. Her silence at the end of the film stands as a haunting indictment of a society that prioritizes the preservation of feudal-capitalist power over the protection of vulnerable human life.

3. Conclusion

Hariharan and M. T. Vasudevan Nair's Aranyakam remains a masterful work of Malayalam parallel cinema precisely because it refuses to allow its lush, beautiful setting to obscure its harsh political insights. By reading the film through Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, this paper has demonstrated how the film subverts traditional eco-romantic narratives to deliver a searing critique of structural violence in pre-Emergency Kerala. The film reveals that the forest of Wayanad is not an innocent space outside of history, but a deeply contested death-world. Within this space, the neo-feudal landlord operates as a localized sovereign who reduces indigenous Adivasis to bare life, while the post-colonial state utilizes absolute violence to eliminate political dissidents and maintain economic hierarchies. By mapping the tragic deaths of Mohan and Devan, and tracking the psychological destruction of Ammini, Aranyakam exposes the horrific human costs of an era where sovereign power was measured by its capacity to manufacture death. Ultimately, the film serves as an essential cinematic archive, warning its audience that when a political system treats human bodies as disposable commodities, the natural landscape itself is stained by the blood of the vulnerable, leaving behind a legacy of trauma that no amount of pastoral beauty can erase.

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