

Breaking the Boundaries: The Artistic Legacy of Evolving Archetypes and Representations of the *Tali* Temple

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Abstract

The Tali Maha Shiva Kshethram in Kozhikode, Kerala, is famous for its artworks in the form of murals, wooden carvings, and sculptures. This research explores the murals, sculptures, and wooden carvings of the Tali Temple as they evolve into archetypal depictions by subverting the long-existing religious and moral taboos within Hindu society. The artistic legacy of the temple is brought to light by crossing boundaries through depicting homosexuality and boldly offering nuanced views on sexuality. The depictions in the artworks not only showcase a wide range of sexual acts but incorporate gender roles that deviate from social norms, integrating female characters dynamically within them. The research brings forth the social and cultural significance of the artistic legacy through multifaceted visual analysis to identify the role of these artworks in redefining the traditionally accepted concepts of gender and sexuality within the Hindu society of Kerala.

Keywords: Archetypes; Murals; Sculptures; Sexuality; Temple.

Introduction

"The art in Indian temples reflects the integration of human emotions, including the sensuality and physical aspects of life, with the spiritual and divine." (Daniélou 27). Temples are melting points that carry relics of ancient culture and traditions. They are the pivotal factor necessary for a community's fruitful sustenance. Along with the beautiful and intricate mural paintings and sculptures, temples of any region have a different story to convey and influence the society. Though these ancient relics and cultures differ from each other, there is a common thread that binds them

and evolves as archetypes. The concepts depicted in these carvings and paintings have the power to change and impact society, be it societal, cultural, political, or psychological.

The Tali Maha Shiva Kshethram is one of the most famous and oldest temples in the history of Kerala, located in the district of Kozhikode, built by Swamy Thirumulapad. This temple dedicated to the deity *Shiva* was the family temple of the Zamorins who had ruled Kozhikode. The *Jyothirlingam* in the sanctum of the Temple was installed towards the end of Dvapara Yuga by Sri Parasurama, one of the ten *Avatars* of lord Vishnu. The temple is built in traditional Kerala architectural style. The two-storied sanctum-sanctorum is shaped like a chariot adorned with murals and granite sculptures of *Shiva's* retinue. The Tali Shiva Temple is historically significant as it is considered a treasure house with numerous deities and beautifully built embellishments decorated with mural paintings. Also, there are fine granite sculptures within the temple complex depicting the various aspects of *Shiva*, along with sculptures of birds and animals portraying the different stories from the *Puranas*. The temple is renowned for its annual festival, *Revathi Pattathanam*, which is considered sacred. The celebration of the festival began in the 14th century and is a yearly seven-day-long congregation of scholars held under the supervision of Zamorins. The temple is a marvel in the Kerala style of architecture and is a standing proof of artistic splendor. The roofs are intrinsically designed, and the beautiful wall paintings inside the *sreekovil* add to the long-standing beauty and history of the temple.

The murals and wooden carvings of the temple signified the Hindu mythological narratives and evolved as archetypes that imprint themselves on the collective unconscious of the Hindu society. The research can create an essential link in understanding the connection between archetypes and their influence on Hindu mythology by appealing to the collective unconscious. These art forms are countering the social norms by portraying the taboos related to sexuality. The narrative and symbolic interpretations of the archetypes give valuable information to Hindu mythology. This research also analyzes the narrative and allegorical interpretations of the archetypal depiction in the Tali temple and how they contribute towards countering the more extensive religious and moral taboos related to sexuality by portraying mythological narratives within Hindu society.

The temple murals and sculptures of Tali Temple have evolved as archetypes over time, boldly challenging prevailing moral, and religious taboos by embracing and portraying homosexuality. These depictions coura-

geously showcase a spectrum of sexual acts and redefine traditional gender roles by encompassing women in the mythological narratives within Kerala's Hindu society.

The Kerala and Dravida temples are composed of stone sculptures, wood carvings, and paintings. Travancore is known for its wooden carvings, viewed in three forms: images, narrative scenes, and decorations symbolic of the culture. Often, many wood carvings are colored, becoming a painted wall with flowers, rocks, clouds, and expressions with tenderness of movements. The Kerala paintings show uniform limbs and bodies, often rounded with varied glances and gestures (Kramrisch). The Thodikalam Mural Paintings in North Kerala are made of natural ingredients from plants and animals, with the colors yellow, green, red, black, and white gaining prominence. The paintings signify the cultural map of Kerala with the patrons of kings and chieftains, themes from the great Indian epics, and refreshing morphology of flora and fauna featuring animals, plants, trees, flowers, and humans in natural ways (Poyil). Plant and plant-based products are used for mural paintings and carvings in Kerala. They are often used for adding decorative details and colors, sketching outlines, and preparing the ground (Nayar). The architecture and Organization of Kerala Hindu temples comprises sculptured wooden panels; the main attraction is the painted *Ramayana* scenes in the courtyard walls of the Vadakkumnatha temple in Thrissur. Also, the Tali temple in Kozhikode and Kottayam's Thirunakkara temple have their artistic contribution by combining paintings and stucco works over sculptures (Noble). The temple patronage in Konerirajapuram has carved gods with a frontal pose inviting worship from devotees. The portrait's world is thus formed with the divine images seeking more closeness with the viewers. Temple stone carvings in the Kaveri region suggest that portraiture in India dates to even before the Mughals and the British, even in the 10th century (Kaimal).

Understanding and erasing the various conventional ideas about gender in the Indian context is made possible by the Kamasutra's connection to power dynamics, gender roles, and sexuality (Doniger). The sanctity of the temples may be affected by the representations of sexual acts in sculptures, which show how these representations have become more and more accepted over time (Krishnan). The sexual symbolism in Indian temple art and erotic sculptural art emphasizes the importance of understanding the various motifs represented in such depictions, as well as the necessity of empirically observing actual sexual representation (Ganesh). Because South Asian and Indian art has traditionally embraced instilling diversity in sexual expression, including depictions of same-sex interactions over

time and the importance of such representations, the intricacies of sexual representations in the depiction of sexuality and homosexuality in these media involve tradition and culture (Miller). Hinduism's diverse gender roles and views on sexual desires examine how marriage and same-sex relationships are viewed as significant expressions of love and commitment (Vanita).

The temple murals and sculptures have been a widely studied topic. However, the temple murals and statues of Tali Temple in Kozhikode, Kerala, have yet to be subject to much research. There needs to be more literature on the murals and sculptures of this temple and how they have evolved as archetypes within the broader Hindu society. Additionally, the concept of sexuality, as depicted in many of the murals and sculptures of the Tali temple, has been understudied, and their symbolic and narrative interpretations have not been subject to deeper visual analysis and scrutiny. The research aims to fill in the identified gaps and provide valuable insights into the archetypes of murals and sculptures of the Tali temple.

Methodology

The research employs qualitative visual analysis, which interprets visual data, including pictures, paintings, artworks, and any visual content. The murals, sculptures, and wood carvings of the Tali temple were photographed for documentation purposes with the selection of the required visual content based on depictions and formal qualities. Upon selection, the pictures of the murals and wood carvings were identified and interpreted as their symbolic meanings and narratives, both in cultural and religious contexts. From information obtained from the temple authorities, the visual materials were compared with the texts, literature, and history of the temple, shedding light on the symbolic meanings of the depictions. The recurring themes of sexuality, women, sexual acts, and gender roles were identified upon thematic analysis. The themes identified can contribute to the broader temple culture by evolving as archetypes of the mythological narratives within Hindu society.

Visual interpretation involves the study of visual content to analyze the information obtained from them by searching for their significance. The signs, symbols, and interpretations of the murals and wood carvings are done through semiotics by identifying the cultural and religious values of the visual elements. The depictions in the wooden carvings and murals depict the symbolic meanings they attribute to the broader culture and religious traditions within Hindu society. The murals of the temple depict

mythological narratives within the temple culture. The gender dynamics, sexuality, and themes related to women draw inferences from feminist and gender perspectives of societal norms.

Results and Discussion

The Tali Shiva Temple, built in the 14th century under the patronage of the Zamorin of Calicut, stands as a prime example of Kerala temple architecture. Its two-storied sanctum sanctorum, designed in the shape of a chariot, is adorned with intricate murals and granite sculptures. The overt representation of homosexuality and fluid gendered roles in the wooden sculptures of the temple is consistent with wider South Asian visual arts. Hindu temple art studies, for example, by Y. Krishan (1972), demonstrate that erotic sculptures were more than adornments but symbols of fertility, liberation of the soul, and human lust. The existence of such imagery at the Tali Temple indicates that the same cultural and religious narratives impacted its artistic depictions, further confirming the temple's historical significance in overturning strict sexual norms. Archaeological evidence shows that Kerala temples tend to integrate paintings with sculptural pieces to represent mythological and social subjects. The wall sculptures of the Tali Temple, which are around 700–800 years old, show a colorful combination of male and female figures engaging in dynamic groupings. This is consistent with historical records of temple iconography as a way of affirming and challenging existing gender roles.

Anthropological and historical studies have confirmed that temple space frequently operates as cultural texts that echo changing conceptions of gender and sexuality throughout history (Vanita). The existence of same-sex unions and fluid gender roles within the artworks in the Tali Temple is consistent with these findings, demonstrating how Hindu religious art throughout history has been open to diversity in sexual depiction.

The murals and sculptures of the Tali Temple are not exceptional examples of artistic expression but one aspect of a larger tradition within Hindu temple iconography. Like temples like Khajuraho and Konarak, the open depiction of sexual themes in the Tali Temple is symbolic, subverting conventional gender expectations while at the same time reinforcing spiritual ideals. The architectural heritage of the temple, from its sanctum design to its iconographic selection, serves to emphasize the historical relevance of these representations (Halder 553). The extensive history of renovation at the Tali Temple, especially following Tipu Sultan's invasion in the 18th century, attests to the ways in which its artistic heritage has endured even

with socio-political transformations. Such reconstructions prove the cultural vitality of the temple and reveal the ways in which its sculptures and murals have continued to provoke and redefine norms in different historical eras.



Figure. 1

The mural depicts Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathy accompanied by Lord Ganesha and Lord Subramanya with his *mayil vahana*, Paravani, and Shiva's disciple Nandi and Ganesha's *vahana*, Mooshika. The symmetrical arrangement of the figures, with Ganesha and Subramanya on both sides, with Nandi, Mooshika, and Paravani, with the background designs, provides an alignment to the mural. The concept of *ardhanarishvara*, which in Hindu mythology is the depiction of half-male and half-female, combining both the halves of Shiva and Parvathy, becomes evident. Hence, there exists a balance throughout the mural. Although there is a balance with repeated use of the same patterns enhancing stability and harmony, there exists a sense of movement in the intrinsic designs in the mural with the dynamic use of diagonal compositions and lines (Kramrisch).

The mural's color palette depicts vibrancy and divinity, with extreme details to ornamentations and features. The murals in Tali temple consist of elements of the *Aranmula* painting techniques known for their intricacy in

more information, vibrancy in colors, and the traditional usage of natural materials for painting (Nayar). The depiction brings life, divinity, peace, and balance with red shades, representing power and divinity. The divine figures in the mural painting are stylized, decorated, and idealized. The detailed features, with different patterns, symbolize the divine qualities of typical Hindu art. The mural projects the idea of interconnectedness as depicted in the Hindu belief system.

Goddess Parvathy sits on the lap of Lord Shiva, who caresses her nipples. This contrasts with the contemporary idea of explicitly showing affection. The intimate expression of “Sringara ” or romantic love, is evident in the deities’ faces. Facing Lord Shiva, Nandi adheres to the Hindu belief that one should distract oneself from worldly matters and look at God only, which signifies one’s devotion and salvation. Lord Ganesha sits on top and feeds his *vahana* (vehicle), Mooshika. His mother fondly holds Lord Subramanya’s head. Goddess Parvathy holding her son’s head showcases motherly love and the roles a woman has to perform within a society. She fulfills the duty of being a mother, wife, and, most of all, a goddess herself. Although Lord Shiva’s eyes are directed towards Parvathy, his third eye is directed towards the front. This frontality depicts his power (Kramrisch), the all-seeing eye like in the ‘Eye of Horus’ in Egyptian mythology. Lord Shiva’s throat, adorned with Vasuki, the snake and deadly poison in his throat from the churning of the ocean, is depicted by three lines with Ganga and Chandra atop his head.

The mural’s background comprises leaves and branches that seem to spring to life. The deities in the mural signify life through their divine power. According to Hindu mythology, the lotus in Goddess Parvathy’s hands represents life, fertility, beauty, eternity, prosperity, and purity, depicting enlightenment. Goddess Parvathy is the epitome of femininity, with her body, posture, ornaments, and long decorated hair. The mural has evolved into an archetype by ingraining into the collective consciousness of Hinduism by depicting the power and divinity the deities hold, which has been reproduced in different ways from the conventional standards and familiarized to the viewers, imbibing into the collective unconscious, and creating archetypes.



Figure. 2

The wooden carvings are composed of dynamic figures consisting of several figures of men and women depicted in groups, interacting with each other. The dynamicity of movement as the figures interact with each other in the depictions and their positioning makes the carvings unique, adding to their historicity. The temple carvings have been derived from the *Aranmula* painting technique. The figures depicted continuously seem to be in motion, with bodies often distorted. Exaggerated details are added to the figures' ornaments, colors, and bodies (Poyil). Notable are the eyes of the figures, usually bright and twinkling with happiness. The sexual energy of the figures showcases itself as they are arranged in ways that showcase it. Specific figures look in front towards the viewer, maintaining frontality and power (Kramrisch), while others look at the adjacent figures. Male figures depict frontality, while female figures focus on something distant.

The carving explicitly depicts eroticism and sexuality, with figures arranged sensually. The figures are carved in a form that involves more realistic depictions of the human body, yet sensual. The carving depicts homosexuality as two women caressing each other, finding pleasure by being in each other's arms. The rough and unfinished texture of the carv-

ing gives it a raw and primal sexual energy. The nature of homosexuality depicted in the women hugging each other, with the men on either side watching, can either show the deviance of sexual norms in the period in which it was carved or showcase the normalization of homosexuality. The chances of women having the freedom to pursue their sexual choices at the time the figures were carved are low – the bright colors used for the figures in between radiate more excitement and dynamics. The carvings can be interpreted in many ways, as the social constructivist paradigm predicts the expression and identification of sexuality and orientation depending on one's cultural, social, and resulting subjective factors (Ussher). The carvings are not just decorative but project the universal expression of sexual desire, female sexuality, and eroticism, forming an archetype.



Figure. 3

Homosexuality is depicted explicitly within the temple murals, considering the period during which they were engraved. It was not considered socially acceptable to the norms of sexuality, especially within Hindu society. The wooden carvings depicting two males embracing each other by being close take the central position. The facial expressions of the figures are in *sringara* with interlocking eyes, calmness of faces, and bodies turned

toward each other. The color of one figure is different from the other; the one with a green hue may indicate social class position or even dominance. The figure with yellow color may be indicative of an individual of lower birth and status or from the less privileged sections of society.

Heterosexual relationships are portrayed as well, with one figure looking at a female figure. He pats her head while the male looks at the female figure in another set of figures. Male figures, colored green, indicate their dominant status within the society. The female figures look at the distance or the male figure with submissive expressions. The dominance of the male figures projects itself in the sitting posture, with their hands on their legs, holding a dominant gaze. One figure, male but not superior in status, maintains frontality to the viewer by being dismissed from the happenings within his surroundings. Male dominance, homosexuality, and heterosexuality appeal to the evolving archetypes of today's world. "From goddesses to courtesans, children to slaves, women have been represented in a multitude of forms. This spectrum ranges from viewing women as commodities in a patriarchal society to celebrating them as central figures in cultural upliftment" (Halder 551).



Figure. 4

The picture is a majestic wall sculpture around the *Sreekovil* of Tali Maha Shiva Kshethram, which dates to the 14th century, around 700 to 800 years

old. It comprises males and females, and several animals arranged symmetrically, one adjacent to the other. It is vibrant with colors and exhibits incredibly detailed work of carvings, proof of the fine craftsmanship and master the sculptors of that era demonstrated. The ornaments worn by the figurines in the sculpture suggest their gender and prominence during the period and for the minute detailing. The wall sculptures are depicted in vibrant colors, including green, white, and beige, which may symbolize the diverse range of skin colors in society. Apart from the figurines, intricate and sophisticated carvings are also the highlight of this picture. The paint of the carvings is partially faded, depicting that they have witnessed and survived the test of time.

Everyone in the picture depicts varied emotions, giving us a space to interpret it differently. The diversity and individuality in a community and the concept of how individuals differ from each other are precisely reflected in the picture. The wall sculptures in the picture represent different body types among females as well as males, and their existence in such a space like the Tali temple, which is considered divine and has years old grandeur and gloriousness, is proof that how every body type was equally accepted, respected and considered beautiful during that period. This counter the various concepts of our times, which assume a particular figure is idealistic and praiseworthy without acknowledging community diversity and beauty. Also, the males and females are arranged symmetrically, one next to the other, symbolizing their coexistence in a community and how everyone, irrespective of their gender, plays a vital role in the proper functioning and sustainability of a society, countering gender stereotypes.



Figure. 5

Another excellent and majestic wall sculpture from Tali Temple is partially like the others. By analyzing the sculptures closely, the vibrant color tone, the detailing of the carvings, the shape of the figurines, etc., are the same as that of the others, and the partial fading of colors indicates the age of the temple, which is 700 to 800 years old. Though similarities are present in every wall sculpture, each one is unique based on the distinct emotions they present, leading to a spectrum of understandings and interpretations. Like the other pictures, the highlight of this picture is also figurines of mythical creatures, which are symmetrically arranged one adjacent to the other. The eyes of the figures are essential and convey much about their state of mind. The picture showcases many happy faces immersed in their world, not directly facing outwards and without a direct visual connection. Here, the concept of frontality is defined as the gaze is not direct, not establishing a direct encounter with the audience.

The picture emphasizes the heterosexual relationship between the figurines and how it is portrayed in the wall sculptures. Along with the explicit embracing of the intimacy between two individuals, the surrounding figures are also overwhelmed by this sight. We can interpret this with the

concept in *Kamasutra*, the ancient Indian text that serves as a guide to lead a happy and fruitful life. Apart from this, the text is also known for its mention of sexuality and sexual acts. The intimacy that is displayed in the wall sculpture and the sight of the overwhelmed figures surrounding them can be connected to the various sexual acts in the *Kamasutra* and the concepts related to the same. An observation like this plays a vital role in countering the taboos, as even a sight of slight intimacy is looked down upon and considered something disgusting by modern society.



Figure. 6

The depiction of engaging in intercourse and sexual acts is one of the familiar sights in the temple murals and sculptures of Indian temples. The explicit demonstration of intercourse and the figurines adjacent to them overwhelmed by the sight is the focal point of this picture, a significant wall sculpture around the primary temple or the *Sreekovil* of Tali Maha Shiva Kshethram. The emotions evoked in the figurines are that of *Sringara*, or romantic love, and *adbutha*, or surprise/wonder, two of the prominent *rasas* among the *Navarasas*. The dynamic use of the vibrant color palette and the exquisite detailing in the sculpture gives more intensity to the portrayal.

The carving depicts one of the significant sexual positions *Saṅgā* mentioned in the ancient Indian text *Kamasutra*, which deals with the art of living, relationships, and sexuality where the woman takes the initiative for lovemaking rather than the commonly accepted notion of men always initiating the act of sexual intercourse (Rodrigues). This counters the idea of women constantly being submissive to men and their desires and counters the gender roles and stereotypes that exist in society. Explicitly depicting or even talking about such sexual acts is considered a taboo or sin. It is looked upon with disgust in the contemporary scenario. Still, the depiction of the same in the temple murals and sculptures opposes and defies this idea of considering sexual pleasure and sexual acts, the basic need of human beings, as a taboo or disgust and normalizing and glorifying the same.

Hindu mythology and beliefs give much importance to the depiction of sexuality and the role of women in society. The ancient Hindu texts, particularly the scriptures like the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas, contain narratives incorporating sensuality, love, and sexual symbolism. The concepts in Hindu mythology like *Shiva* and *Shakthi*, where the former and latter depict the male and female counterparts respectively, prove that in Hindu mythology, gender roles and stereotyping are considerably less and regard women as a pivotal factor for the sustainability of society. The concept of considering *Shakthi* as the source of all energy and the mother goddess has evolved as an archetype over time, as similarity can be seen in different mythological interpretations. The representation of sexuality and the diverse genders that exist is not acknowledged enough and is considered taboo by society. Still, the mural paintings and sculptures of Hindu temples, especially the Tali temple, depict sexuality and the other concepts related to it, like the different body types, the homosexual and heterosexual relationships between individuals, etc, with significant glorification. Hindu mythology considers sexuality and the act of sexual intercourse as one of the primary needs of human beings without considering it as a sin. By embodying and representing the concept of sexuality, gender roles, and the portrayal of strong women, the mural paintings and sculptures of the temple, which is considered the most divine space according to Hindu mythology, counters the idea of considering it a sin and categorizing it as forbidden. Due to time constraints, the research looked at the visual analysis of selected works of murals and wood carvings of Tali temple. Yet, the scope for analyzing the entire artistic legacy is prominent with studying the narratives from the great Indian epics within the temple walls by bringing in various socio-cultural elements.

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