

**SPECTRAL RESISTANCE: MAPPING THE LITTLE NARRATIVES OF NEELI**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of  
the requirement for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in  
English Language and Literature*

**By**

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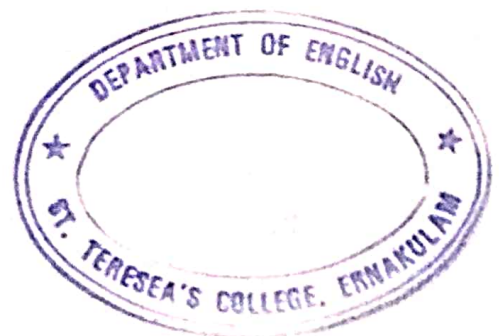
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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “Spectral Resistance: Mapping the Little Narratives of Neeli” -is a record of bona fide work done by me under the supervision of Ms.Athira Babu, Assistant Professor, Department of English and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, or any other similar title of recognition.



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## CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Spectral Resistance: Mapping the Little Narratives of Neeli," is a record of bona fide work carried out By Mary Swapna Antony under my supervision and guidance.



Ms. Athira Babu

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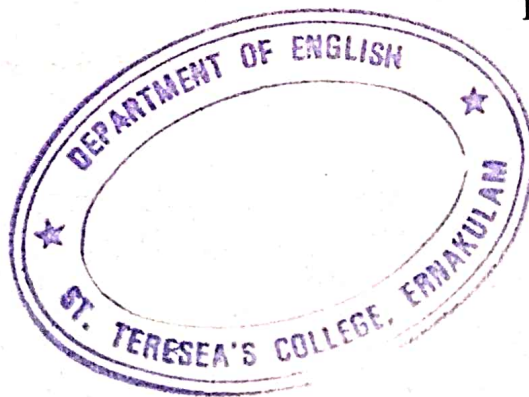
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## CONTENTS

List of Figures	i
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Postmodern Little Narratives of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization: A Theoretical Framework	5
Chapter 2 From Ghost to Goddess: Tracing the Little Narratives of Neeli	11
Chapter 3 Little Narratives of Neeli: Resistance of the Specter	26
Conclusion	36
Works Consulted	39

## List of Figures

Fig.1 Picture of Neel. <i>Kalliyankaattu Neeli</i> (00:02:25)	14
Fig.2 Picture of Neeli's husband. <i>Kalliyankaattu Neeli</i> (00:24:14)	15
Fig. 3 Family of Neeli. <i>Kalliyankaattu Neeli</i> (00:19:02)	17
Fig. 4. Neeli trying to scare of Kathanar. <i>Kalliyankaattu Neeli</i> (00:17:04)	17
Fig. 5. Neeli as femme fatale. <i>Kalliyankaattu Neeli</i> (00:13:27)	18
Fig.6 Illustration of Nambi and Alli. <i>Kalliyankaattu Neeli</i> (21), 20 July.2018	18
Fig.7 Neeli and Neelan flying out through window. <i>Kalliyankaattu Neeli</i> (47), 20 July.2018	19
Fig.8 Lakshmi praying to Neeli's idol. <i>Neeli</i> (00:43:27)	20
Fig.9 Lakshmi seeing the apparition of Neeli. <i>Neeli</i> (1:02:36)	21
Fig.10 Place where Neeli is worshipped as mother goddess. 28 December. 2024	23
Fig.11 Entrance of Neeliyaarkottam . Neeliyaarkottam Temple, 28 December.2024	24
Fig.12 Sacrificial Alter. Neeliyaarkottam Temple, 28 December.2024	25
Fig.13 Neeliyaar Bagavathi Theyyam. Neeliyaarkottam Temple, 28 December.2024	25
Fig.14 Kalliyankaattu Neeli Temple in Nagercoil. <i>Grihalakshmi</i> ,13 January. 2024	31



## Introduction

In a world where grand narratives control and boast about universal truth, the Little Narratives or petits receipts bring out the rich tapestry of life by whispering the secrets of personal experience and weaving together contextualized small narratives. Little Narratives is a modernists. Grand narratives limit the possibility of change. They refuse to accept evolving narratives and ideologies clinging to outdated ones. Popularizing grand narratives is a tactic to suppress the marginalized voices that do not fit into the framework of grand narratives giving more power to the dominant ideologies. The modernist tries to assert universality but the postmodernist rejects this idea bringing forward the concept of Little Narratives. Little Narratives give importance to contextualized narratives honoring marginalized voices and multiple perspectives. The chaotic nature of life is projected through advocating fragmented tales. There is no objective truth rather, there is subjectivity in Little Narratives that vary from person to person.

Deterritorialization and reterritorialization can also be linked with the characteristics of Little Narratives. The concept of reterritorialization and deterritorialization was put forward by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who argue that deterritorialization is the process of dismantling the existing social order or political structure which will allow new connections and possibilities. Reterritorialization is one step forward from deterritorialization, where a new territory is formed by incorporating elements from the previous ideals but with a different configuration. The existing structures and ideologies are dismantled, giving way for change as in Little Narratives. These concepts emerged as a form of resistance towards the dominant ideologies and oppression.

Spectral narratives are also a form of resistance which questions power structures that rule over the marginalized. Human beings who did not have agency to resist the authorities gain

strength to do so after they become a specter. Death gives them a vent to overpower the dominant structures and narrate everything that was suppressed in their lifetime. The past haunts the present by the appearance of a specter. The unsettling presence of a specter questions the injustice that happened in the past and prevents it from happening in the future. Being a specter is a form of resistance which exists through the presence of small narratives questioning the dominant ideologies.

Neeli is a fascinating figure, embodying the fluidity and complexity of folklore traditions in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Her stories reflect the intricate tapestry of cultural beliefs, social structures, and local traditions. Neeli is interpreted diversely, from a symbol of hope and protector to a fearsome ghost or deity. This shows how folklore adapts to the needs and emotions of the communities that preserve it.

Her metamorphosis in tales, from being a high-born woman to a representative of Dalits, to a vengeful goddess, or a nurturing mother highlights the inclusive and multi-layered nature of Little Narratives. It also mirrors the evolving social and cultural perspectives of the regions she is associated with. Neeli's presence in ancient texts, oral traditions, and modern adaptations demonstrates how folklore can transcend time, reshaping itself to remain relevant.

Neeli is not confined to one role or identity or to a grand narrative. As a Yakshi, her narratives seem to bridge boundaries between protector and punisher, mortal and divine, past and present.

The stories of Neeli can be a classic example of Little Narratives that advocate the concept of reterritorialization and deterritorialization which is a form of resistance. This project aims to trace the evolution of the specter Neeli chronologically and find out how well her tales

can be placed under the framework of the postmodern Little Narrative. It analyzes how her tales destroy already established territoriality of dominant ideologies.

Some of the research questions of the study are:

How Neeli's tale evolves into a spectral narrative and becomes a site of resistance? How do the diverse tales of Neeli exemplify the concept of Little Narratives? How the concept of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization can be associated with the multiple readings of Neeli's tales? What are the reasons for the multiple versions of the tale? The methodologies employed in the research include site visits, literature reviews, film analyses, and interviews. These methods were conducted to frame and address the research questions the project seeks to explore and validate.

Chapter 1 of this project tries to elaborate the theoretical framework of postmodernism, postmodern writing and how postmodern critics advocate for Little Narratives, particularly how Jean-François Lyotard rejects the totalitarian notion of grand narratives. This chapter also tries to place Little Narratives in the framework of reterritorialization and deterritorialization. The chapter concludes by discussing spectral narratives and its importance.

Chapter 2 traces the chronological evolution of the character Neeli as depicted in literature, films, television series and oral narratives. Chapter 3 analyzes the tales of Neeli through comparing the versions under theoretical frame works of Little Narratives, deterritorialization and reterritorialization. It also establishes the tales as spectral narratives of resistance.

## Chapter -1

### Postmodern Little Narratives of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization:

#### A Theoretical Framework

Jean-Francis Lyotard states that “Postmodern as incredulity towards metanarratives” (22). Postmodernism is a transformative movement which began somewhere in the middle to late part of the 20th century. Gradually, it became an intellectual vehicle based on literary, artistic, architectural, and philosophical efforts at times highlighting scepticism, relativism, and an attempt at deconstructing grand narratives. It thus developed beyond any form of modernism so dominant at its inception into a new thrust for pluralism, coexistence, and an acceptance of meanings that are different. It questions the concept of objective truth and declares that reality is a social construct, varying with individual perspective and social context, and thus challenges the notions of authority and authenticity.

To understand postmodernism the historical environment of the late 20th century must be understood. A few inaugural and closing events of the 20th century are the assassination of John F Kennedy, the fatwa of famous writer Salman Rushdie also the erection and demolition of the Berlin wall. The aftermath of World War II and the Cold War delegitimized grand narratives that are central to Western thought. Globalization and technological advancements made the lines blur between old regimes, and the skepticism of such norms became high; thus, through critical questions over authority, postmodern narratives became a cultural response to rapidly changing historical landscapes.

Thus, emerged Postmodern narratives which are characterized by the rejection of meta-narratives and universal truth which encourages a pluralist cultural strategy in which multiple

interpretations are tolerated without clear boundaries between genres and styles. Temporal disorder is marked by purposefully shattering the normal linear flow of time in narratives. Other characteristics of postmodern writing are pastiche, irony and ambiguity. Postmodern writers fragment narratives to reflect modern complexity, encourage various readings, and redefine culture. In postmodern novels, chapter order is not always predetermined. All chapters, apart from the first and last one, may be rearranged in any fashion. This leaves the reader feeling more individual and subject to many different interpretations. Another typical strand running through postmodern narratives is paranoia, that is, that characters feel that they cannot rely on anything. They might be afraid of being stuck in one location, locked into a single identity, or even think that society is against them. This sense of fear and uncertainty is the mood of the Cold War period when individuals were unsure of what the future held.

Postmodern narratives also create ambiguity between the real and fictional, and it becomes difficult to determine where the narrative ends and the actual world begins. They disrupt the conception of one true reality. Postmodern narratives welcome alternative perspectives and question conventional norms. Postmodern writers enjoy deconstructing tales, toying with power structures and representation as well as tying their work into other texts. Unlike traditional writers, who dictate the meaning of their works, postmodern writers feel that the reader and the writer both contribute to creating meaning together. This makes reading an interactive process where every individual can interpret the narrative in their manner.

The most famous postmodern theorist is Jean-François Lyotard, who is known for using the term postmodernism for the first time in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In this work, he shows his objection against the grand narratives of modernism and the universalizing of a single narrative.



“In the postmodern, the grand narratives that once provided legitimacy to knowledge and authority are replaced by a multitude of small narratives that reflect the diversity and complexity of contemporary life”(24).

He brought forth an idea or a form of narrative that is different from the grand narrative which he called as “small narrative”, “petits récits”. The category of ‘little stories’ or “petits récits” enters into focus when Lyotard talks about the postmodern condition of knowledge and the disappearance of the great Big Stories or metanarratives. He proposes that in postmodern culture knowledge is dis unified with a small story telling of organization and purpose that was established previously in modernist framework. However, the latter can be considered truly pluralist like small, local stories that can be reconstructed by Lyotard.

Small narratives do not aim to tell universal truths but rather give plurality in multiple versions. Small narratives provide numerous possibilities to express meaning without referring to any accepted ideologies. They give importance to each perspective, context-specific as well as experience-specific stories. They give voice to the voiceless like the tribals and subaltern whose words are otherwise silenced in the rush of dominant narratives. Though their voice express their truths, they are considered worthless as they don’t fit into the framework of grand narratives.

Small narratives advocate for its plurality and diversity. Human experience and imagination are vast and complex. This idea does not allow the forceful imposition of universality. The variety of human experiences is honored by small narratives. No narrative is considered valid than the others. The tendency to categorize experiences is not accepted in postmodern writing.

Small narratives focus on local and the particular. Each narrative can have a personal dimension in it. Just because a writer in the mainstream writing generalized an experience does not mean that there is no scope for change. By trying to universalize narratives the local details and multiplicity of the human psyche is neglected. Focusing on the specific rather than the general celebrates cultural heritage. A community gets the chance to clear the misinterpreted picture of their culture through little narratives.

Stories change from place to place. The narrative in one place will not be accepted in another as their lived reality is different. Narratives become authentic and meaningful when aspects of historical background, socio-political setting and cultural background is common in a shared community. As long as these differences exist there cannot be a single truth or one accepted narrative.

Another important characteristic that makes small narratives different from grand narratives is the lack of hierarchy. A hierarchical division pushes the subaltern into the periphery where they have no voice and is forced to accept the dominant ideologies. Small narratives advocate for mutual respect without considering caste class or gender etc. There is a democratic view on human experience. Small narratives make sure that voices are heard equally with mutual respect.

Oral narratives are celebrated in small narratives. Storytelling is considered magical as it rejects the idea that whatever is written down is the only authentic version. Many cultures pass down their knowledge history and collective memory through oral narratives.

Small narratives appreciate the voice of the narrators. Narrators have the agency to express their selves without fear. The narrator does not have to conform to already existing

narratives. Therefore small narratives are fluid and is open to change. These narratives are continuously evolving incorporating changes in its process. Small narratives are powerful and is a site of resistance against the dominant narratives.

A very similar idea with Small narratives is the concept of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization put forward by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari who argue that deterritorialization is the process of dismantling the existing social order or political structure which will allow new connections and possibilities. Reterritorialization is one step forward from deterritorialization, where a new territory is formed by incorporating elements from the previous ideals but with a different configuration. The existing structures and ideologies are dismantled, giving way for change as in Little Narratives. These concepts emerged as a form of resistance towards the dominant ideologies and oppression.

Deterritorialization refers to the process of breaking down or disrupting existing social, cultural, or political structures, essentially "de-territorializing" a previously established order, allowing for new connections and possibilities to emerge whereas, reterritorialization is the process of establishing new structures and power dynamics, creating a new "territory" that may incorporate elements from the previous one but with a different configuration.

Spectral narratives are also a form of resistance which questions power structures that rule over the marginalized. Ghostly figures often serve as metaphors of return, the return of repressed history, which continues to haunt the present. Sometimes they mark a present absence of marginalized groups of people. Human beings who did not have agency to resist the authorities gain strength to do so after they become a specter. Death gives them a vent to overpower the dominant structures and narrate everything that was suppressed in their lifetime. The past haunts the present by the appearance of a specter. The unsettling presence of a specter

questions the injustice that happened in the past and prevents it from happening in the future. Being a specter is a form of resistance which exists through the presence of small narratives questioning the dominant ideologies.

Ghosts have the power to help people see the world in new ways and to influence how we think about right and wrong. They act as messengers or bridges between different ideas. Even though it's unclear exactly how ghosts can change society, exploring ghost stories in postcolonial literature can help us better understand and challenge unfair rules and oppression.

## Chapter 2

### From Ghost to Goddess: Tracing the Little Narratives of Neeli

The tale of Neeli is a prominent *Yakshi Kadha* or story of a female spirit which is part of the Kerala folklore passed down through generations. The tales have evolved and stands as the best example of the postmodern little narratives which involves deterritorialisation and reterritorialization. Kerala and Tamil Nadu is famous for folklores on female spirits known as *yakshi* or *rektharekshas*. One such famous figure in the folktales and legends is the tale of Neeli. She is often depicted as a malevolent and vengeful spirit who kills people, especially men, mostly *Namboodiri*'s or men from the upper class. There are various stories prevalent about the reason for her vengeance or her being a ghostly figure. The most common one is that she was wronged by her husband or lover, with whom she was blindly in love with and was murdered by him for capturing her possessions. Neeli often appears as a beautiful woman haunts the forest roads and lonely places at night. She is believed to be residing in the blackboard tree or the devil's tree. She lures men with her charm, disguising herself as a woman in distress, asking for help. Men who fall for her beauty are killed.

Neeli can be seen as a Malayali version of a *femme fatale*. *Femme fatale* is a term coined in the works of 19<sup>th</sup> century French criticism. The term *femme fatale* is broken down into two parts- *femme* meaning woman, and *fatale* which means deadly or dangerous. A *femme fatale* is a woman who uses her beauty and seductive power to manipulate men often with a hidden intention. This concept of *femme fatale* is not a new idea it is dated back in ancient works. Sirens in Greek mythology is a character who lures sailors into death with their enchanting beauty and music. Delilah in the Old Testament of Hebrew bible is a dangerous woman who tricks Solomon into trap leading to his failure, these women are the early representations of *femme fatale*.



The defining characteristics of a *femme fatale* are manipulateness she skillfully makes use of the situation to ploy her revenge like Neeli making use of the darkness of the night, lonely forest roads and *Namboodiri* men who are interested in polygamous relationships, she often appears as a woman who is afraid to travel alone which makes the *Namboodiri* men think they can molest her. The *femme fatale* women often have mysterious past with concealed motives, usually revenge to those who wronged her. In the case of Neeli her past is the untimely tragic death caused by a male and her hidden motive is to avenge this. The most powerful weapon of these characters are their physical appearance, such as long hair, beautiful eyes and well rounded figure, projecting her charm that lures men into the death trap. By considering all these characteristics Neeli can be considered as a Malayalam version of *femme fatale*..

There are multiple versions of Neeli's vengeance one among them is caste-based stories that is, its not just one man but the whole community of high castes that caused her death. This might be the reason for her agitation towards upper-class men, making her wrath indiscriminate. The tale also affirms that she will not harm women and innocent men. The story of Neeli changes from place to place and culture to culture. Some communities worship her as a powerful goddess who protects her devotees, some consider her as a wronged dalit woman and some as a vengeful ghost. There are numerous temples in Kerala and Tamil Nadu in her name where she is worshipped as a motherly figure.

One of the oldest depictions of Neeli's story can be seen in C.V. Ramanpilla's work *Marthandavarma*. The novel weaves in references to the Indian subcontinent as well as Western history, culture, and literary traditions. In the novel, many ghostly figures appear, but the most significant one is Panchavankaattu Neeli. The story of Neeli in Marthandavarma is as follows;

“There was a beautiful woman who lived near Nagercoil. She was young and had some wealth with her. There was no man to help her. A man from the Pattar community came along and offered her help. Soon, they fell in love, and she bore his fruit in her womb. Pattar insisted that the delivery should happen in Pathmanapuram. The woman followed his instructions and set off for the journey. On a Friday afternoon, they reached a place called Panchavankaadu, they rested there for a while... she dozed off in his lap ... he hammered her head with a large stone she woke up with excruciating pain he beat her again with the stone and left with all her possessions without turning back” (157).

Here, the culprit is a Brahmin who was more interested in gold and the female body . He did not consider the fact that she was pregnant, the result of the brutal murder led to the creation of a vengeful spirit and who was named Panchavankaattu Neeli, as she was murdered in the place Panchavankaatu.

A notable version of the tale of Neeli is the Malayalam movie *Kalliyankattu Neeli* (1974), written by Jagathy N.K. Achary and directed by M. Krishnan Nair. The movie has its setting in a village in n Kerala. Neeli in the movie is initially called Neelamma, who is from an affluent family, who lives with her mother. She was murdered by her greedy husband. She was blindly in love with him, but her love was in vain. She was murdered while she was travelling with her husband to visit a temple. She was 7 months pregnant and on the way to the temple the couple stopped at *Kalliyankaadu* to take rest. Her husband killed her by hitting her with a huge stone while she was asleep. There was no one around other than the cactus plants. The cactus plants are known as *Kalli chedi* in Malayalam. She says her final word, “dear cactus you are the only witness of my tragic untimely death” (*Kalliyankaattu Neeli* 00:22:01). Later she was known as *Kalliyenkaattu Neeli*. No human soul dared to travel through *Kalliyankaattu* at night and even

during the daytime as the place was haunted by Neeli. The *Namboodiri* men who travelled through *Kalliyankaatu* never crossed the paths alive. She fulfilled her vengeance after murdering her husband at the very same place where he killed her. She was not satisfied by killing him; she continued to kill upper-class men who wooed beautiful women. Finally, she was exorcised by Sooryakaladi, who suppressed her soul. Centuries after this incident, she comes back with extreme power.



Fig. 1 Picture of Neeli from *Kalliyankaatu Neeli* (00:02:25)



Fig. 2 Picture of Neeli's husband who is going to drop a stone on Neeli (00:24:14)

The next tale that came out was Chirakkal Balakrishnan Nair's *Kerala Bhasha Ganangal* which came out in 1979. This verse piece talks about Neeli who appears in *Thottam* songs.

*Thottam* songs are ritualistic songs that are sung by people who dress up as deities in *Theyyam* performances. *Theyyam* is the only performance in which the upper caste bows down to the lower caste. In this version of the story, *Kunju Neeli* appears as the daughter of a *Kunjikkali* and *Chaathan*. *Kunju Neeli* is an innocent dalit girl, but she falls prey to the ego of the upper class. She was falsely accused of her chastity. The custom is that the lords belonging to four different feudal families must assemble in the holy grove and watch the fallen women being sacrificed in front of the deity. The father of the accused have to behead the woman;

“Four lords from four feudal families

Will assemble at the holy grove

I am told to bring Neeli there

Tomorrow at 10.30am

And kill her at the stone alter

To sacrifice Neeli for god

I am to cut my Neeli to pieces” ( Nair 31).

With a heavy heart, Chathan took Neeli to the grove and asked her to take a bath and wear new clothes. The most innocent young girl *Neeli* stands near the altar like a “helpless deer” (Nair 32). But when *Chathan* strikes the head she miraculously turns into a stone statue and her voice is heard from heaven.

The actual reason for her popularity was through a supernatural drama television series *Kadamattathu Kathanar* which came out in 2004. The serial was running in Asianet with huge viewership. The series is based on the legendary priest who is well known for his supernatural

power to do tricks and subdue any ghost. Neeli appears as a ghost who continuously disturbs the people in *Vamanam tharavaadu*. The family initially seeks the help of Mapaadan *Namboodiri*, though he tries to capture her soul in an idol she tricks him and escapes from him and continues to haunt the *tharavaadu*. It is then Kadamattathu Kathanar comes to their rescue, the priest subdues the spirit by inserting a nail in her head. Neeli narrates her tragic life story to the priest. She was the daughter of pot makers in Kilipadi village. One day she meets a man from the *Vamanam tharavaadu*, they both fall in love with each other and gets married. But the elders in the *tharavadu* was against this marriage. They kill her husband, stabs her and her parents and also sets fire to their hut. Pregnant Neeli was burned alive. This is the reason for her wrath towards the people in *tharavadu*. From then on Neeli started haunting the *tharavadu*. She starts killing the people in the house one by one not even sparing the pregnant women in the family. The villagers were so scared to come out of the house at night. She possesses women in the family and murders others in disguise. Kathanaar initially felt pity for her and gave her a second chance to live in the world but she again changed into a vampire and finally Kathanar transforms her into an idol of worship in the sacred grove.



Fig. 3 Family of Neeli. *Kalliyankaatu Neeli* (00:19:02)





Fig. 4. Neeli trying to scare of Kathanar. *Kalliyankaatu Neeli* (00:17:04)



Fig. 5. Neeli as femme fatale. *Kalliyankaatu Neeli* (00:13:27)

In the latest version of the tale written by Vinod Narayanan in 2018, named *Kalliyankaatu Neeli* the character's name is Alli, and she is the daughter of a (*devadasi*). Alli was a very beautiful woman being a strong devotee who visits the temple every day, she falls in love with the temple priest Nambi, depicted as a charming womanizer. He had an adulterous relationship with a temple servant and it is from her that Nambi learns that Alli's wealth. Nambi

tries woo Alli and this ends up in their marriage. Nambi starts to loot her possessions but Neeli was blind in her love with him.



Fig.6 Illustration of Nambi and Alli

Nambi is beaten up and sent away to the forest by Alli's mother Karveni. Alli who was pregnant follows him to the forest. Nambi murders Alli by hitting her with a huge stone and escapes from the place..“Alli dies touching the Kallipala, making Kallipala witness her death” (Narayanan 59). Her brother Ambi comes looking for Alli, sees her dead body and commits suicide. Both the deaths happened in Kalliyankaadu making the devil's tree a witness. Alli did not get a chance to take revenge on Nambi. But she and her brother are given a second life as the children of a king. King named them “Neeli and Neelan” (Narayanan 44). These two children are monsters and they fly out through the window every night and kill animals and drink their blood, later they switched to harming humans. The King orders to find the creature behind these atrocious deeds and finds out that his own children are the culprits. King orders to take away the children to a faraway place and not to kill them. Neelan and Neeli wandered in the forest for

days looking for humans and animals to quench their thirst and hunger. Neelan's life start deteriorating.



Fig .7. Neelan and Neeli flying out through the window of the palace.

Neelan vanishes but Neeli remains in the world to kill the man who wronged her in her first life. The man who wronged her “Nambi, took a rebirth as Anand which he was completely unaware of”(Narayanan 63). When she gets a chance she kills him in the exact place she got murdered. Finally she was tamed by a catholic priest Kadamattath Kathanaar who made her into a deity.

Soon after the publication of Vinod Narayanan's *Kalliyankaatu Neeli* the next moth a movie named *Neeli* got released in August 2018. The movie is based on a mother and daughter. The mother Lakshmi comes to her ancestral village after the death of her husband along with her child. The village is known for the *Kaavu* of Neeli. The daughter goes missing while the mother and daughter was standing in front of the idol of Neeli. Neeli helps the mother to find her

daughter and kill the person who harmed the family. Here Neeli is depicted as a ghost as well as mother who protects her devotees.



Fig. 8. Lakshmi praying to Neeli's idol. *Neeli* (00:43:27)



Fig. 9 Lakshmi seeing the apparition of Neeli. *Neeli* (1:02:36)

Later in a new work of 2020 *Kalliyankaatu Neeliyude Kettitillatha Kathakal* by Adi Mithra and Akhil Das focuses on the stories around the *Kalliyankaadu* haunted by the *Yakshi*,

Neeli. There are many instances in the work where Neeli is seen as a motherly figure showing the attributes of Goddess Kali who helps the needy and punishes the wicked. There are about 10 chapters in the work which tells different tales. In the chapter titled *Kalliyirachi*,

“A man named Kunjira reaches Kalliyankadu, he was starving all he had in hand was a few grains of rice and a broken pot. He was surrounded by lot cactus plants out of hunger he decided to cook and eat it. He quickly made a fire and started cooking the cactus plants. For his surprise, the cactus plant changed into meat... he became wealthy selling the cactus meat...when he became greedy Neeli punished him” (Mithra and Das 4-6).

In chapter 9 titled *Panamkula* a nair woman who did not have hair since childhood prayed to Neeli. “Neeli appeared in front of her and tied a palmfront to her hair. Palmfront started to grow as the woman’s hair from then on” (Mithra and Das 17). In almost all the chapters she tries to punish the wicked and help the ones who are in trouble. In the last chapter of the work Neeli appears in front of the *Namboodiri* who comes to exorcise her. She says that “If you suppress my soul the thieves, burglars and anti-socials will plunder people’s wealth and dignity of women” (Mithra and Das 19). Here she is concerned about the wellbeing of the people who live around *Kalliyankaadu* assuming that it is her moral obligation to take care of them. The ghostly figure transforms into a deity.

Apart from the written accounts on Neeli, there are many oral narratives in and around the sacred groves or temples where she is adored as a goddess. In one of the temples in Kannur Mangaaattuparambu Shri Neeliyaarkottam there are two versions of the story that people from different social status believe. One popular version prevalent among the upper class is that she was a deity, the *paradevatha* of a Namboodiri *illam*. When the glory of the *illam* deteriorated, the goddess became angry as there was no one to attend to her and give her *nivedthyam*, like a

human who becomes a cannibal in extreme starvation, she turned into a ghost. She started killing the men who came to the *illakulam* or the pond. She starts to appear as a beautiful women who tries to seduce the *Namboodiri* men. Charmed by her beauty they bend their heads in front of her as she offers to apply *thaali* to their hair. One day when Kaalakatt Namboodiri a well-known exorcist who was well aware of the tricks of Neeli went to the illakulam, Neeli appears to seduce him with her charm and offers him *thaali*. He received the *thaali* from Neeli in his hands like the sacred water and bending his head in devotion drank it saying it is the elixir from the mother. Neeli was pleased with him as he addressed her as mother and agreed to follow him to the forest and remain as a deity where the cattle and tiger live together in harmony. This is the version that was popularized by the upper-class men who built the temple. The temple is still taken care of by an upper-class family.



Fig. 10 Place where Neeli is worshiped as mother. Neeliyaarkottam Temple, 28 December.2024



Fig.11 Entrance of Neeliyarkottam. Neeliyaarkottam temple.28 December 2024

The second version of the tale popular among the lower-class people is that, Neeli was a lower caste woman who went to study under an Ezhuthachan who molested and killed her. She came back as a fierce ghost to kill all the Namboodiri men who came to the illakulam as her anger was against the men of the illam. It is then that Kaalakaatu Namboodiri came to the rescue. The worship of the deity continues even now, sacrificial offerings are given to Neeliyaarkottathamma where a Brahmin does the pooja in the upper floor of the temple where she is worshipped as mother and another caste of people perform the offering in the lower floor where she is blood thirsty Kali figure. Usually, roosters are given as offering. The blood of the rooster is poured in the alter.



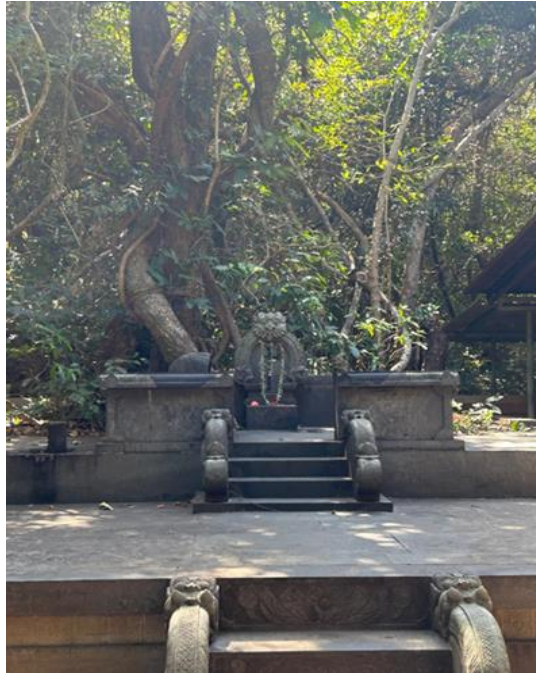


Fig.12 Sacrificial Altar. Neeliyaarkottam Temple, 28 December.2024



Fig. 12. Neeliyaar Bhagavathi Theyyam. Neeliyaarkottam Temple, 28 December.2024



One important ritual in the temple is *Neeliyar theyyam* performed on a particular day of the week. its usually the lower-class men who perform the ritualistic theyyam here it is not the lower caste but an upper caste artist who is allowed to perform the theyyam.

## Chapter 3

### Little Narratives of Neeli: Resistance of the Specter

Tales of Neeli adorn the literary sphere as spectral narratives which give voice to the silenced. The voiceless woman gains an agency through the spectral narrative and it acts as a powerful form of resistance. Neeli as a specter reclaims her power and transcends the limits imposed upon her during real life. Neeli disrupts the power dynamics through haunting the oppressors, who once held power on the marginalized. Tales of Neeli takes the frame of Little Narratives and rejects the grand narratives embracing multiplicity and fragmentation. Neeli rejects the dominant, single, linear tales or histories and exists as Lyotard's Little Narratives. Tale of Neeli is also created as a tool of resistance to protect the weaker sections of the society - the women or the Dalits. The tales were deliberately constructed to resist exploitative practices by instilling fear in potential aggressors. The tale of Neeli as a Nair woman would have been created by Nairs to protect the Nair women from Namboodiri men and also from the practice of *sambandam* [a historical practice in Kerala in which Namboodiri Brahmin men (often the elder male members of their family) entered into a relationship with Nair women]. The tale of Neeli as a Dalit girl would have been created by the Dalits to protect the Dalit women who were exploited by the upper caste. Neeli's spectral narratives dismantle rigid social orders in a process of Deterritorialization and restructure it into new structures that incorporate elements of the old but in transformative ways through the process of Reterritorialization. The journey from Deterritorialization to Reterritorialization has created multiple versions of the tale of Neeli.

The tales of Neeli have evolved through generations, resulting in multiple versions, starting with the first written account in C.V. Raman Pillai's *Marthandavarma*. In this version, Neeli is portrayed as a wealthy woman, likely from the upper caste. She was robbed of her

wealth and murdered by her Namboodiri husband, who caused a boulder to fall on her head during their journey to Pathanapuram. This incident occurred in Panchavankaadu, Nagercoil. After becoming a ghost, Neeli would kill her victims by striking them on the head with a rod. The pattern of injuries on the victims led people to recognize that Neeli was responsible for these deaths. At that time, she was known as Panchavankaadu Neeli. A mainstream written account is created by C.V Raman Pillai through depicting Neeli as a malevolent ghost haunting Panchavankaadu seeking revenge on her oppressors.

In contrast, the movie *Kalliyankaatu Neeli* shifts the setting to Kalliyankaadu, Kerala. A key difference from *Marthandavarma* is the inclusion of Neeli's mother in the narrative. In this version, Neeli is taken on a pilgrimage by her husband, but, similar to the story in *Marthandavarma*, she is killed by him. Unlike in *Marthandavarma*, where the cactus or Kallichedi is not mentioned, in this version, the cactus becomes symbolic, giving rise to the name Kalliyankaatu Neeli. This version of Neeli is more famous in Kerala than Panchavankaadu Neeli. Kalliyankaatu Neeli kills her victims by biting them with her fangs, drinking their blood, and consuming them. The movie adds a justification to the fate of Neeli by placing in a sympathetic family setting.

In *Kerala Bhasha Ganangal*, the name Kalliyankaatu Neeli is absent; instead, the character is called Kunju Neeli. In the previous versions, Neeli was depicted as a wealthy upper-class woman, either Nair or Namboodiri. However, in this version, she is portrayed as a lower-class Dalit girl. The story shifts from presenting her as an innocent victim to a powerful figure who turns into a stone statue and paves the way for the formation of Neeliyaar Bhagavathi Theyyam. There is no mention of her taking vengeance or reclaiming power; instead, she becomes a deity who protects lower-class men. She instills fear in upper-class men who exploit

and falsely accuse lower-class women. The authors associated with *Kerala Bhasha Ganangal* are Balakrishnan Nair, Chirakkal T., and Anandakuttan Nair, V. They formulate a new trajectory by dismantling the dominant narrative of Neeli as a beautiful Nair to reconstructing her as a Dalit girl. This change in caste has led to transformative change as it opened up new vistas to the tale and led to the creation of the revolutionary art form of Neeliyaar Bhagavathi Theyyam. This is an example of the process of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization.

In the popular supernatural drama series *Kadamattathu Kathanar* (2004), which was aired on Asianet, Neeli was the daughter of pot makers in Kilipadi village. She haunted the Vamanam Tharavaadu and killed her oppressors. This television drama series gained popularity and resulted in creating the mainstream account of Neeli as a ghost from the lower caste haunting the upper caste space. This also influenced many gothic tales, television series and cinematic adaptations with the same story in different settings. The plot will be the same with an enchantingly beautiful woman, with a tragic backstory of betrayal or revenge haunting in the devil's tree. The climax of the story will have an exorcist modelled on Kadamattath Kathanar or a Hindu sorcerer or priest trying to exorcise the spirit. The spectral narratives critiques societal norms around beauty and power. Beauty becomes a weapon which destroys the power structures.

Later, in Vinod Narayanan's 2018 version, the setting shifts to Nagercoil, not Panchavankaadu. Here, the character is named Alli, the daughter of a rich Devadasi. The man who deceives her is a temple priest who impregnates her, loots her property, and ultimately murders her. In the first two versions, Neeli seeks revenge during the same lifetime. However, in Narayanan's version, Neeli waits for her second life to exact revenge. Her brother, who committed suicide, and her husband also take second lives. In this version, there is no mention of Kalli chedi; instead, the story includes *Kallipaala*, the devil's tree. Nevertheless, the ghost

continues to be called Kalliyankaatu Neeli due to the name's widespread popularity. This naming trend persists in the work *Kalliyankaatu Neeliyude Kettitillatha Kathakal*. A key difference in this version is that Neeli is seen as a deity who punishes the wicked and helps the needy. It also mentions Neeli hiding the gold of wealthy Namboodiri men who fell victim to her vengeance. Many more layers are added to Neeli which questions the idea of linear narratives with single truth.

Oral narratives, however, present an entirely different story. The name Kalliyankaatu Neeli is seldom heard outside literary works and films. Locals in the same area narrate varying versions of Neeli's tale. There is no single authentic version or universal truth; as place, experience, class, and status shift, so do the tales. Thus Neeli's tales exist as Little Narratives altering or transforming its ways.

Jean-Francois Lyotard introduced the concept of Little Narratives, rejecting single-truth grand narratives in favor of emphasizing multiple versions of a tale, like the stories of Neeli. The tales of Neeli fit perfectly within this concept. The defining characteristic of Little Narratives is their continuous evolution and openness to new interpretations. By tracing the tales of Neeli from before 1891, or from the literary work of 1891 to the present day, one sees how the character's name, place, and story have changed. They may continue to change in the future, allowing for new interpretations. Oral storytelling further accelerates these changes; as tales are passed from one generation to the next, details are both omitted and added, creating new versions. Storytelling is fundamentally human, and as long as humanity exists, this act of storytelling will endure. It is crucial to provide space for these stories to coexist in a broader social structure, celebrating cultural diversity.

One key characteristic of Little Narratives is the appreciation of the narrator's voice and the celebration of the author's freedom. Little Narratives affirm the idea that personal experiences gain dignity and identity through self-expression, as different individuals or authors offer distinct versions of a story. To honor and preserve the dignity and freedom of these expressions, there must be an absence of hierarchy. Little Narratives reject the privileging of certain narratives or voices over others. For instance, in the locality of the Neeliyaarkottam temple, two versions of the story are narrated by different social classes. Both versions are equally significant. The Dalit version of Neeli's story in *Kerala Bhasha Ganangal* and the version in *Marthandavarma* are different yet equally valid, as they express the perspectives of different authors without the constraints of hegemony. Some tales gain widespread popularity not because of hierarchy but due to mass media, film, or documentaries reaching larger audiences.

Little Narratives are inherently contextualized within traditions and the environments they inhabit. For example, the story of *Neeliyaarkottathamma* is most popular in the Mangattuparambu area. In contrast, in Nagercoil, this story is unknown. People there are more familiar with the tale of Panchavankaattu Neeli. There is even a temple in Nagercoil, built on the site where Neeli was murdered, called *Neeliyamman Kovil*. Special offerings and rituals take place there every Tuesday and Friday.



Fig .14. Kalliyankaatu Neeli, Grihalakshmi,13 January. 2024

The figure above represents the temple in Nagercoil devoted to Panchavankaattu Neeli. There is a notable resemblance between the story of Neeli in *Marthandavarma*, Ezhacheri Ramachandran's poetry collection *Neeli* (2013), and the tales heard around the Neeli temple in Nagercoil. However, there is no evidence linking the Neeli of Nagercoil to the version presented in *Marthandavarma*.

*The Tales of Neeli* serve as an excellent example of postmodern narratives, particularly Little Narratives. It comes under the framework of Little Narratives, which emphasizes plurality and diversity, rejects imposed singular and universal truths, and contextualizes stories within particular or local contexts without supporting social hierarchies while granting freedom to the

authorial voice. The concept of Little Narratives can also be aligned with the ideas of deterritorialization and reterritorialization proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Deterritorialization refers to the process of dismantling existing social or political structures, thereby enabling new connections and possibilities. Reterritorialization goes a step further, forming a new structure by incorporating elements of the old but reconfiguring them differently. The concepts of Lyotard, Deleuze, and Guattari complement each other, as they all reject grand narratives or dominant structures that suppress narrative multiplicity. When analyzing the tales of Neeli, no rigid or fixed storyline emerges; the narrative changes from individual to individual and place to place. Even when mass media popularizes a particular story, it does not constrain the emergence of new storylines or interpretations. Thus, deterritorialization, which breaks down grand narratives, finds its alternative in Little Narratives.

These concepts reject the idea of a universal truth. The stories that emerge are strictly context-based; for example, in Kerala's literary texts, Neeli is portrayed as a ghost, while in certain localities in Kerala and Nagercoil, she is revered as a deity who grants the wishes of her devotees. The localized meanings of *The Tales of Neeli* reflect multiple shifting perspectives, rejecting universal truth and narrative totality in favor of multiplicity and fragmentation. This aligns with the ideas of deterritorialization and Little Narratives.

Lyotard conceptualizes postmodern identity as one of conflicting discourses. Neeli exemplifies this fluid identity. Her tales appear in different parts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where she is variously described as Nair, Namboodiri, or, in Dalit versions, a Dalit woman. The Theyyam Kolam performed by certain lower-class communities keeps her alive as Neeliyar Bagavathy, an incarnation where the upper caste bows to the lower caste. This postmodern



notion of conflicting identities resonates with Deleuze and Guattari's idea of nomadic subjects in deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

Little Narratives can also act as a resistance to grand narratives and hierarchical structures, which are often employed to legitimize power. By embracing Little Narratives, a form of resistance emerges, as seen in deterritorialization, where rigid ideological boundaries are dismantled, making way for fluid, boundary-less reterritorialization.

The politics behind *The Tales of Neeli* can be multifaceted. One possible origin of such spectral narratives lies in resistance. For example, Dalits may have created the monstrous figure of Neeli to protect Dalit women from exploitation by upper-class men who saw them as objects of desire. Without the physical strength or social voice to protect themselves, Dalits might have spread the spectral narrative to deter such actions, possibly even harming Namboodiri men who exploited them and placing the blame on Neeli. A second possibility draws from historical customs like the excommunication (Bhrashtu) of Namboodiri women accused of sexual misconduct. Such women lived in isolation until their trial (Smaartha Vichaaram), with famous cases like Kuriyedathu Savitri leading to the eventual abolition of this system. Women banished after being found guilty were not allowed to appear during the day, leading them to roam at night, perhaps inspiring the Yakshi legends that later became part of Neeli's story. A third possibility relates to the practice of *Sambandham*, where Namboodiri men could marry Nair women without long-term obligations. Nair men, often affected by this practice, might have perpetuated the story of Neeli to deter Namboodiri men from exploiting Nair women. This tale possibly kept Namboodiri men away from crossing Kalliyankaadu. Despite various theories about Neeli's origins, her transformation into a specter to narrate her story and seek revenge remains central to her narrative.

Neeli is always characterized as a specter because her mortal life was marked by powerlessness and suppressed voice, which made her a victim. A specter, meaning an apparition or illusion with extraordinary powers, represents someone who faced an untimely or unjust death. In Udayakumar's essay *The Strange Homeliness of the Night: Spectral and the Dalit Present in C. Ayyappan's Stories*, parallels to Neeli's story emerge. Specters typically focus on marginalized figures, highlighting gender or caste inequities. After death, Neeli is no longer helpless; she becomes a powerful ghost, haunting the night. Death authorizes the specter to narrate the life story that was suppressed during its lifetime. Ritualistic performances, like the Theyyattam of Neeliyar Bagavathy, remember unjust killings and give voice to victims.

The past never truly disappears, it haunts the present, as seen with the atrocities committed against Neeli continuing to resonate today. Her tales, as postmodern narratives, challenge historical clarity and resist single-truth conclusions. Postmodernism's emphasis on fragmentation, ambiguity, hyperreality, and uncertainty finds resonance in Neeli's spectral narratives. Tracing the evolution of Neeli as a character highlights postmodernism's rejection of stable reality, grand narratives, and linear history. Neeli's tale stands firm as a spectral narrative, which holds the weapon of her enchanting beauty to dismantle the dominant power structures and thereby evolving as a site of resistance.

## Conclusion

Postmodernism is a movement that began in the middle or late part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that emerged as a reaction towards modernism that gives importance to Metanarratives or Little Narratives. Little Narratives are multiple small narratives that cannot be brought under one universally accepted narrative as it is strictly context based. Little Narratives does not support hierarchy rather it tries to break the idea of fixed territories. Deterritorialization is a process of destabilizing existing social, cultural, or political structures and boundaries. Reterritorialization follows deterritorialization and refers to the act of redefining meaning or structure to create a new "territory."

By analyzing the multiple versions of the tales of Neeli it is evident that Neeli is apt to be named as a postmodern narrative. Neeli is not a character that has one single universally accepted narrative, she is the embodiment of multiple cultures. It is difficult to trace the origin of her story but one can only assume that hers is a story created by excommunicated women, or the creation of Nair men who did not get a partner as all women were victims of *Sambandam* or there is also a chance that such a spectral narrative was created to maintain the ecosystem of sacred groves. There is no evidence of her origin but multiple possibilities are tied to the context in which her stories are heard.

The variety in her appearance as mother, goddess, and ghost points to the significance of reterritorialization and deterritorialization. Tales that appeared in adjacent years have made use of already existing stories in different ways also adding the creativity of the writer. By conducting interviewing in Neeliyarkottam, it was evident that people add their personal experiences and stories they have heard in the past in to the narratives they form. Some people claim that they have received several boons from

*Neeliyaarkottathamma*. Some consider her just as a ghost. Younger generation like to believe in none of the above attributes. The family that looks after the temple and its premises boast about their privileges in the community. A person who visits the temple for the first time and has heard the tales of the ghost feels fear in their mind whereas people who worship Neeli as a goddess feel a divine presence. People inhabiting, visiting and researching on the space will have their own versions of the tale. The multiplicity of the human psyche gives rise to different narratives that might oppose each other. This results in the existence of Little Narratives which rejects the dominant power structures. Deterritorialization takes place in this space as meaning is removed from the territory creating a space for innovation challenging fixed systems. It paves way for Reterritorialization as it re-establishes the meanings, creating new structures or tales (as the tales of Neeli) which are often fluid and adaptable.

The Neeli's tales evolves into spectral narratives of resistance. One commonality in all her tales is that she is not a human but a specter. Tales of Neeli have survived from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or before till now because she is a specter and the narratives about her act as sites of resistance. The haunting presence of Neeli even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century proves that her spectral narrative is a site of resistance against the dominant ideology of universal truth . Her tales will not end in this century or the centuries that come ahead as her identity is fluid and open to multiple interpretations. They act as a resistance not just within the cultural spaces where they originated, but also within the literary domain by challenging dominant and homogenizing narratives. Her tales thrive as Little Narratives which are fragmented, evolving and deeply rooted in context. Neeli's ability to adapt, shift, and retain relevance over generations demonstrates the power of little, context-

specific narratives. It has the power to preserve diverse voices and question hegemonic structures in literature.

There are future research possibilities in this area, research can be conducted on creation of only female specters and not male specters popularized in Kerala. This research can be taken forward using gender theory questioning why only women become specters after becoming victims. Research can also be done about how women or female specters are projected as *femme fatale* using the theory of male gaze. Researchers can also trace the legacy of Neeli through the lens of cultural memory.

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