

# Mapping the Interior: Gendered Spaces and the Haunting Feminine in *Akam* (2013)

Lakshmi Salim and Sajna Sanal

## Abstract

*Akam* (2013), the Malayalam film directed by Shalini Usha Nair, is a contemporary adaptation of Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's novel *Yakshi*. The first cinematic adaptation of the novel, directed by K.S. Sethumadhavan, was released in 1968 under the title *Yakshi*. This version reflects the era's anxieties surrounding female sensuality and seeks to contain it through narrative erasure. In contrast, Nair's *Akam* offers a deconstruction of the yakshi myth, delving into themes of female autonomy and the haunted feminine space, reimagining the legend through a feminist lens. The film reframes the mythical yakshi, positioning femininity as both spatial and spectral. Thus, it offers a compelling critique of gendered perception and challenges viewers to reconsider the boundaries of desire, identity, and the self. This article seeks to analyze the representation of feminine space in *Akam*, with a particular focus on how domestic and psychological environments shape and reflect gendered experiences. It also attempts to explore the articulation of female desire in the film, highlighting the ways in which it subverts the conventional portrayals of femininity. Drawing on feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and spectral studies, the article investigates the construction of the haunting feminine as a site of power, ambiguity, and resistance.

**Keywords:** Malayalam Cinema; Yakshi Myth; Gendered Spaces; Spectrality; Spatial dynamics

## Introduction

The figure of the *yakshi* occupies a central place in South Indian folklore, particularly within the cultural consciousness of Kerala, where she is frequently depicted as a spectral embodiment of feminine vengeance. Typically represented as a woman who has suffered betrayal or violence, often perpetrated by an upper-caste male, the *yakshi* returns as a ghostly seductress, employing her

physical allure as an instrument of retribution. Many of the *Yakshi* myths “invoke the fear of formidable female sexuality that refuses masculine closures or patriarchal caste laws, coming ‘un-dead’ to fulfil thwarted desires or pending revenge” (Pillai 18). Far from serving merely as a trope within the horror genre, the myth of the *yakshi* functions as a cultural site through which collective anxieties surrounding female agency, sexuality, and social transgression are mediated and explored.

In mid-twentieth century Malayalam cinema, the adaptation of the *yakshi* myth often operated as a narrative strategy to reinforce patriarchal anxieties surrounding female sexuality and autonomy. The *yakshi* was typically portrayed as a seductive yet menacing presence, her physical allure constructed as a threat to male authority and societal norms. Rather than interrogating the historical or socio-cultural conditions that give rise to her spectral existence, these cinematic representations tended to frame her as a figure of excess and moral deviance. In doing so, the *yakshi* became a symbolic site through which anxieties about female transgression were contained, allowing the cinematic apparatus to discipline and neutralize expressions of feminine agency within a patriarchal order.

*Akam* offers a radical feminist reconfiguration of the *Yakshi* figure, departing from folkloric and psychological interpretations to foreground a spatially articulated and spectral feminine presence. Directed by Shalini Usha Nair, the film constructs domestic interiors, female desire, and the haunted psyche as interrelated terrains through which normative gender roles and patriarchal epistemologies are unsettled. While *Akam* is often approached as a psychological thriller or as a cinematic adaptation of *Yakshi*, existing scholarship has largely emphasized narrative ambiguity, masculine paranoia, and generic experimentation, thereby leaving the film’s spatial politics insufficiently theorized. In particular, there is limited critical engagement with how the concept of *akam* is reworked in the film as a gendered and epistemically opaque interior that resists patriarchal modes of perception and mastery. Addressing this gap, the present study argues that *Akam* mobilizes domestic interiors as haunted, feminized spaces that contest patriarchal impulses to decode and dominate the female subject, offering a spatially grounded feminist critique of epistemic power. Methodologically, the article undertakes

close textual and visual analyses of selected scenes, focusing on mise-en-scène, lighting, framing, sound design, and architectural composition, and draws on feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and spectral studies to examine how *akam* is spatially configured as a haunted interior and how feminine subjectivity is articulated through space as a site of power, opacity, and resistance.

### **Gendered Interiors and the Architecture of the Uncanny**

Set in contemporary Kerala, the film follows the unraveling psyche of Srinu, a young architect who begins to suspect that his enigmatic wife Ragini is a *yakshi*, a mythological seductress who lures and consumes men. While the film foregrounds Srinu's descent into paranoia, the feminist reading reveals a deeper engagement with the themes of gendered space, epistemic violence, and the politics of female subjectivity.

The title *Akam*, taken from classical Tamil poetics, refers to the interior or emotional realm, often contrasted with *puram*, the external and public sphere. The Tamil literary tradition classifies *akam* poetry as concerned with the personal, emotional, and intimate centered around love, longing, and the inner life. In contrast, *puram* deals with war, heroism, and the public realm. In the film *Akam*, this conceptual duality is visualized through spatial arrangements and gendered subjectivities. Srinu occupies the public world of work, architecture, and rationality, while Ragini is situated in the domestic space—the apartment, the kitchen, the bedroom—that becomes symbolic of the feminine *akam*. The film, thus, deploys the concept of *akam* as a gendered and haunted space both literally (as domestic interiors) and figuratively (as the unknowable feminine self) to critique the patriarchal compulsion to contain, decode, and dominate the female subject. Through its aesthetic strategies and narrative ambiguity, the film destabilises conventional gender binaries and reclaims the interior as a space of feminist resistance.

The domestic sphere, traditionally coded as feminine and secure, becomes deeply uncanny in the film. Freud defines the uncanny as “something familiar [‘homely,’ ‘homey’] that has been repressed and then reappears” (152). The apartment Srinu and Ragini inhabit transforms into a site of surveillance, suspicion, and psychological instability. Rather than offering comfort, the home becomes a haunted interior where normative expectations of gender, marriage,

and intimacy unravel. The film's sparse dialogue, unsettling sound design, and fragmented spatial framing amplify this transformation. One of the most striking expressions of the uncanny emerges within the apartment's corridors and rooms, which are consistently framed through constricted compositions and fragmented sightlines, producing a sense of spatial spectrality. As the camera trails Srimi through these interiors, it initially evokes surveillance and control, yet the space repeatedly eludes his mastery. Half-open doors, dimly illuminated rooms, and disrupted spatial continuity render the apartment unstable and ghostly, transforming the familiar domestic interior into an unsettling presence. This spatial disorientation not only intensifies the uncanny but also registers the collapse of patriarchal rationality. Patriarchal rationality here denotes a masculine, logocentric mode of knowing grounded in surveillance, possession, and interpretive control, where linear causality and visual mastery position the male subject as the authority within the domestic sphere. *Akam* unsettles this epistemic structure by making space opaque, time fragmented, and the feminine subject spectral, thereby exposing the structural limits of phallogocentric reason to comprehend the feminine interior.

The kitchen and bedroom spaces conventionally associated with domestic intimacy, play a crucial role in generating the uncanny within the film. Ragini's calm, ritualised movements within these interiors contrast sharply with Srimi's escalating paranoia. In several scenes, her silence and stillness within these spaces provoke suspicion rather than reassurance. The uncanny here does not emerge from overt supernatural events but from the excess of meaning Srimi projects onto ordinary domestic gestures, revealing how patriarchal fear arises when feminine interiority refuses transparency.

Mirrors and reflective surfaces further intensify the architecture of the uncanny. In scenes where Ragini is framed indirectly, through reflections or partial visibility, her presence becomes spectral, fragmented, and resistant to stable perception. These visual strategies deny the spectator, aligned with Srimi's gaze, a coherent or authoritative view of the feminine subject. The apartment thus functions as a haunted interior, where space itself collaborates in destabilising masculine epistemic control. Within the structure of domestic patriarchy, epistemic authority is vested in the husband, who assumes the power to define and regulate the wife's subjectivity by categorizing her as loyal, deviant,

rational, or unstable, thereby securing himself as the sovereign producer of truth within the marital domain. As Luce Irigaray argues “The feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual” (86). In *Akam*, this masculinist epistemological privilege progressively erodes as spatial opacity and psychic ambiguity unsettle Srini’s interpretive mastery.

### **Feminine Opacity and Epistemic Violence**

Building on *Akam* as a gendered realm, the film foregrounds interior space as an uncanny site where patriarchal perception confronts the limits of knowledge and control, rendering feminine subjectivity simultaneously intimate, elusive, and unsettling. The interior spaces in *Akam* are rendered dim, claustrophobic, and spatially ambiguous, mirroring both the protagonist’s psychological deterioration and the inaccessibility of the feminine interior. From the film’s opening sequences, viewers are drawn into Srini’s increasingly unstable perception of his wife, Ragini. Her silences and calm demeanor become sites of suspicion for Srini, who interprets them as signs of deception. Notably, his fear does not stem from any overt threat but from her refusal to disclose her inner life legible to him. In this context, *Akam* becomes synonymous with epistemic opacity, and Ragini’s subjectivity emerges as a contested interior onto which Srini projects his masculine anxieties.

This dynamic aligns with feminist critiques of patriarchal systems that position the feminine as the “other”—a figure whose subjectivity is either idealized or demonized, but never fully accessible. As Luce Irigaray observes in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, the feminine has been excluded from discourse (88). In *Akam*, Ragini’s unknowability is not a narrative deficiency but a feminist refusal of transparency; a resistance to being fully seen, known, or appropriated by the male gaze. The domestic space she inhabits becomes a terrain of spectral feminine resistance not through overt confrontation or violence, but through an aesthetic of ambiguity that refuses patriarchal legibility.

In *Akam*, Nair offers a radical departure from conventional portrayals of feminine desire in Malayalam cinema by presenting a female protagonist who resists legibility and containment. Ragini, the central female figure, is neither

eroticized nor demonized in overt terms, but occupies a complex space where desire is implied, withheld, and quietly asserted. Rather than presenting her as the passive recipient of male attention, the film allows Ragini to exist as an autonomous subject, whose emotional and sexual interiority is rendered opaque. This challenges dominant cinematic representations where female desire is either hyper-visible and objectified or morally punished. Her calm demeanor, silences, and self-contained presence are not indications of repression but acts of refusal to perform expected emotional labour, to confess, or to make herself available to the male gaze.

Ragini embodies a form of desire that is enigmatic and inward, resisting the patriarchal tendency to define women's desires through the male gaze. The film uses subtle visual and narrative cues to portray Ragini's emotional autonomy and unsettling allure. One notable scene in the film occurs when Ragini gently but assertively initiates intimacy with Srinivasan. Her body language is calm, composed, and controlled, subverting the traditional portrayal of the desirable woman as expressive and eager to please. Here, desire is not flamboyant but self-possessed, expressed on her own terms. Srinivasan, however, grows increasingly disturbed not by her presence, but by his inability to read her desire or locate it within familiar gendered patterns. Her refusal to be transparent becomes a source of fear and suspicion. As the narrative progresses, Ragini's quiet self-containment becomes a site of projection for Srinivasan's insecurities. He becomes paranoid after noticing that she goes out alone or speaks to strangers without offering explanations. Instead of representing her desire as dangerous or immoral, *Akam* presents Srinivasan's anxiety as a reflection of his own fragile masculinity. The mystery of Ragini's inner life remains intact throughout the film, asserting her agency and resisting narrative closure.

"The Yakshi as the Monstrous Feminine," discusses how contemporary *Yakshi* narratives conflate the wife and the whore, rendering the wife persistently othered through the suspicion that she harbors secrets: what initially appears as mystery and allure later becomes the source of masculine paranoia and mistrust (Karollil and Bindu 168). *Akam* translates this logic into spatial terms, where the home, rather than offering reassurance, becomes unfamiliar and threatening. A telling instance occurs when Ragini exits a room after a brief

exchange and the camera lingers on the empty corridor she leaves behind; her absence is overdetermined as concealment. This moment crystallizes epistemic violence, as masculine anxiety transforms feminine opacity into evidence of guilt, projecting suspicion onto both the woman and the space she inhabits.

The subversiveness of Ragini's portrayal lies in how her desire is articulated not through dialogue or romantic display, but through spatial presence and affective withdrawal. Scenes such as those in the kitchen, where she appears immersed in her own world, or moments of physical intimacy that lack performative seduction, create a mode of feminine presence that is self-possessed rather than reactive. Ragini's failure to respond to Srini's growing paranoia further destabilizes conventional gender roles. Her silence becomes unsettling not because it signifies danger, but because it denies the male protagonist epistemic access. This refusal to be 'read' disrupts the patriarchal expectation that female desire must be transparent, available, and responsive to male interpretation. In this sense, Ragini's presence embodies what Irigaray calls a feminine discourse that resists being subsumed into masculine logic.

### **The Spectral Feminine Beyond Horror Trope**

By refusing to make Ragini's motivations and inner life fully knowable, *Akam* reclaims female desire as a private, interior force rather than a spectacle for male consumption. The film critiques the traditional binary in which women are either idealized as nurturing and docile or vilified as dangerous and excessive in their desires. Ragini fits neither role; she is neither a loving wife nor a fatal seductress in any conventional sense. Instead, the film allows her ambiguity to remain unresolved, making her interiority a site of both narrative and political resistance. In doing so, *Akam* not only reimagines the *yakshi* myth through a feminist lens but also opens up new representational possibilities for depicting female desire less as an object of fear or control, and more as an autonomous and spectral force that destabilizes patriarchal narratives.

The feminist, Barbara Creed, has discussed the trope of the "monstrous-feminine," noting how horror films often frame the woman's body as the source of fear and abjection (3). In *Akam*, the fear does not stem from Ragini's body per se, but from her refusal to conform to the roles of the ideal wife. Her ambiguity, her silence, her sexuality—none of these fit Srini's expectations. As

a result, she is framed as monstrous, even though she commits no monstrous acts.

The notion of the feminine as a ‘spectral’ presence in *Akam* extends beyond supernatural tropes. It intersects with broader feminist questions of representation, knowledge, and power. The film questions who is allowed to know, who is seen, and who is believed. Srinu’s descent into madness is not just psychological; it is epistemological. His world collapses because it cannot accommodate a woman who refuses to be possessed emotionally, sexually, or narratively. In this context, spectrality becomes a feminist epistemology where ghost stories evolve as a means of rewriting history, of including the excluded (Brogan 5). Ragini is excluded from Srinu’s understanding, from the film’s narration, and from direct speech. But her spectral presence destabilizes the entire narrative structure. She does not haunt through action but through absence and withdrawal. This aligns with a feminist politics of opacity, as proposed by Édouard Glissant, who argues for “the right to opacity” as a resistance to the imperialist and patriarchal demand for transparency (Glissant 189). Ragini’s refusal to ‘explain herself’ is thus an assertion of her subjective autonomy, a radical insistence on the validity of interior life beyond male comprehension.

Nair’s directorial choices further reinforce the feminist thematics of *Akam*. The film avoids melodrama, horror tropes, and jump scares. Instead, it cultivates a slow, meditative rhythm that invites viewers into a contemplative state. The use of long takes, negative space, and subdued color palettes creates an atmosphere of disquiet, not terror. This aesthetic restraint is crucial as it shifts the focus from *what happens* to *how perception is shaped*. The editing is elliptical, often leaving gaps in time and information. Ragini is frequently framed alone, in windows or doorways, reinforcing her position both inside and outside the domestic sphere. These visual choices reflect a cinematic language of ambiguity, which resists patriarchal narrative closure. Moreover, the sound design characterized by minimal music, ambient noises, and silences deepens the sense of estrangement. Sound, like space, becomes a medium of haunting, suggesting that feminine presence is felt rather than seen. In this way, the film mobilizes a feminist poetics of the spectral, grounded in aesthetic indeterminacy rather than spectacle.

## Conclusion

By reimagining *Akam* as a gendered and haunted interior, *Akam* offers a sustained critique of the patriarchal impulse to dominate the feminine emotionally, spatially, or epistemologically. The domestic space, traditionally coded as knowable and controllable within patriarchal logic, is rendered unstable and opaque, mirroring Srinivasan's psychological fragmentation. Ragini's spatial elusiveness functions not merely as an atmospheric device but as a narrative strategy that exposes the failure of masculine rationality and visual mastery. Her refusal to remain fixed within the frame destabilizes the male gaze, denying it a stable object of desire and undermining cinema's conventional mechanisms of narrative and visual control.

Positioned as both wife and spectral presence, Ragini emerges as a figure of feminist resistance rather than gothic excess. Her silence, opacity, and narrative refusal do not signify absence or monstrosity; instead, they operate as assertions of agency that resist interpretation and containment. By withholding explanatory closure, the film compels viewers to confront the limits of patriarchal knowledge systems that demand visibility, coherence, and resolution from the feminine interior. In this sense, *Akam* reclaims haunting as a political and feminist mode, transforming the domestic interior into a space that cannot be colonized by gaze, logic, or fear. The film ultimately proposes that the unknowability of the feminine interior signifies not absence or lack but a form of power that destabilizes patriarchal cinematic and epistemological authority.

## Works Cited and Consulted

- Akam*. Directed by Shalini Usha Nair. Box Office Cinema, 2013.
- Brogan, Kathleen. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*. University of Virginia Press, 1998.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock, Penguin Books, 2003.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Mapping the Interior: Gendered Spaces and the Haunting Feminine in *Akam* (2013)

Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

Karollil, Mamatha, and K.C. Bindhu. “The Yakshi as the Monstrous Feminine.” *The Gendered Body in South Asia: Negotiation, Resistance, Struggle*, Routledge, 2024, pp.162–175.

Pillai, Meena T. *Gender and Modernity in Kerala: Politics, Praxes, Paradoxes*. Orient Black Swan, 2023.

— \* —