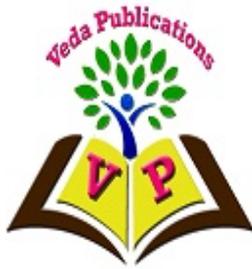RESEARCH ARTICLE

FROM VENGEFUL YAKSHI TO ANTI-CASTE AVENGER; *LOKAH CHAPTER 1: CHANDRA* AND THE SUBVERSIVE REIMAGINING OF THE FEMALE SUPERHERO

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ABSTRACT

This research paper employs a qualitative, mixed-method approach aimed to investigate both the content and commercial appeal of one of the biggest breakthrough films in the history of popular Malayalam cinema, *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*. The study deconstructs the film and discusses its narrative subversion, analysing how it transforms the indigenous Yakshi folklore into an anti-caste avenger, a female superhero story authentically rooted in the traditional folklore of Kerala. The study contrasts the film's protagonist, Chandra, with the overtly sexualized and exaggerated global female superhero tropes. It also addresses the long-debated question of the marketability of female leads by analysing the record-breaking global box office performance of the film. The study concludes that *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* serves as a significant case study, which demonstrates that complex, feminist, and socially conscious popular narratives can facilitate mainstream commercial success in contemporary Malayalam cinema. This finding validates the core hypothesis that the film's success is directly attributable to the strategic reinvention of its female protagonist.

Keywords: Fantasy Fiction, Kerala Folklore, Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra, Malayalam Cinema, Popular Culture, Superhero Trope, Vampire fiction, Yakshi Myth

INTRODUCTION

Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra, a dark fantasy fiction film directed by Dominic Arun and produced by Dulquer Salmaan under Wayfarer Films, is credited as the first female-led superhero film in Malayalam cinema. The film was released on August 28, 2025, across multiple regional markets in seven languages, including Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Kannada. This wide distribution, alongside its record-breaking worldwide gross exceeding 300 crore rupees, echoes the film's significant pan-Indian appeal and the rising nationwide interest in indigenous superhero narratives. The movie features the graceful and versatile Kalyani Priyadarshan as Chandra, a mysterious, supernaturally-powered Yakshi trying to maintain a normal existence, and Naslen, the sensational youth star of *Premalu*, as Sunny, a curious and earnest young neighbour who becomes Chandra's unsuspecting ally in the modern world. The captivating visuals are brought to life by the talented cinematographer Nimish Ravi. The screenplay, written by Dominic Arun and further developed alongside dramaturgy by actor-writer Santhy Balachandran, intriguingly blends multiple genres and social themes, forming a cohesive, pan-genre epic. The enchanting cinematic experience is further elevated by the hauntingly atmospheric background score, impressive colour grading that enhances its mythic tone, and sophisticated visual effects that seamlessly merge the dark fantasy elements with realism.

Rather than echoing the quintessential Western superhero tropes, the film builds a vibrant fantasy world that draws extensively from indigenous folklore and mythology. The film subversively reimagines the traditionally feared indigenous spirit, the Yakshi, through its female protagonist, Chandra, by portraying her as a composed and purposeful figure whose immense strength and fierce protective instinct embody the qualities of a modern superwoman. Employing a cleverly fragmented, non-linear narrative structure, the film establishes the foundational *Lokah* premise: that myths and legends are real. This is achieved by revealing the protagonist Chandra's origin story, the tale of Neeli, through a series of stylised and appealing animation sequences. These details are mostly narrated as a bedtime story by Verghese Kurien, who, under the pen name Joseph Dominic, authored the seminal book titled *They Live Among Us*. The book serves as the franchise's in-universe encyclopedia, validating the existence of these supernatural beings and providing the framework through which the supernatural universe is introduced to the audience. The narrative gradually expands beyond the Yakshi named Neeli, introducing a Chathan named Michael, an Odiyan named Charlie, and referencing a leader named Moothon, thereby setting the grand scope of the *Lokah* franchise.

The film not only strategically deconstructs historical cinematic traditions but also re-engages Indian mythology and challenges global superhero conventions. By presenting a powerful, non-Western female lead, the film exemplifies the cross-cultural viability of regionally rooted fantasy storytelling. Therefore, the worldwide release of the film undeniably marks a significant moment in the evolution of contemporary mainstream Malayalam cinema, notable for its dynamic engagement with pop culture. This research paper argues that the

film's unprecedented box office success stems not merely from its genre appeal but from its richly layered thematic construction and the bold reimagining of its female protagonist. The study aims to critically examine the production, thematic content, and reception of the film through the following objectives:

1. To trace the historical evolution of female representation in mainstream Malayalam cinema.

2. To analyse how the film subverts the indigenous yakshi folklore to construct Chandra as a female superhero.

3. To compare and contrast Chandra's character design and narrative function with global female superhero tropes.

4. To assess the commercial and cultural significance of the film's record-breaking success.

This study works under the hypothesis that the massive critical and commercial success of *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* is directly attributable to its strategic reinvention of the female protagonist. By transgressing the stereotypical cinematic and mythological tropes, the film grounds her agency in indigenous, anti-caste social justice themes. It demonstrates the viability and profitability of female-centric genre narratives in popular Malayalam cinema. This study employs a qualitative, mixed-method approach based on critical cultural analysis and historical content analysis of cinematic narratives. It explores the intersection of film, folklore, feminism, and commercial viability within the Kerala context, rooted in indigenous cultural traditions yet resonating within the broader Indian

cinematic discourse. The study draws upon two primary categories of data: (1) the film, including its narrative structure, character design, and promotional materials; and (2) a body of secondary sources comprising academic literature and journalistic reports. These include: (a) thematic analyses of gender representation in Indian and Malayalam cinema; (b) prior studies on global superhero tropes; and (c) commercial box office data and critical reviews on the film and its lead actor.

To address the research objectives, the study adopts a multi-pronged methodological framework. Historical analysis traces the evolution of female archetypes in Malayalam cinema, probing the shift from passive, patriarchal archetypes to the emergence of modern, individualistic characters associated with the post-2010 New Wave movement. This research paper also discusses the aesthetic strategies used to frame the female protagonist's indigenous identity, as the film's adaptation of the legend of Kalliyankattu Neeli is examined through a folkloric critique that presents her transformation from a vengeance-driven, sexualized spirit to an anti-caste avenger shaped by a matriarchal ethos. Comparative content analysis focuses on Chandra's character design, motivation, costume, and relationship dynamics, which are examined against established global superwoman tropes, such as hyper-sexualisation, masculine mimicry, and derivative hero status, to validate her reinvention as a distinctly Indian female superhero. Finally, an integration of box office data and cultural reception metrics will be used to assess the commercial and cultural significance of the film's record-breaking success.

THE SHIFTING GAZE FROM PASSIVE ARCHETYPES TO NEW WAVE PROTAGONISTS

In 20th-century Malayalam cinema, women were often portrayed through a patriarchal gaze, either as submissive figures or as objects of criticism, which not only reinforced stereotypes but also restricted their presence as independent characters on screen. Hence, the cinematic narratives of the time constructed and glorified the stereotypical traditional woman by portraying female characters mostly as submissive, passive, and ornamental figures whose primary purpose was to support the male protagonist's narrative or to satisfy domesticated roles. Any deviation from this hegemonic norm was often met with ridicule or punishment. Women, under colonial hegemony, were allowed only two dimensions: either as an 'angel in the house', symbolising devotion, submissiveness and chastity, or as a 'vamp', sexual freedom and a rebel, as the other woman (Mulvey 7). The entertainment industry, and in particular, cinema, didn't just mirror the socio-cultural values of the time but perpetuated them. Research shows that the concept of the binary opposition of 'good' and 'bad' women, where the 'vamp' acts as a necessary counterpoint to define the 'angel', is a classic trope of patriarchal storytelling, serving to police female behaviour (Haskell 38). The movies of this period actively conformed to the reigning cultural hegemony, sticking to narrow, patriarchal definitions of womanhood and consequently rendering such one-dimensional versions of femininity normative and fixed in the public imagination.

With the advent of the new generation film movement, characterised by a move away from the superstar system and a new focus on realistic, humane, and urban-centric characters and themes, the portrayal of women also evolved. They were gradually depicted as working, independent women who openly flirted, drank, and smoked in public, challenging the taboos of the 1980s and 1990s. Female-centric narratives, which projected female protagonists and depicted their ambition and resilience, gained prominence. This paradigm shift in Malayalam cinema can be read through the lens of feminist film theory, which critiques the traditional gaze and celebrates the creation of a female gaze or a narrative focused on women's experiences and subjectivity (Kaplan 28). As the focus shifted from quintessential archetypes of the era to more humane characters, filmmakers utilised their creative license to explore the lives and struggles of a wider range of relatable protagonists, including women, who were previously relegated to the footnotes of history. Such a paradigm shift was undeniably a necessary precondition for the thematic evolution of powerful female characters. One of the most striking recent examples is the portrayal of the lead character in *Lokah: Chapter 1: Chandra,* who embodies a cinematic resistance to patriarchal and casteist tropes, reclaiming agency and voice within a historically oppressive narrative contract.

RE-MYTHIFYING THE YAKSHI FOLKLORE AND THE RISE OF CHANDRA AS AN ANTI-CASTE AVENGER

The character of the female protagonist in *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* offers a radical, cinematic reimagination of the ancient myth of Kalliyankattu Neeli, one of the most haunting and fascinating figures in the history of Kerala's folklore. Neeli's story, as recorded in the early twentieth-century

seminal collection *Aithihyamala*, begins with a woman named Alli, the daughter of a temple dancer. Alli's life takes an unprecedented, tragic turn when she marries Nambi, a Brahmin priest who, driven by greed and the allure of her ornaments, kills her while she is pregnant. After her death, Neeli's spirit, along with that of her brother Ambi, transformed into vengeful spirits fueled by rage and betrayal. According to legend, Neeli reincarnated and once again encountered the soul of her treacherous husband. Disguised as his devoted wife, she persuaded the village elders that he was abandoning her. Trusting her plea, they confined the couple together for the night. Despite their promise of protection, Neeli unleashed her fury and tore the man apart, and satisfied her long-awaited revenge (Patnaik 5). The legend of Kalliyankattu Neeli also carried echoes of justice and feminine rage. Over time, some versions of the legend reframed her not just as a spirit of terror but as a divine protector. At sacred sites such as Neeliyar Kottam, Neeli is worshipped as a Mother Goddess, suggesting a cultural shift from fear to reverence and revealing the complex ways folklore can evolve to reflect changing values.

In the *Lokah* cinematic universe, the myth of Neeli is reimagined through a feminist and anti-caste lens to confront contemporary injustices. Chandra steps into Neeli's legacy not as a ghostly threat but as a modern protector shaped by matriarchal and anti-caste ethos; the focus therefore shifts from a vengeful yakshi to an anti-caste avenger, an immortal female superhero fighting contemporary social injustice. While the film acknowledges the folkloric backstory, its version of Neeli is a young tribal girl whose village is destroyed by the tyrannical king enforcing caste and social segregation. This new origin frames Neeli's transformation as a direct result of feudal and structural oppression, turning her into a symbol of women's struggle against power. Incarnated as Chandra, she operates as an ageless vampire in modern-day Bengaluru, battling evils such as organ trafficking. Through this reimagining, Neeli is no longer confined to the trope of the seductive temptress; instead, she emerges as a fierce protector, channelling her centuries-old rage into a powerful force for justice. The film thus transforms the traditional yakshi, a figure often subjugated by male authority as seen in narratives involving Kadamattathu Kathanar, into an agent of resistance. As a vigilante who defends the oppressed and suppressed, Chandra personifies a modern, feminist reimagining of the folklore.

The film effectively blends folklore, fantasy, and superhero conventions to present Chandra as a mythic figure of resistance who challenges both gender bias and caste oppression. This evolution justifies the shift from "Vengeful Yakshi" to "Anti-Caste Avenger", by defining her transformation from a figure traditionally seen as malevolent to a purposeful champion of justice. Chandra's origin story is directly rooted in casteist oppression, where her childhood community was massacred by a king for the crime of attempting to transgress caste boundaries by entering a forbidden temple. The film is notable for its non-brahmanical world-building, which uses subaltern cultural icons to construct a necessary counter-narrative to majoritarian mythologies, making Chandra's mission, to use her power to protect the marginalised and vulnerable, a

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direct act of vengeance and justice against systemic social injustice. Chandra's cosmic role as a guide in times of peril is reinforced by the film's theme song "Thani Lokah Murakkaari", which affirms her self-authored agency. The film inevitably portrays her as a symbol of resistance and reclaims mythic space for feminist and anti-caste representation.

The folkloric figure of the Yakshi has long represented society's conflicted relationship with female autonomy and desire. Frequently described as a superhuman entity, the Yakshi embodies both enchantment and ferocity that reflect a powerful and untamed feminine energy. Nevertheless, her association with fertility and agency has often been constrained, vilified, and reshaped through patriarchal interpretations. This tension is especially evident in the contrasting narratives of Neeli. In one narrative, she appears as a vengeful spirit driven by bloodlust. In another, she is portrayed as a free-spirited woman who resists the moral expectations imposed by society. The story of her being contained and impaled by the Christian priest Kadamattathu Kathanar serves as a potent metaphor for the ways patriarchal systems attempt to suppress and demonise women who assert their independence and embrace their sexuality. By choosing Neeli as its source material, the film confronts a deeply rooted cultural fear and turns it on its head. This act of subversion is not only bold but also culturally resonant. As Barbara Creed's work on the monstrous-feminine suggests, figures like the Yakshi often reflect society's anxieties about female power that exists outside male control, power that is seen as dangerous, disruptive, and in need of containment (1).

The film presents a bold reinterpretation of Neeli's origin, shifting the narrative from a tale of romantic betrayal to one grounded in caste violence and feminist resistance. Instead of portraying her as a woman seeking revenge for love, the story introduces Chandra as a child from a forest-dwelling tribal community who witnesses the brutal massacre of her family over a thousand years ago. This atrocity stems from caste-based exclusion, as her people were barred from entering temples reserved for dominant groups. Her transformation into a blood-soaked avenger, triggered by a bat bite, becomes a symbolic response to systemic injustice. This reimagining serves as a political act of re-mythification, turning a culturally conservative legend into a vehicle for social critique. Chandra channels her ancestral rage into extraordinary powers, and her vampirism is explained through a hybrid origin involving a virus, blending folklore with speculative fiction.

A deliberate and significant narrative choice was to root Chandra's moral compass in matriarchal wisdom. In this version, Chandra's indigenous mother, at her time of death, advises young Neeli to use her powers to protect the vulnerable, directly challenging the original folklore where Kathanar, a male priest, subdues her. The film also reimagines Kadamattathu Kathanar, traditionally an exorcist, as a character who seeks Chandra's help as a friend rather than suppressing her powers as an oppressor. While this revision successfully dismantles traces of patriarchy, it has drawn criticism for diluting Neeli's sexuality and tribal identity. The portrayal of Chandra as a fair-skinned woman who conceals her origins to navigate a society that favours privilege and

whiteness has been seen by some as cultural appropriation. Critics argue that this aesthetic assimilation, sometimes referred to as blackfishing, risks erasing the very communities the film aims to uplift (Dyer 32). This tension complicates the film's progressive message and invites deeper reflection on representation and casting politics in mainstream cinema.

CHANDRA AS A DISTINCTIVE ARCHETYPE BEYOND GLOBAL SUPERHERO TROPES

"The politics of representation of women on the silver screen has always been a problematic discourse, owing to the phallogocentric, hegemonic constructs of the society"(Georgy 10). This long-standing ideological struggle is particularly evident in the action and fantasy genres, where traditional power dynamics are frequently reinforced rather than challenged. The historical depiction of female superheroes, mainly in Western comics and films, is a direct result of patriarchal ideologies that measured female worth by either subservience or a masculine imitation of strength. This framework facilitated the rise of the problematic villain, victim, and vixen archetypes that have dominated female superhero narratives since the Golden Age of Comics. This development was not accidental but deeply rooted in the gender roles of its time (Robbins 11). One outcome of this legacy is the persistent use of impractical and overtly sexual costumes designed to objectify the female characters.

Over the years, the mainstream portrayal of female superheroes, particularly in Western media, has often employed the tough girl trope, where a woman's strength is depicted through masculinity,

heavy sexualization, or by simply mimicking established male heroes. DC's Wonder Woman, Diana Prince, and Marvel's Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers, are notable examples. Wonder Woman's early history and famous costume often prioritised the male gaze over combat functionality. Meanwhile, Captain Marvel, whose heroic origin is intrinsically linked to the Kree military and the male hero Mar-Vell, often falls into the trap of masculine mimicry as her power is largely defined by masculine aggression and scale. Similarly, Marvel's Scarlet Witch, Wanda Maximoff, is also a notable example, as her traditional costume design, often featuring a revealing leotard and headpiece, exemplifies the imposition of heavy sexualization onto a character whose powers are rooted in mystical chaos and immense emotional complexity. Another persistent trope in global superhero narratives is the derivative hero, a female character created mainly as a counterpart to an existing male figure. This trope is clearly projected by figures like DC's Supergirl, Kara Zor-El, cousin of Superman, and Marvel's She-Hulk, Jennifer Walters, cousin of the Hulk, Bruce Banner. Their identities and origin stories are established on a direct familial or biological link to their male predecessors. Therefore, these characters frequently struggle to establish independent identities, often duplicating the heroic mandates of their male predecessors instead of forging distinct paths in their respective universes. This lack of narrative autonomy is precisely what Chandra's character subverts by drawing on an independent, culturally specific mythological source to define her power.

Chandra's character in *Lokah* challenges conventional portrayals by presenting a distinctly

Indian archetype of the superwoman, a calm, composed power rooted in a sense of justice. When the story begins, Chandra attempts to blend into modern society after moving to Bengaluru from Sweden, despite her immortal status and secret mission. Her mundane tasks, like working as a barista, cleaning her floor, and walking with earphones, project her pursuit of ordinariness, which serves as a sharp contrast to her immortal status and secret mission. Chandra's visual identity actively rejects the hypersexualised norms of the genre. Unlike global examples like Catwoman or early Black Widow, who feature sexualized, impractical, or excessively revealing outfits, Chandra is consistently seen in functional, nonsexualized attire such as jeans, sneakers, and bomber jackets, which are designed for mobility and ordinariness. Her appearance is visually striking, featuring a septum ring and red hair. Moreover, the black and red colour palette of her clothing subtly symbolises power and combat prowess, as it is derived from the signature colours of Kalaripayattu, Kerala's traditional martial art form.

The cinematic universe of *Lokah* presents Chandra as an immortal whose core identity is strongly rooted in the mythological Yakshi, though her powers and vulnerabilities are expressed through classic vampire traits. Chandra exhibits characteristic traits directly borrowed from classic vampire lore, such as a severe weakness to sunlight that requires her to cover her windows with newspaper and move only at night, the inability to enter a home without an invitation, and a lethal vulnerability to an attack on the heart. Moreover, her transformation is traced to the tribal girl Neeli, who was infected by a virus after a bat bite in a mysterious cave, and her own bite can turn other clean and healthy bodies into similar supernatural beings, as seen in the case of Inspector Nachiyappa, the antagonist in the movie. Nevertheless, Chandra is a powerful vigilante who aids the unhelped, positioning the film as a modern vampire-superhero narrative. She possesses clear superhuman abilities, demonstrating super speed to rescue Sunny from a car accident and later using super strength and action skills to defend a coworker. Her invulnerability is quickly established as a burn on her hand heals instantly, and she employs enhanced senses to predict danger. Despite her ancient origin, the burden of her immortality is evident in her lonely, nonchalant demeanour, as she has witnessed the passage of life for centuries. However, Chandra deviates from classic vampire lore by consuming stored O-negative blood kept in her refrigerator instead of directly feeding, and she even sleeps, showing a concession to mortal habits. The modern Chandra is fully acclimated to contemporary society, shown speaking multiple languages and listening to music most of the time. She adopts a modern style, including red colored hair and contact lenses to hide her natural, cat eyes. Chandra's white, elegant attire and silver jewellery at Sunny's party evoke the image of a contemporary Yakshi, powerfully reimagining the ancient mythological figure for a modern era.

Chandra's internal and external conflicts are driven by a rigid moral code that contrasts sharply with common Western female superhero tropes. Western portrayals of female superheroes often depict power emerging from personal trauma or patriarchal mentorship, as seen in Wonder Woman's Amazonian training or Black Widow's militarised conditioning. In contrast, Chandra's strength

originates from her mother, a figure of indigenous wisdom and matrilineal power. Chandra's power is not an expression of unchecked rage but a tempered force, rooted in emotional intelligence and ancestral memory. The film thus validates female rage not as hysteria, but as a legitimate and powerful source of action and cosmic justice. Her entire origin as Neeli is rooted in the experience of a vulnerable, persecuted tribal girl, and her transformation into the powerful Yakshi is an act of righteous rage over the murder of her family and her people. The parallel sequence where young Neeli attacks the king's men and Chandra attacks the abuser portrays that her power is intrinsically linked to avenging injustice against the marginalised and the helpless. Through the narrative of the story of Neeli by Verghese Kurien, the film states that Neeli, in her immortal journey, seeks out the vilest people to slay and drink their blood. This turns the traditional monstrous Yakshi or vampire figure into a moral compass that she preys on predators, not innocents, offering the powerful subtext that the greatest monsters are the immoral humans in positions of power, such as the vengeful, tyrannical and casteist king and misogynistic and corrupt Nachiyappa.

While many global heroes operate within pre-established codes shaped by masculine authority, such as the rigid moral framework followed by Batman, Chandra's guiding principles are inherited from her mother and rooted in indigenous cultural wisdom. Rather than being subjugated by religious authority, she is presented as a figure whom Kathanar seeks out for help, reversing the traditional power dynamic. Her mission is focused on societal ills, such as an organ donation racket and misogynistic goons and police officers, like Nachiyappa Gowda, who explicitly represent a toxic patriarchal mindset. Moreover, the core idea presented in the movie that myths and legends are real can be seen as a commentary on the things society tries to deny or suppress, such as the existence of great injustice, corruption, and the consequences of moral failings, where the supernatural beings are an inevitable response to human vileness.

The movie subverts the conventional superhero sidekick dynamic by positioning Sunny, a faint-hearted, emotionally expressive young man, as Chandra's companion. Sunny plays a significant role in Chandra's modern life and captures her attention due to his resemblance to her deceased lover. His character represents a human's shocked reaction to the supernatural, as he gradually notices her unusual symptoms, such as her super speed, cold hand, the smell, and the blood on her shoes. Unlike the dominant male saviour trope, Sunny is not portrayed as a conventional dominant hero. Instead, he is presented as a jittery guy who faints at the sight of blood and often reacts to the horror by fainting, especially upon witnessing her full transformation into the fanged Yakshi and her power. Sunny is charming but often powerless, relying on Chandra's strength for survival. This subverts the classic male-as-protector trope, as Chandra is consistently the financially, physically, and emotionally stronger partner; she is the rescuer and the one with the ultimate control. Despite his fear and being overwhelmed, he supports her rather than saving her, remaining loyal and aiding her in times of need. By presenting Sunny as a supportive companion,

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Chandra remains the sole source of physical and narrative power. This inversion redefines gender roles, presenting a novel way of gender collaboration where women are the primary agents of change. Chandra's act of trust, revealing her true self, her weakness to the sun, her reliance on packed red blood cells, and her fate to move every two decades, to Sunny projects her desire for authenticity in a relationship. In a society that demands women hide their true selves or power, Chandra chooses to be fully honest, daring Sunny to accept her reality.

CHANDRA'S CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL SIGNIFICANCE AS FEMINIST RESISTANCE

By grossing over 300 crore rupees worldwide, *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* became not only the highest-grossing Malayalam film but also the first to cross the 300-crore global milestone. Being the first female-led film to achieve this remarkable record, the film surpassed the worldwide collections of male superstar-led Malayalam blockbusters such as *L2: Empuraan*. The film's unprecedented global success powerfully challenges the industry's stereotypical misconception that a female star cannot be the primary crowd puller. The financial success of the film evidenced that investing in a female-led genre film is highly profitable, dismantling the outdated misconception of it being a risk. For decades, producers were hesitant to invest in women-centric films, often underfunding them. *Lokah*'s performance, especially in a genre historically dominated by men, is irrefutable data that audience interest in female-led narratives is significant. The film's rising popularity among people of all genders shows that a compelling story focused on female agency, when told through a genre format, can resonate with a wide audience. This level of mainstream acceptance signals a paradigm shift in societal perceptions, moving the dialogue around gender equality into the mainstream consciousness. By normalising female power in a genre that has traditionally been defined by masculine archetypes, *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* has powerfully actualised the sentiment that female action heroes inspire real-life confidence and empowerment. Moreover, the film's success was enriched by a production team with significant female participation, including Santhy Balachandran as co-writer and dramaturg, Yashika Routray as colourist, and Sayanora Philip as dubbing artist, affirming the importance of female perspectives both in front of and behind the camera. For Kalyani Priyadarshan, predominantly known for her 'girl next door' image in lighthearted films, *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* represents a major turning point. Her portrayal of India's first female superhero was acclaimed by critics for its conviction, charisma, and the ease with which she executed high-intensity stunts, seamlessly blending physical performance with CGI. The movie firmly established her as a bankable lead for future big-budget genre projects.

The cultural impact of the film is powerfully amplified by its soundtrack, extending its relevance beyond the narrative. While *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* received critical acclaim, it was the explosive success of the theme song "Thani Lokah Murakkaari", translated as "she who writes her own rules", that propelled it into the public imagination. Composed by Jakes Bejoy, it features the dynamic voices of Sufi singer Jyoti Nooran and rapper Reble in a striking fusion that mirrors the film's blend of ancient folklore and modernity. More than mere entertainment, the

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track quickly became a resistance anthem that reinforces Chandra's cosmic role as a guide in times of peril, urging listeners to write their own rules. This bold message transformed the soundtrack into a manifesto, creating a transmedial cultural moment that resonated across digital platforms and audiences. With its emotive vocals, the English-language track "Queen of the Night" also intertwines themes of radical self-reliance and definitive female power. Its popularity across digital platforms has made it a cultural touchstone for audiences, especially the youth, thereby reinforcing the film's feminist message and Chandra's dual identity as both a cosmic force and a modern icon. By fusing music and visuals, the film emerges as a popular and pioneering artistic statement that reimagines women as dominant figures in contemporary mythology.

CONCLUSION

Cinema, a powerful mirror to contemporary society, derives its sustenance, ideas and imagination from its surroundings (Georgy 67)*.* In the context of mainstream Malayalam cinema, this societal reflection finds new expression in the superhero genre*. Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* stands as a cultural and cinematic milestone, skilfully bending indigenous storytelling with contemporary feminist sensibilities to redefine female power in popular Malayalam cinema. The film's success marks a significant game-changer in the evolving representation of women in Malayalam cinema. It decisively breaks away from the submissive archetypes that shaped twentieth-century narratives and embraces the layered, self-directed protagonists of the New Wave movement. By reimagining the folklore of Kalliyankattu Neeli, the film transforms a traditionally feared yakshi into a

symbol of anti-caste resistance and female agency, whose moral code is rooted in matriarchal wisdom rather than patriarchal control. This revisionist approach fundamentally challenges the cultural narratives that have historically demonised female power. Despite its cultural subversions, the film functions as a powerful subversion of global superhero tropes as it explicitly rejects the hypersexualised costumes and excessive masculinity often associated with female heroes, instead presenting a character whose power is understated, functional, and deeply human.

The massive commercial success of *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*, the highest-grossing Malayalam film of all time, serves as irrefutable proof of a paradigm shift within the industry and a growing cultural reception for progressive narratives. Such massive financial success directly challenges the long-standing industry belief that male stars are the sole crowd-pullers, a mindset historically rooted in the limitations of the male gaze. By portraying a female protagonist in a genre traditionally dominated by men and achieving record-breaking box office numbers, *Lokah* validated the commercial viability of complex, progressive female-centric narratives. Kalyani Priyadarshan's portrayal of India's first female superhero not only drew audiences but also redefined her star persona, elevating her celebrity status across linguistic and regional boundaries. The film's widespread popularity and record-breaking box office performance established Priyadarshan as a major crowd-puller with pan-Indian appeal, laying the foundation for the ambitious *Lokah* franchise and expanding the possibilities of big-budget filmmaking within the Malayalam industry. In conclusion, the film

has not only rewritten history as the highest-grossing Malayalam film and launched Kerala's first female superhero franchise but has also forged a new, empowered path for Indian cinema, where powerful women are not just accepted but celebrated as the primary agents of change and creators of a new cinematic universe.

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