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Negotiating Gender through Symbols: Cultural Semiotics and Creative Agency in Malaiyaha Tamil Community of Pedro Estate, Sri Lanka

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Abstract — *This paper examines how cultural semiotics shapes the construction and negotiation of gender roles within the Malaiyaha Tamil community of Pedro Estate, Sri Lanka. While symbols such as the thali, metti, pulli kolam, and traditional attire have historically reinforced patriarchal ideologies, they also function as contested terrains open to reinterpretation and creative adaptation. Drawing on semiotic theory, gender performativity, and grassroots innovation the study situates cultural practices as both mechanisms of social regulation and resources for transformation. Ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates that the community actively re-signifies traditional markers, transforming them from tools of subordination into expressions of resilience, choice, and identity. This underscores creative intelligence as a lived, semiotic, and social practice embedded in daily life. By showing how women reshape cultural meanings, this study demonstrates how semiotics can support inclusive and socially responsible design. It argues that recognizing the creative contributions of marginalized groups helps design evolve as a transformative field that connects tradition with innovation and promotes equity and inclusion.*

Keywords: *Cultural Semiotics, Gender Roles, Malaiyaha Community, Grassroots Innovation, Creative Intelligence*

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I. Introduction

Design research must extend beyond technical problem-solving to address complex social realities shaped by identity, power, and inequality. This requires engaging with symbolic systems and lived experiences, where creativity entails not only generating novel ideas but also interpreting, reframing, and innovating within socio-cultural contexts. This paper positions cultural semiotics as a design problem rather than treating it solely as an anthropological study. By examining how symbols encode meaning within communities, designers can uncover opportunities for socially responsive interventions that are culturally sensitive, inclusive, and ethically grounded.

The Malaiyaha Tamils, descendants of 19th-century South Indian labourers brought to Sri Lanka by the British, remain a marginalized community historically tied to the tea industry of Pedro Estate, Nuwara Eliya, one of the oldest plantation regions in the country. Their social structures reflect the legacies of colonialism, economic vulnerability, and patriarchal norms. Gender roles reinforced not only through labour and familial hierarchies but also through cultural semiotics. Symbols such as the *thali* (sacred marital thread), *metti* (toe rings), and *bindi* inscribe women's identities within marital duty and domesticity, while male markers signify authority and autonomy, thereby sustaining gendered expectations. This study is guided by two research questions: (1) How do semiotic symbols in the Pedro Estate community construct and regulate gender roles? and (2) How are these symbols reinterpreted by generations in ways that can inspire design research and practice?

Younger generations increasingly reinterpret these markers, transforming them from instruments of subordination into expressions of choice, resilience, and collective heritage. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, the study examines how intuition, insight, and innovation inform the reinterpretation of cultural codes, revealing new directions for socially engaged and ethically responsive design practice.

While gender roles have been extensively studied in sociological, anthropological, and feminist literature, the influence of cultural semiotics—the ways symbols and signs convey meaning—remains underexplored, especially in marginalized communities such as the Malaiyaha Tamils of Sri Lanka. Prior research has focused on economic exploitation and labour struggles in plantation contexts, often overlooking the symbolic systems that shape identity and daily life. At Pedro Estate, cultural symbols encode gendered expectations, reinforcing hierarchical relations, limiting women's agency, and sustaining men's authority. Yet, limited studies have explored how younger generations are reinterpreting these symbols to question established conventions. This gap is especially significant for design research, which risks reinforcing cultural stereotypes when symbolic systems are ignored. By examining how cultural symbols both shape and contest gender roles within the Malaiyaha Tamil community, this study demonstrates how insights from cultural semiotics can inform innovative and contextually grounded design practices that promote equity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity.

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II. Literature Review

Examining cultural semiotics and gender in plantation communities necessitates an integrative approach, combining semiotic theory, gender studies, and research on everyday innovation. In the Malaiyaha Tamil community of Pedro Estate, symbols such as jewellery, attire, and rituals encode gendered expectations, simultaneously reinforcing women's roles within the family and estate structures while offering spaces for reinterpretation and creative transformation that reveal women's agency. This review situates these insights within the historical context of Sri Lanka's plantations, where women navigate intersecting pressures of labour, marginalization, and patriarchy. By integrating semiotics, performativity, and grassroots innovation, the study conceptualizes visual symbols in estate life as both instruments of social constraint and sites of everyday creative thinking.

A. Semiotics as a Cultural Lens

1. Defining Semiotics

Semiotics offers a critical framework for understanding how cultural signs communicate meaning and reinforce social expectations. Foundational semiotic theories by Saussure (signifier/signified) and Peirce (triadic model of interpretation) establish the structure and process of meaning-making, while Roland Barthes' model extends these ideas to reveal how meaning operates within specific cultural contexts (Yakin & Totu, 2014). Barthes (1972) demonstrates how cultural codes and myths naturalize social norms, making practices such as gendered attire or jewelry appear self-evident while reinforcing hierarchies and expectations. The first order, denotation**,** establishes the literal, objective meaning of a sign. Critically, the second order, connotation (or *myth*), then leverages the denoted meaning, transforming the literal sign into a powerful ideological tool for the reproduction of cultural power and dominant social structures.

This dual-layered framework allows for the critical decoding of cultural artifacts as systems of power.In the context of Pedro Estate, this distinction is essential for analyzing how visual symbols encode societal expectations of women (connotation/myth) while providing avenues for subtle reinterpretation. By applying Barthes' (1972) model, this study positions cultural semiotics as a design-relevant analytical framework, highlighting how everyday artifacts function as both instruments of social control and mediums for creative agency.

Building on this foundation, semiotic anthropology examines how cultural artefacts—such as rituals, symbols, and narratives—function as signs within their specific contexts, shaped by historical, geographical, and social factors (Kockelman, 2007). Signs facilitate human interaction, operating as a shared mental language that produces coherence within communities (Fiske, 1993). In plantation contexts, these semiotic practices extend beyond decoration or ritual, functioning as tools for negotiating belonging, hierarchy, and identity. This framework is essential for understanding how Malaiyaha Tamil cultural markers, far from being fixed, operate as a dynamic system that can be reinterpreted over time, a process central to this study's investigation.

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2. Cultural Semiotics and Identity

Culture serves as a repository of collective memory, shaping individual and collective identities while maintaining social cohesion through shared symbols, values, and norms (Geertz,1973). Defined as "the nonhereditary memory of the community" (Lotman et al., 1978), culture functions as a symbolic system that structures roles, expectations, and behaviours. Within this framework, gender operates as a key symbolic system that structures socialization and reproduces power relations (Best & Puzio, 2019). Understanding culture, therefore, requires analysing its symbolic codes and interpretive structures, which form the basis of social meaning and interaction (Geertz,1973; Weber et al.,1978).

Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology frames culture as a dynamic, historically constructed system of symbols through which communities construct and communicate meaning. These symbols—manifested in attire, rituals, oral traditions, and other expressive forms—mediate social realities and shape gendered roles within specific cultural contexts. In plantation contexts, such symbolic practices both reinforce and contest social hierarchies, reflecting the communities' capacity to reinterpret symbolic systems over time (Keerthi & Sri Ranjan, 2015).

B. Gender as a Cultural Construct

1. Understanding Gender Roles

Gender is a sociocultural construct shaped by societal norms rather than biology, varying across cultures and history reflecting social, political, and historical contexts. People internalize and reinforce these roles through interactions within their cultural environment (Lindsey, 2021). Gender is widely recognized by scholars as a crucial aspect of identity that individuals learn through interactions with others and also an essential component linked to the social order. Gender roles are culturally mediated, and maintained through semiotic cues embedded in language, rituals and institutional practices. These cues often naturalize hierarchies, positioning women as nurturers and men as authority figures; however scholars stress that these roles are historically and culturally contingent, underscoring their socially negotiated nature (Wood, 2007).

2. Theoretical Synthesis; Social Constructivism, Performance and Interaction

Social constructionism posits that beliefs, values, and knowledge are formed through social interactions and ongoing negotiation, rather than reflecting inherent or natural truths. Meaning emerges from human creativity, with individuals actively reproducing and reshaping cultural scripts. Within this framework, gender is not a fixed biological category but a relational and culturally mediated construct.

Plantation women, for instance, are not merely passive recipients of tradition; they actively negotiate and shape societal norms through their roles as laborers, mothers, and community participants ("The Social Constructivist Movement in Modern Psychology," 1985). Judith Butler's (1999) theory of performativity reframes gender as an enacted identity, sustained through repeated behaviors, gestures and symbols producing the appearance of stable identities while

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simultaneously allowing subversion. Plantation women's daily performances-from dress to ritual participation-both reproduce and challenge traditional gender norms, revealing how cultural scripts are continuously negotiated.

Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism further clarifies this process by emphasizing that meaning is socially constructed; individuals act based on the meanings objects and symbols hold, which are derived from interaction and adjusted through personal experience (Lindsey, 2021). In essence, symbolic interactionism highlights that human behavior is not merely reactive but interpretive—people actively construct and negotiate meanings within their social contexts. This perspective reinforces the idea that identity, roles, and gendered behaviors are products of ongoing social exchanges rather than fixed attributes.

In plantation communities, directives, rituals, and symbols are thus understood in context, with social spaces such as workplaces, households, and communal gatherings serving as micro-sites where gender roles are negotiated, resisted, or reimagined. This dynamic process parallels design practice, where meaning emerges through interaction, iteration, and reinterpretation rather than fixed rules. Framing gender as relational, performative, and contextually negotiated allows for an examination of how plantation women navigate and transform societal expectations in their everyday lives, addressing a critical gap in the literature on gendered experiences within plantation communities.

C. Creative Intelligence: From Intuition to Collective Practice

Creative intelligence can be understood as a form of situated cognition an ability to generate meaning, envision alternatives, and act innovatively within cultural and social frameworks. The NASS newsletter ("Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies [NASS]," 2025) highlights that creative thinking enables communities to generate novel approaches to entrenched challenges. This aligns with Howard Gardner's notion of multiple intelligences, where creativity is distributed rather than concentrated. Within design theory, creative intelligence is linked to abductive reasoning and semiotic interpretation. Signs, symbols, and cultural artefacts provide the raw material for innovation by reinterpreting their meanings, communities unlock new possibilities. Roland Barthes' concept of *myth* (Barthes, 1972) is particularly relevant here, what is taken as "natural" can be re-signified, turning cultural constraints into platforms for creative transformation.

1. Grassroots Innovation as Social Design

Grassroots innovation encompasses socially embedded, bottom-up practices of problem-solving and adaptation, extending design capabilities beyond professionals to communities themselves (Manzini, 2015). Such initiatives are contextually relevant, resourceful, and socially embedded, arising from lived experience, limited resources, and collective values that reinforce identity and resilience. Conceptualized as forms of social innovation, these practices mobilize shared intelligence to generate material and symbolic change, shaping narratives of dignity, belonging, and identity.

**Contact: Phone +94-715603252*
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Semiotics provides a lens to understand how grassroots innovation is expressed through cultural symbols. In plantation communities, artefacts, rituals, attire, and oral traditions function as semiotic resources for negotiating gender and identity, with innovation occurring when these symbols are reinterpreted to contest oppressive norms. This "semiotic re-design" enables creative reinterpretations that foster alternative social practices, including cooperative labour, community rituals, and new livelihood strategies.

2. Grassroots Innovation and Design for Social Change

Contemporary design extends beyond mere form-making to address systemic challenges through cultural intelligence. Grassroots innovation exemplifies how communities creatively repurpose symbolic and material resources, while Manzini's (2015) concept of 'cosmopolitan localism' emphasizes that local innovations can resonate within global contexts, rendering grassroots creativity both contextually grounded and globally relevant.

Importantly, grassroots innovation thrives in liminal spaces between tradition and modernity, between constraint and possibility (Marais et al., 2024). For the Malaiyaha Tamil community, plantation-based gender roles and cultural semiotics can be reimagined as design spaces where innovation emerges not despite marginalization, but through it. Creative thinking is best understood not as an abstract faculty but as a lived, semiotic, and social practice. Grassroots innovation illustrates how marginalized communities use it to adapt, resist, and reshape their realities. This paper frames creative intelligence through semiotics, design theory, and plantation case studies, positioning it as both an analytical lens and a lived practice of innovation.

D. Plantation Social Structures in Sri Lanka

The plantation economy, rooted in colonial labor practices, has historically gendered work: women were assigned tea-plucking roles while men undertook supervisory and infrastructure work. This division was justified semiotically, with women's "delicate" hands mythologized as ideal for tea picking a symbolic narrative masking economic exploitation (Daniel, 1993). The Malaiyaha Tamil community, brought from South India under colonial rule, occupies a marginal position in Sri Lankan society (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003) . Despite their central role in sustaining the tea industry, they face systemic marginalization, socio-economic vulnerability, and gender-based inequities. Yet, within this adversity, cultural semiotics through rituals, attire, language, and everyday practices provide both continuity and creative resilience.

Plantation life functions as a space of cultural negotiation where gender roles are simultaneously reinforced and reinterpreted. Among Sri Lanka's Malaiyaha Tamil community, historical, cultural, and socio-economic conditions shape gendered expectations manifested in rituals, attire, language, and labour. Women's dual roles as workers and caregivers illustrate how symbols of subordination can also signify resilience and agency. A semiotic lens reveals how such practices

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both sustain and transform gender roles, providing critical insights for culturally sensitive and socially responsive design.

Examining these semiotic dynamics highlights how plantation women navigate and subtly reshape imposed structures through symbolic acts of self-expression. Recognizing these lived semiotic negotiations invites a rethinking of design and social development approaches within plantation communities, positioning them not as passive recipients of aid or reform but as active cultural agents whose practices carry transformative potential.

III. Analysis

The broader research from which this paper is drawn, identified and analyzed ten semiotic symbols embedded in the everyday life of Malaiyaha Tamil women in Pedro Estate. These included bodily ornaments such as the *thali* (marriage necklace), *metti* (toe ring), bangles, *kaapu* (sacred wrist thread), and nose/ear ornaments; ritual and spatial practices such as the *pulli kolam* (rice flour threshold drawings); and attire such as the saree and *dhavani*. Each of these symbols functioned as a cultural signifier of gendered expectations, social status, and community identity, while also carrying potential for reinterpretation and negotiation.

The selection of symbols was guided by six key criteria to ensure both cultural accuracy and analytical depth: frequency of use, cultural significance, diversity of symbolic form, visual clarity, community validation, and representational inclusivity. These parameters were essential in assuring that the selected symbols reflected the lived experiences and interpretive agency of women themselves, in addition to reflecting their visibility and significance within plantation life.
While many of the identified symbols primarily reinforced patriarchal roles (e.g., bangles or *kaapu* functioning as direct markers of subordination), the *thali*, *metti*, and *pulli kolam* provided the richest evidence of reinterpretation. Women were found to actively redesign their meanings and practices, thereby transforming restrictive symbols into tools of aesthetic agency, pragmatic adaptation, and cultural innovation. Accordingly, this section focuses on four interrelated domains of symbolic expression—adornment (*thali*, *metti*), ritual-artistic practice (*pulli Kolam*), and embodied performativity (attire)—to illustrate how each reflects women's negotiation between tradition and autonomy. Collectively, these reinterpretations demonstrate grassroots innovation and design intelligence within plantation life.

A. Thali (Marriage Necklace)

1. Traditional Significance

The *thali,* central to Tamil marital rituals, symbolizes fidelity, devotion, and a woman's integration into her husband's family. In plantation contexts, it also serves as a visible marker of marital status where its absence through widowhood or personal choice – can invite stigma. Like other symbols such as the *metti,* it encodes social control through material culture linking femininity to duty and propriety.

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Figure 1

A sacred necklace traditionally worn by married women

Note. Photograph from https://thewallertimes.com/?t=the1-13-161993-3-17-65-thali+necklace

2. Reinterpretations Observed

Field interviews indicate a generational shift in perception. While elders emphasize its sacred and moral significance, younger women increasingly regard the *thali* as aesthetic rather than defining symbol of identity. One participant described it as "a tradition I respect, but not something that defines me." This reinterpretation parallels the changing attitudes toward the *metti* and attire, where symbols of duty evolve into expressions of personal choice.

3. Discussion

Through subtle acts such as redesigning or concealing the *thali*, women reinterpret tradition to align with their lived realities. These aesthetic modifications express autonomy within cultural continuity, illustrating how plantation women employ everyday design intelligence to negotiate between heritage and individuality. Together with the *metti* and *pulli kolam*, the *thali* demonstrates how semiotic practices become spaces of negotiation—where inherited symbols are neither rejected nor blindly preserved but **re-signified** to reflect evolving identities.

B. Metti (Toe Ring)

1. Traditional Significance

The *metti*, a silver toe ring worn after marriage, symbolizes marital commitment, prosperity, and fertility. It reinforces expectations of women's faithfulness and domestic responsibility, while marking the transition into married life. Within estate communities, the absence of *metti* often

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attracts criticism, framing married women as incomplete or nonconforming. It operates as both ornament and disciplinary sign, making the female body a site of visible marital identity.

Figure 2

The Metti Ceremony: A symbolic tradition where the husband places a toe ring (metti) on his wife's toe

Note. Photograph from Toe ring in Indian Culture / myLot.(n.d.).myLot. https://www.mylot.com/post/2919398/toe-ring-in-indian-culture

2. Reinterpretations Observed

Younger women increasingly deviate from this practice. Many describe the *metti* as uncomfortable for plantation labor and impractical for mobility. Instead, some opt for alternatives such as anklets or stylish toe rings that serve as fashion rather than fertility symbols. Others dispense with the *metti* entirely, asserting that their marital identity does not require visible proof. One interviewee noted: *"I wore metti for my wedding, but I don't wear it daily."*

3. Discussion

The reinterpretation of the *metti* illustrates functional innovation, where symbolic practices are adapted to the demands of labor-intensive life. While the object of marriage remains, the interpretive meaning shifts from reproductive duty to personal expression or irrelevance. This shift reflects grassroots creativity and embodied agency, demonstrating how women rework tradition under constraint, subtly contesting patriarchal narratives.

C. Pulli Kolam (Threshold Designs)

1. Traditional Significance

The *pulli kolam* is a geometric design traditionally drawn with rice flour at the entrances of homes. It is believed to invite prosperity, ward off evil, and symbolize women's role in maintaining domestic order. As a daily practice, it reinforces the association between femininity, domestic labor, and auspiciousness.

**Contact: Phone +94-715603252*
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Figure 3
Applying Pulli Kolam in front of the houses

Note. Photograph by the author, 2025.

2. Reinterpretations Observed

In Pedro Estate, women innovate significantly within this practice. Due to the cost and perishability of rice flour, many substitute chalk or synthetic powders. They also experiment with motifs, incorporating flowers, or even modern designs inspired by media culture. During festivals, *kolam* becomes a collaborative and competitive medium for creative expression, marking a shift from inherited repetition to individual and collective stylistic experimentation.

3. Discussion

Kolam exemplifies grassroots design intelligence, transforming a routine domestic task into a site of aesthetic expression and innovation. Aligning with Manzini's (2015) concept of everyday design, it demonstrates how communities creatively adapt resources and traditions to generate new meanings. Semiotic analysis reveals that *Kolam* shifts from a domestic obligation to a form of cultural authorship, positioning women as active cultural designers rather than passive tradition bearers.

The three key symbols—thali, metti, and pulli kolam—reveals a shared trajectory from instruments of patriarchal control to mediums of personal and collective agency. They illustrate how Malaiyaha Tamil women transform inherited symbols of duty into dynamic expressions of autonomy, creativity, and cultural resilience within plantation life.

**Contact: Phone +94-715603252*
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Table 1
Analysis of symbols in the Signification Process

Order / Level of Signification	*Thali* (Marriage Necklace)	*Metti* (Toe Ring)	*Pulli Kolam* (Threshold Drawing)
Denotation (First Order)	Gold pendant tied with a yellow thread, worn after the wedding.	Silver ring worn on the toe after marriage.	Geometric rice-flour design drawn at home entrances.
Signifier	Gold pendant (*Thali*).	Silver toe ring (*Metti*).	Visual pattern of dots and lines.
Signified (Literal Meaning)	Marital status, devotion, integration into husband's family.	Marital identity, fertility, household duty.	Daily ritual for prosperity and protection.
Connotation (Second Order)	Modesty, loyalty, subordination within the patriarchal system.	Fertility, prosperity, and compliance with domestic norms.	Domestic harmony and spiritual order tied to femininity.
Myth / Ideological Layer	A woman's virtue and worth are tied to her marital status.	Marriage and motherhood define feminine identity.	Women sustain culture and morality through household labor.
Reinterpretation / Contemporary Shift	Seen as an aesthetic tradition, not defining identity.	Replaced or adapted for comfort; symbolizes choice.	Transformed into a collaborative creative act, sign of agency and artistry.

Note. Created by the author.

D. Women's Attire (Dhavani, White saree, Pattu Pavadai, and Pattu saree)

Attire in Sri Lankan Malaiyaha culture operated as a semiotic code marking life stages and social identity. The *pattu pavadai*, symbolizes girlhood and the early stages of womanhood; the *dhavani* or half-saree marks the transition from childhood to adolescence and modest femininity; the *pattu saree* symbolizes wealth, social status, and marital happiness, while also expressing cultural pride and the fulfillment of societal norms; and the white saree, traditionally worn by widows, emphasizing societal expectations of renunciation, purity, and withdrawal from festive life.

Women in labour-intensive contexts creatively adapt traditional attire to suit practicality, modifying draping styles, fabric choices, and embellishments while preserving cultural identity. Like the reinterpretations of the *thali* and *metti*, these changes reveal how women negotiate between cultural symbolism and bodily comfort, transforming traditional dress into an assertion of individuality and creative agency. Together with jewelry and ritual practices clothing becomes a part of a broader semiotic system through which women balance tradition and practicality revealing the community's embedded design intelligence.

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Figure 4

Pattu Pavadi

Note. Photograph from Pedia, T. U. (2017, April 29). Pattu pavadai or langavoni. Utsavpedia

Figure 5

Dhavani

Note. Photograph from https://www.indiamart.com/proddetail/cotton-silk-pavadai-thavani-21716035297.html

Figure 6

Pattu Saree

Note. Photograph from https://www.indiamart.com/proddetail/wedding-pattu-silk-saree-21365919612.html

Across all cases, a unifying pattern emerges: symbols that once encoded patriarchal expectations of fidelity, domesticity, and subordination are being subtly yet powerfully re-signified to reflect women's lived realities of labor, aspiration, and autonomy. Collectively, these micro-acts of reinterpretation—from aesthetic modification to functional innovation—demonstrate how Malaiyaha women mobilize their embedded creativity to transform restrictive semiotic forms into fluid spaces of agency, individuality, and cultural authorship within the enduring constraints of plantation life.

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Conclusion

This study examined how semiotic symbols construct and reinterpret gender roles in the Malaiyaha Tamil community, revealing three key findings; symbolic regulation, generational reinterpretation, and design-led empowerment. Cultural semiotics in the Pedro Estate context functions both as a mechanism of regulation and as a site of innovation. While traditional symbols reinforce cultural norms, younger generations actively reinterpret them as instruments of agency and empowerment. Drawing on semiotic and design theories, the research positions plantation women as active cultural designers rather than passive custodians of tradition. Their everyday adaptations-modernized jewellery, innovative *kolam* motifs, or practical saree draping - demonstrate grassroots creative intelligence that bridges tradition and modernity.

Recognizing cultural semiotics as a dynamic, transformative practice has significant implications for inclusive and culturally grounded design. Engaging with symbols as tools for transformation enables ethical, participatory interventions that support community development and women's empowerment. Future interventions can engage the Malaiyaha Tamil community as co-creators, using semiotic insights to develop contextually relevant, culturally sensitive, and inclusive creative solutions that advance equity, innovation and transformative social impact.

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