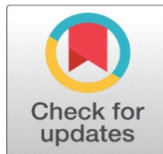
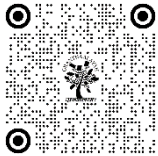


STRATEGIC USE OF EROTIC CAPITAL IN CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY: THE CASE OF KURIYEDATH THATRI AND ITS CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION IN *PARINAYAM*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the concept of erotic capital and its use by women to fight against the patriarchal system, with a focus on the historical figure, Kuriyedath Thatri (also called Thatrikutty) from the *Namboodiri* community in Kerala. The study aims to understand Thatrikutty's strategic deployment of erotic capital, which marked an end to the chastity trial of *smarthavicharam* within the community. Additionally, it critiques the 1994 Malayalam movie *Parinayam*, which is based on Thatrikutty's life, for its lack of portrayal of erotic capital. Employing a qualitative analysis, the study begins with an overview of the condition of *Namboodiri* women and the concept of *smarthavicharam*. It then delves into how Thatrikutty used her erotic capital as a weapon against the oppressive system. Subsequently, the article shifts focus to the movie *Parinayam*, detailing the film's failure to depict erotic capital. The findings reveal how women can use erotic capital as a powerful weapon to challenge patriarchal oppressions, as exemplified by Thatrikutty's actions. The study also finds out that the lack of portrayal of erotic capital in the movie *Parinayam*, accounts to the attempt to suit the movie to societal thoughts, concerning the response of a wide audience.

Keywords: Erotic Capital, Smarthavicharam, Thatrikutty, Strategic Resistance, Patriarchal System, Gender Dynamics, Malayalam Cinema, Namboodiri Community

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of the social benefits of erotic capital has increased in recent times. It has emerged as a thought-provoking and controversial topic of discussion in social sciences, gender studies, etc. The concept of erotic capital was coined by Catherine Hakim (2011) in her book *Honey Money*, which refers to an individual's sexual attractiveness (p. 12). It encompasses a range of behaviors and attitudes that contribute to a person's ability to evoke desire in others on a sexual level. However, there are a lot of debates on how erotic capital empowers an individual. People

argue that the use of erotic capital can objectify the bodies, especially of women, and reinforce the prevailing stereotypes. But women using their bodies intentionally to fulfill their needs is different from that of the other. The use of erotic power to seek revenge, in particular, can boost self-confidence and allows women to reclaim their control over their bodies and challenge societal norms [Lorde \(1978\)](#), p. 88. By placing it within the theoretical context of erotic capital, the article examines how Thatrikutty, a captivating historical figure in Kerala, used her erotic power to bring an end to the age-old patriarchal practice of *smarthavicharam* (a chastity trial which was prevalent among the *Namboodiri* community of Kerala).

Prior to exploring the tale of Thatrikutty, the article provides an overview of the miserable condition of women in the *Namboodiri* community in Kerala and explains the concept of *smarthavicharam*, which was a trial held when the chastity of a *Namboodiri* woman was doubted. The article then explores the remarkable account of Thatrikutty, who marked an end to this trial within the *Namboodiri* community in Kerala. During *smarthavicharam*, the accused woman would be asked to disclose the name of the man with whom she was suspected of having a relationship, leading to her subsequent excommunication. Unlike others, Thatrikutty gave the names of sixty-four men with whom she had been in sexual relationships, since her childhood. She meticulously retained evidence of her relationships with these men, and demanded an equal punishment for all if she were to be punished at all and marked an end to *smarthavicharam*. This argument is also supported in the article with insights from two popular Malayalam works about Thatrikutty's *smarthavicharam*, Lalithambika Antharjanam's short story, "The Goddess of Revenge" (1997) and Matampu Kunjukuttan's *Outcaste* or *Bhrushtu* (1996).

According to Prasad (1999), Srinivas (2006), and Bhugubanda (2018), the South Indian movies have an inseparable relation with politics and religion [Sooraj et al. \(2023\)](#), pp. 119-120. Movies adapted from the stories of historical figures can be taken as few of the examples for these (for instance, *Unniyarcha* (1961), *Kayamkulam Kochunni* (2018), *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (2009)). The article also adds to the study, a critical analysis of one such Malayalam movie *Parinayam* (1994), which is based on Thatrikutty's life [Amrita TV Archives. \(2023\)](#), [Asianetnews. \(2013\)](#). Mohini (*Unnimaya Antharjanam*) is the female protagonist in the movie who faces *smarthavicharam*, soon after the death of her aged husband for having a sexual relationship with an upcoming *Kathakali* artist, Madhavan. While the film portrays a similar narrative, it fails to capture Thatrikutty's strategic use of erotic capital, which had ultimately brought an end to *smarthavicharam*. Therefore, while highlighting Thatrikutty's courageous resistance against patriarchal oppression with the use of erotic capital, the article also critically examines the absence of its portrayal in the movie, *Parinayam*.

2. METHODOLOGY

The method adopted in this article was a qualitative approach. Lalithambika Antharjanam's "The Goddess of Revenge" (1997), Matampu Kunjukuttan's *Outcaste* or *Bhrushtu* (1996), and the movie *Parinayam* (1994) were used as the primary sources. Catherine Hakim's book, *Honey Money* (2011), in which the concept of erotic capital was introduced, was used as the theoretical framework. It has followed a thematic analysis to study the strategic use of erotic capital that Thatrikutty adopted to challenge the patriarchal institution of *smarthavicharam*. Moreover, the article has done a comprehensive literature review to give a detailed understanding of *Namboodiri* community, the condition of *Namboodiri* women, and the practice of *smarthavicharam*. Critical and comparative analyses were carried out to exhibit the

lack of portrayal of erotic capital in the movie *Parinayam*. It has also employed a discourse analysis of the movie to examine how the dialogues and communication contribute to the article's objective. Several other articles and YouTube videos about Thatrikutty's life, *smarthavicharam*, and filmmakers' discussions on *Parinayam* were also referred as secondary sources to support the arguments made in the article.

3. WOMEN AND SMARTHAVICHARAM

Until the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the *Namboodiri* community in Kerala remained among the highest ranks on the social ladder. Being at the apex of the caste hierarchy, regimentation remained a common practice among them. Education was strictly caste-based, with higher education accessible only to *Namboodiris*. Sreekumar & K (2020) in their article, "Temporal and Spatial Coordinates of *Smarthavicharam*", elucidate about the interrelation between Sanskrit and *Namboodiris*. The *Namboodiris* leveraged their monopoly over Sanskrit as the rationale to maintain their supremacy in the caste hierarchy and for their atrocities including murders (p. 5). They were reluctant to bring about changes within the community.

While men in the community enjoyed their positions and advantages conferred by the caste, the plight of women were markedly different. George (2018) in his article, "Role of Women in the Transformation of Namboothiri Community in the 18th and 19th Century Travancore", points out that a *Namboodiri* woman was called *antharjanam*, which literally meant, women inside the house. Despite the community's elevated status, many women wished that no one would ever be born as a *Namboodiri* woman, due to the stark disparities in privilege within the caste (p. 784). M (2014) in her article, "The Plight of Namboodiri Women in Colonial Kerala-Reading Through Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Cast Me Out If You Will*", observes that the *Namboodiri* girls after reaching puberty were called as *asuryampasyakal* which meant those who were restricted to see the sun (p. 784). They had no right over the property and were married off with high dowry (many of their families going bankrupt), just to remain as a "good wife" and a "good mother" inside the four walls of their husbands' house. Their participation in public meetings or employment were considered sinful. From the day of her birth, which was considered as a disappointment for the family (p. 16), a *Namboodiri* woman faced discrimination throughout her life. Rituals were performed to ensure the birth of sons in the families, perpetuating the cycle of gender inequality.

Education for *Namboodiri* women is yet another aspect to be observed which was considered immoral. *Upanayana* or the ceremony which marked the beginning of education was practiced only for *Namboodiri* boys Gladston (2006). It was even believed that educating *Namboodiri* girls might lead to their widowhood in the future Gladston (2006). Additionally, the community was concerned that educated women would question traditional beliefs and customs, thereby challenging the established order Gladston (2006). They usually remained inside their homes, and if at all had to go out, were supposed to cover their faces with an umbrella, and were to be accompanied by a female companion M (2014) p. 784. This stringent control over education and mobility further reinforced the subjugation and seclusion of *Namboodiri* women within the patriarchal society.

Child marriage was prevalent within the community with girls as young as 5 to 7 years old being married to much older men. These young brides found themselves confined within the spaces at their husband's houses, shrouded with mystery and

uncertainty. As polygamy was allowed, young women who were married to older men, experienced domestic assaults from the other wives of her husband.

Men could have multiple marriages while widow remarriage was strictly restricted. Widowed women wore white and were ostracized from all social gatherings M (2002), p. 43. Their heads were shaved and they were restricted from using luxury ornaments (p. 43). They were only allowed to apply *bhasmam* (made of ashes of cow dung) on their forehead and were even considered as a sign of ill fortune within the community.

As understood by Sreekumar & K (2020) from Aji. K. M.'s insights in "Temporal and Spatial Coordinates of *Smarthavicharam*", central to the ethos of the *Namboodiri* community was to preserve racial purity. This was achieved with stringent control over women's sexuality (p. 18). M (2002) in her PhD thesis, delves into how the *Namboodiri* community meticulously safeguarded the "racial purity", both internally and externally. The internal purity was maintained by controlling women's sexuality and bodies so as to not produce offspring from the blood of a non-*Namboodiri* and external purity was secured by not touching anyone outside the community. Paternity was highly revered and the glorification of womanhood led many women to adhere to these patriarchal norms and beliefs without external pressure (p. 82). Hence, their bodies came under the control of the community's entrenched biased structures. Additionally, exogamous marriages were vehemently discouraged to protect the age-old traditions and beliefs which were considered the soul of the community's identity (p. 18).

As detailed by N (2021) in her article "Re-Reading *Smarthavicharam*", in order to keep the hold of enormous family possessions undivided, the community only allowed the elder sons to get married and often to multiple spouses. However, the younger sons could have sexual relationships with women from the *Nair* community, referred to as *sambandham* (p. 21). The condition of *Namboodiri* women was different. A lifelong celibacy or an early marriage with aged men were the options available to them. This reveals the piteous lives that *Namboodiri* women had to lead, sequestered at their homes, with fully escorted and shrouded movements.

The chastity of *Namboodiri* women held profound implications for their entire lives. The *Namboodiri* communities followed their own laws to protect their caste privilege M (2002), p. 46. If a *Namboodiri* woman was suspected to have exercised her sexual agency voluntarily or involuntarily, her chastity would be questioned by a trial called *Smarthavicharam* under a written approval from the king M (2002), p. 46. Revathy Hemachandran and Vinay (2023) in their article, "Traversing the Inner Courtyard to the Public Sphere: Exploring Lalithambika Antharjanam's Short Stories as Narratives of Protest in Early Twentieth Century Kerala", explain that such punishments were maintained to safeguard "the high-caste" woman's sexuality and to protect "the purity of the caste". As a consequence, they were subjected to a number of restrictions. The reasons for the trial were not always a sexual act from the woman, but worthless causes ranging from, forgetting to carry an umbrella, to being seen by a man other than her spouse, to prostitution (p. 6).

As put forth by M (2002) in her PhD thesis, *smarthavicharam* usually had six stages: -*dasivicharam*, *anjampurayilakkal*, *swaroopam chollal*, *dehavichedanam*, *udakavicchedam*, and *suddhabhojanam* (pp. 47-48). Once found culpable, the woman would be transferred to a different space (small and confined) known as *Anjampura*, with the most trusted female servant (*dasi*) who would guard her from other men or from committing suicide. The accused woman would thereafter be referred as *sadhanam* (p. 47). During the entire trial-period, the family of the

accused was also obliged to stay away from “enjoying” the privileges of the caste. The accused’s family had to spend a ransom amount to a team who would be appointed to conduct the trial, headed by a judge or *smarthan*. This group typically comprised two law experts (*mimamsakas*), one regulator of order (*akakoyma*), and one representative of the king (*purakoyma*) who usually carried a sword with him (p. 48). Throughout the duration of the trial, the group would be treated with splendid feasts and accommodation by the accused’s kinsmen who were obliged to luxuriously entertain them after every day’s proceedings.

The trial commences outside the *anjampura* by reading out the king’s sanction. The conversation between the *smarthan* and the accused takes place through the medium of *dasi*, as the direct communication between the first two was restricted (M (2002), p. 49). The interrogation would then begin by asking the whereabouts of the accused, for which the *smarthan* acts surprised at her shameless situation. As soon as this is over, the *smarthan*, accompanied by the team, questions the accused until she admits the offence charged against her, which in most cases, might not happen soon. The team continues this practice as many days as the accused takes to admit the offence. A report of the trial is submitted and read out at the end of every day by the *smarthan*, subject to scrutiny by the *akakoyma*. Whenever the *akakoyma* finds any error in the *smarthan*’s description, he would remove a piece of cloth from his shoulder and place it on the floor. The *smarthan* would take it as a clue and would correct himself. Any further discrepancies would prompt the *smarthan* to revisit the accused to get the complete information for the questions expected to have been asked and the cloth is replaced by the *akakoyma* on his shoulder after that (Sreekumar & K (2020)). The trial continues till the accused makes the confession, a process that could extend for weeks, months or even years.

Figure 1



Figure 1 Smarthavicharam

Source From Kuriyedath Thathriyude Smarthavicharam [Photograph], by Maddy, 2009, maddy06.blogspot.com (https://maddy06.blogspot.com/2009/07/kuriyedathu-thathriyude-smartavicharam.html).

Sreekumar & K (2020) in their article, “Temporal and Spatial Coordinates of Smarthavicharam”, have explained that several insolent measures were adopted to make the accused admit the “crime”. From rolling the accused in a mat from the roof to the courtyard, to physical and emotional harassment including continuous persuasion and starvation from the *smarthan*, the proceedings were extreme (p. 13). In a further display of cruelty, the accused’s room would be deliberately filled with rodents and poisonous snakes like cobras (p. 13). Once the accused confesses, the trial moves onto the next phase. The accused would be examined and re-examined

to extract every detail about her transgression. Efforts were made to identify the man responsible for her pregnancy which might also take time. Moreover, the team would compel her to reveal the man's identity. The adulterer would get a chance to prove his innocence through the boiling-oil ordeal (if the adulterer can retrieve an item from the boiling oil without getting harmed, his innocence is proved) (p. 14). A detailed record of the time, place, and occurrences would be meticulously collected and recorded. Similar to that of the previous days, the *smarthan* would present the record in front of the whole team including the king, which will again be inspected by the *akakoyma*. The adulterer's name is revealed by a Tamil Brahmin (*kutti pattar*), who would then bathe in a pond to absolve himself of the sin of uttering the former's name (p. 15).

As added by M (2002), the verdict of the accused, known as *swaroopam chollal*, will be read out in public, followed by the hand-clapping ceremony or *kaikottal* which marks the official deprivation of the accused from all the caste privileges. The *smarthan* declares the accused as excommunicated and her umbrella (considered as the symbol of chastity and status) is taken away from her by a person from the *Nair* community (pp. 51-52). As she walks out of the house, the kinsmen perform rituals signifying her spiritual death, further cementing her social demise. In case, if the woman had died during the course of the trial, the same rituals (*udakavicchedam*) would be carried out as if she were alive (p. 52). To signify the end of this ordeal, the excommunicated woman's family hosts a feast (*suddhabhojanam*) (p. 52), as a form of purification. In most cases, men from different religions wait outside the house to take her home for sexual needs or to offer her a marriage. Some excommunicated women would relocate to a distant land for survival, join their lovers, or may be forced into a life of prostitution. Having established a thorough understanding of *smarthavicharam* and the *Namboodiri* community, the article will now focus on Thatrikutti's use of her erotic capital against *smarthavicharam*.

4. EROTIC CAPITAL OF THATRIKUTTY: AN END TO SMARTHAVICHARAM

The chastity trial of Kuriyedath Thatri in 1905 stands as a seminal event in the history of *smarthavicharam*, marking a departure from the previous trials in several key aspects. Not only does it shed light on her personal experiences, but also underscores its significance on questioning the traditional conduct of *smarthavicharam*, which had imposed stringent moral codes on women. The state's active and direct participation was notable in Thatri's trial. It gained attention in revealing how malleable the norms and beliefs of a particular caste were. As mentioned by Rajeev Kumaramkandath in his Ph. D thesis (2013), "The Discursive Formation of Sexual Subjects: Sexual Morality and Homosexuality in Keralam", *smarthavicharam* and Thatrikutti are closely linked that the memories of one cannot exist without the other (p. 91).

Thatri was born in 1885 to Ashtamurthy *Namboodiri* of Kalpakasseri Illam at Arangottukara of today's Thrissur district. She got married at the age of ten to Raman *Namboodiri* of *Chemmanthitta Kuriyedath Illam* and later came to be known as Kuriyedath Thatri. While Thatri hadn't even reached her puberty at the time of her marriage, Raman *Namboodiri* was in his early 60s and had many other wives. Later, she was accused of adultery and the historic event of Kuriyedath Thatri's *smarthavicharam* happened.

In her defiance against the patriarchal oppression of *smarthavicharam*, Thatri wielded a potent form of power: erotic capital. During an era when *Namboodiri* women remained veiled from the public eye, Thatrikutti used her body to fight

against the misogynistic system which resulted in the excommunication of sixty-four men. Matampu Kunjukuttan's *Outcaste* or *Bhrushtu* (1996) clearly draws in the picture of Thatrikutty as a *Namboodiri* woman who used her sexuality to fight against the innumerable restrictions placed on her. She intentionally got into sexual associations with several men and kept the associations confidential (p. 9). Alankode Leelakrishnan begins his work, *Thathrikuttiyude Smarthavicharam* with a quote of V. T. Bhattathirippadu which declares Thatri's revenge as a guerilla model warfare against the patriarchal set up of *Namboodiri* community by using "the same plan" of action that they used against her [Sreekumar & K \(2020\)](#), p. 38. By "the same plan", he meant the use of her body to question the community's patriarchal system.

To understand how Thatrikutty employed this plan, one must know what the concept of erotic capital is. Erotic capital is one of the unidentified assets that has played a crucial role in social relations. It is acquired as a result of a person's sexual attractiveness and is both culturally and socially important [Hakim \(2011\)](#), p. 12. [Lorde \(1978\)](#) in *The Uses of Erotic* asserts that erotic capital is a resource deeply rooted in the power of a person's unexpressed feelings (p. 87). Catherine [Hakim \(2011\)](#) in *Honey Money* states that, male judgments about sexual interaction with women depended upon their erotic attractiveness (p. 140). This imbalance in sexual interest among men and women, indirectly gave room for women to exploit their erotic capital more (p. 40).

Throughout history, patriarchy has consistently objectified women's eroticism and allure. The reluctance of women to explore their erotic potential stems largely from the stereotypes imposed by male dominance on female sexuality [Lorde \(1978\)](#), p. 88. However, a shift occurred when women recognised and embraced their erotic power [Lorde \(1978\)](#), p. 90. There are several instances where women have used it to fight against the patriarchal forces and systems. Thatrikutty is one such example of a woman who used her erotic power to question the chastity trial or *smarthavicharam* which was prevalent in the *Namboodiri* community.

While *Namboodiri* women were trapped within the confines of false consciousness dictating the ideals of womanhood, Thatrikutty emerged as a vibrant and assertive young woman, opposing societal norms. She became a vivacious woman who captivated the minds and dreams of both young and old men alike [Maddy. \(2009\)](#). Despite the societal constraints imposed on her, she began to engage in intimate encounters with various men, ultimately becoming a sensual prostitute whose allure spoiled the sleep of many [Maddy. \(2009\)](#). The only obstacle was her identity, as people were aware of the consequences of having physical union with a *Namboodiri* woman. Thus, she maintained the secrecy, knowing well that ignorance on their part remained as an advantage for her.

Lalithambika Antharjanam in "The Goddess of Revenge" (1938) gives a narration from Thatrikutty's perspectives about what led her to the deeds she conducted and how people reacted to it. She has illustrated Thatri's beauty through her protagonist's (Thatrikutty's) reflections on her own allure and vitality [Krishnankutty \(1998\)](#). According to her,

And yet, when I combed my hair, placed the bright red *sinduram* between my eyebrows, and peered out through the barred door, all I felt was a desire to see the world, or, at most, an innocent longing that someone should notice how beautiful I was. [Krishnankutty \(1998\)](#), p. 24

This reflects Thatri's confidence in her erotic power which she navigated to seek revenge against the patriarchal forces. Her fame as the most beautiful prostitute, as she was called, spread wide and all those who met her left delighted [Krishnankutty \(1998\)](#), p. 27. In the short story, Lalithambika Antharjanam narrates

an event in Thatrikutty's life when her husband, unaware of her true identity, approached her. She found herself triumphant when her husband, who had previously shouted at her to "go and learn to be a prostitute" [Krishnankutty \(1998\)](#), p. 27, acknowledged her as the most intelligent and passionate woman he had ever encountered. After experiencing a lasting impression, he realised she was Thatrikutty, his wife. This revelation paved the way for the historic *smarthavicharam* of Kuriyedath Thatri [Krishnankutty \(1998\)](#), pp. 27-28.

As mentioned by Lalithambika Antharjanam in her short story, Thatrikutty's *smarthavicharam* happened soon after her husband got to know about her involvements with many men. During the time of her trial, Thatri sat with a serene face ready to answer the questions. She reflected the power of a bold and beautiful woman who had been controlling many sexually deprived men for the past few years. The *smarthan* who monitored Thatrikutty's trial was Jathavedan *Namboodiri*. Unlike others, Thatri accepted the offences imposed on her without any reluctance and began to list the names of sixty-four men who had been in sexual relation with her. But she stated that the rule of law must be performed equally. If she was meant to be punished, then all the men who were involved in sexual relations with her must also be pronounced guilty. This turned things upside down and brought a remarkable change in the history of *smarthavicharam*. Contrary to the tradition where only Thatri would have been held accountable, the king agreed for an impartial justice, ordering an investigation upon all the men involved. As the names started to come out, men quivered, some fleeing from the nation, and others fervently performing *poojas* in hope that Thatri would forget their names. Anticipating the chastity trial of *smarthavicharam* in her future, Thatrikutty had kept the proofs of those liaisons in the form of rewards she received in return or through a record of birth marks like moles on bodies of the men involved [Kunjukuttan \(1996\)](#), p. 9. She had an account of the exact place, time, and special days of festivals when the unions took place. It is also believed that the trial was shut when Thatri showed a ring to the king before disclosing the sixty fifth name, suggesting a possible direct connection to the king himself, either as the sixty-fifth man or someone very close to him in stature [Asianetnews. \(2023\)](#). It is also rumored that she could have gone from sixty-five to sixty thousand names if it hadn't stopped then [Maddy. \(2009\)](#). Along with her excommunication, she also brought down many of them who held esteemed positions in society [Mohanan \(2013\)](#), p. 109.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Thatrikutty's Trial

Source From Thatrikutty's *Smarthavicharam* 1905 [Photograph] by Murali T, Innu Art Store (https://www.innu.in/shop/art_details/707/Murali-T-Thatrikuttys-Smarthavicharam-1905-canvas-prints-art).

[M \(2002\)](#) has illustrated the details of the sixty-four men named by Kuriyedath Thatri during the trial. Having her first experience with her music teacher, the list included men from different socio-cultural backgrounds who were highly revered

in the society, including scholars, artists, astrologers, actors, etc. (p. 64). The first was from her music teacher Pushpakath Narayanan *Nambeeshan* at the *kulappura* (bathhouse) when she came to take a bath, even before reaching an age where she could realise what was happening. The second was with her maternal uncle Okki Illath Itteri *Namboodiri* who also mediated for the third with Akazhi *Namboodiri* who asked for it in return for the necklace he gave her (p. 59). The fourth was with her childhood friend, Mundayoor Illath Madhavan *Namboodiri* and thereafter with her sister's husband when they came for her sister's delivery. The latter had some beautiful collections of *mundu* with him and he agreed to give one of those to Thatri in return for physical union with her (p. 60). Her father also took advantage of her while she was massaging him during his stomach ailment (p. 61). She was asked for sexual unions from other close relatives such as her cousin, Kalpakassery Narayanan *Namboodiri* (p. 62).

The most remarkable among these was her relations with *Kathakali* artists. Thatri's request to play the role of Lalitha in the play *Narakasuravadham* was accepted by Narikotta Raman *Nair* in return for a sexual offering from her. Another prominent *Kathakali* artist was Kavungal Sankara *Panicker* who was invited by Thatri to Kalpakassery (her house) to perform *Cholliyattam* (a *Kathakali* performance) for her. The play was *Keechakavadham* from the *Mahabharata*. In one scene, an infatuated Keechaka urges Draupadi to meet him. Instead, Bhima disguises himself as Draupadi and ultimately kills Keechaka. This specific enactment which involves Bhima concealing under a sheet while Keechaka mistaking Bhima for Draupadi, generates an erotic moment in the play. It ended up with the physical union of Thatri and Kavungal Sankara *Panicker* as Keechaka and Bhima laid together in the scene [M \(2002\)](#), p. 64. All these were among a few from the list of sixty-four men which comprised men from "prominent" caste groups including *Namboodiri*, *Nair*, *Nambyar*, etc. As noted by [Sreekumar & K \(2020\)](#) in "Temporal and Spatial Coordinates of Smarthavicharam", many influential men were already aware of Thatri's relationships but chose not to report them, as they were among those on whom the responsibility to maintain the laws of the caste system rested (p. 30).

In spite of the mens' attempts to refute Thatri's accusations with various explanations, she presented strong evidence against each one, leaving no room for escape from excommunication. With the king's scrutiny of the data collected from *smarthan*, all the implicated men were deemed guilty, and the king agreed to mete out equal punishments for all. However, many men tried to disprove Thatri by stating her as mentally unstable. As mentioned by [M \(2002\)](#), out of the sixty-four men, two had already died and three could not attend due to illness. Even though none among them accepted their involvement, neither could they prove their innocence. The *smarthan* even praised her for her intense memory and the strong arguments (p. 70).

Thatrikutty ingeniously turned the very system that oppressed her, against the patriarchal forces that wielded it. Her trial is believed to have signaled the demise of the entire system of *smarthavicharam* [Chandwani \(2022\)](#). As part of Chithra [Mohanan \(2013\)](#) analysis of Madampu Kunjukuttan's novel *Bhrushtu* or *Outcaste* in her PhD thesis "Tradition in Madampu Kunjukuttan's Novel", she states that Thatrikutty (represented by the character *Papthikutty* in the novel) used her erotic power to fight against a community that upheld women's chastity, which they believed could be tainted even by a man's gaze (p. 112). With her enhanced beauty, Thatrikutty used her body to survive and abolish an age-old patriarchal tradition that controlled a woman's sexual freedom (p. 109).

In Lalithambika Antharjanam's rendition, "The Goddess of Revenge", Thatrikutty emerges as a complex character, portrayed from her own perspective. She argues passionately that her actions were a form of resistance against the patriarchal structures that subjugated women, to highlight the inherent strength and desires of *Namboodiri* women that society often overlooked and suppressed [Krishnankutty \(1998\)](#), p. 25. Her act is mentioned to have not only served as a protest but also as a beacon of hope for the entire *Namboodiri* women community. The narrative underscores Thatri's pivotal role in emancipating women from the shackles of *smarthavicharam*, emphasizing that she is a figure no *Namboodiri* woman should ever forget [Krishnankutty \(1998\)](#), p. 29. Her trial sparked vital discussions about the entrenched oppressive beliefs within caste systems, opening new avenues for challenging age-old norms.

Despite these attempts, she faced widespread disdain from her community. According to the information gathered and shared by News18 Kerala on their YouTube channel, it seems that even after many years since her death, Thatrikutty continues to face significant rejection from the residents of her hometown. She is merely considered as, a woman whose actions caused shame for her family, that ended up in their departure from their hometown and the subsequent burning of their *illam* (their house) out of disgrace [News18 Kerala. \(2024\)](#).

There are numerous other literary works about Thatrikutty's *smarthavicharam*. *Thathrikuttiyude Smarthavicharam* by Alankode Leelakrishnan, *Kuriyedath Thathri* by Nandan, and *Smarthavicharam* by P Bhaskaranunni are some of these. Additionally, several short stories by Lalithambika Antharjanam have also delved into this subject matter. One of the notable critical examinations of this narrative is Oduvil Kunhikrishna Menon's *Aparaadhiyaya Antharjanam*. These literary explorations contribute a deeper understanding and dialogue, surrounding Thatrikutty's story and the practice of *smarthavicharam*.

5. THE LACK OF PORTRAYAL OF EROTIC CAPITAL IN *PARINAYAM*

The story of Thatrikutty has been explored in various ways, blended with different fictional narratives and ideologies [Kumaramkandath \(2013\)](#), p. 142. The 1994 Malayalam movie *Parinayam* stands as a profound portrayal of the struggles and triumphs of *Namboodiri* women, inspired by the life of Thatrikutty. This film mirrors the harsh realities faced by *Namboodiri* women, who lived in the shadows of a society that was dictated by stringent customs and archaic beliefs. Here, we examine the lack of portrayal of erotic capital in the representation of Thatrikutty, through the character of Unnimaya Antharjanam, enacted by the actress Mohini.

Directed by Hariharan and written by M. T. Vasudevan Nair, *Parinayam* revolves around the mental and physical dilemma that a *Namboodiri* widow had to experience for losing her "chastity". As mentioned by its writer and director, the movie is a cinematic representation of the life of Kuriyedath Thatri [Asianetnews. \(2023\)](#), [Asianetnews. \(2013\)](#). The protagonist, Unnimaya Antharjanam (Mohini), a young *Namboodiri* woman, is married to Palakkunnath *Namboodiri* (Jagannatha Varma), a man as old as her grandfather and faces physical and verbal abuse from the other wives of her husband. Upon Palakkunnath *Namboodiri's* death, shortly after their marriage, Unnimaya gets stuck into the solitary life of a widow, deprived from all societal connections and joy. Her plight intensifies when she falls in love with an upcoming *Kathakali* artist, Madhavan (Vineeth) and subsequently becomes pregnant. As mentioned before, being a *Namboodiri* woman, Unnimaya is then subjected to *smarthavicharam* resulting in her being labeled as *sadhanam*. [S \(2022\)](#)

in her article, “Unveiling the Veiled: Cinematic Representation of Widowhood in India with Specific Reference to the Kerala Society”, points out that the remaining part of the movie shows the psychological and physiological trauma that the protagonist undergoes throughout the trial (p. 24). Nevertheless, the movie concludes with her rejection of Madhavan and her attainment of financial independence (p. 24).

In the movie, Unnimaya’s trial has similarity with that of Thatrikutty’s, particularly in the revolutionary way she answers the questions posed to her. She interrogates the *smarthan* and the other members in the trial team with evidence drawn from the traditional texts, surprising them with her assertiveness. As mentioned before, a *dasi* stands as an intermediate between the accused and the trial team M (2002), p. 49, since the former was not allowed to communicate directly to the latter. However, Unnimaya challenges this by asking the *smarthan* whether he cannot hear her voice directly. She states that it would be easier to speak for herself rather than relying on the *dasi*, shocking the trial team. She firmly denies committing any crime when questioned by the *smarthan*, and steps out of her room to confront the men assembled. She openly admits her pregnancy and declares it as not a mistake, justifying that she is a woman, and women are created by god with the ability to give birth, shifting the blame to god’s design. When the *smarthan* states that the *Vedas* prohibit a widow from becoming pregnant, Unnimaya counters by pointing out that, Vyasa Muni, the author of the *Vedas* himself used a widow’s body to conceive a son Millennium Cinemas. (2015).

Unnimaya didn’t choose to terminate her pregnancy, even though doing so would have allowed to avoid the trial. Unnimaya’s decision, despite Maadhu’s (one of Unnimaya’s maids) suggestion to have an abortion Millennium Cinemas. (2015), was in the hope of Madhavan’s return. When asked who was responsible for her pregnancy, Unnimaya boldly declares it was many men, echoing Thatrikutty’s own declaration of naming 64 men Millennium Cinemas. (2015). However, the motivations behind their actions differ significantly. Even though Unnimaya is against the practice of *smarthavicharam*, her stance was aimed at protecting her lover, Madhavan, who had requested her not to reveal his name Millennium Cinemas. (2015), while Thatrikutty’s was a strategic action to dismantle the practice. The distinction is critical, as it highlights Unnimaya’s departure from Thatrikutty’s use of erotic capital as a tool of resistance. This calls for a criticism for the film’s lack of depiction of erotic capital, in the context of Thatrikutty’s real-life story.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Unnimaya, the protagonist in *Parinayam*

Source Screenshot from *Parinayam* (Hariharan (2015), 1:46:11).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yr81NDVJ6VM&t=6356s>

The lack of portrayal of erotic capital can be attributed to various reasons. As Lorde (1978) in *Uses of Erotic* explains, women’s erotic power has been warned by

patriarchal forces, misnaming it as pornographic (p. 88). In a patriarchal society, if the real story were depicted, the film might not have received a positive response. Moreover, the belief in such a society that a woman's strength lies in suppressing her erotic power (p. 88), could have influenced the decision of the filmmakers, to avoid portraying how Thatrikutty used her erotic power in real life. Given the movie's wide audience, the filmmakers might have intentionally steered clear of showing this aspect.

Over time, the stories of historical figures often evolve when adapted in art and literature leading to changes. Similarly, Thatrikutty's story is transformed by the removal of sexual elements, placing her as a moral symbolic figure. This reinterpretation created a gap between her actual deeds and how she got remembered [Kumaramkandath \(2013\)](#), p. 141. The movie, *Parinayam*, represented the character Unnimaya in a way so as to suit the time period and societal thoughts. Moreover, there are several scenes that indirectly criticise Thatrikutty's actions. For instance, when Madhavan meets Unnimaya to request not to reveal his name during the trial as it would ruin his reputation and career as a *Kathakali* artist, Unnimaya responds that she won't, questioning what she would gain by destroying someone's life,

Pedikkanda, oraale nashippichittu enikkenthu kittaan? (Trans. Don't be afraid, what will I gain by destroying someone?) (1:49:37-1:49:45, [Millennium Cinemas. \(2015\)](#))

This is an indirect criticism towards Thatrikutty, who had named 64 men who had to suffer for their deeds. Even though the movie is an adaptation of Thatrikutty's life, this particular scene subtly conveys criticism of her actions.

One might argue that Unnimaya's lack of use of erotic capital, unlike Thatrikutty, can be attributed to their different life situations. The movie does not portray the sexual abuse Thatrikutty faced; instead, it focuses on Unnimaya's grief resulting from her lover's denial. However, this cannot justify the omission of erotic capital, as it is part of the movie's attempt to sanitize Thatrikutty's story. Unnimaya's characterisation is one of victimhood and purity, devoid of the strategic use of her sexuality that Thatrikutty had used. Moreover, by tracing Unnimaya's path towards financial independence and self-assertion rather than portraying the use of erotic capital as a form of resistance, the film reshapes Thatrikutty's story into one that fits the prevailing cultural values of the time

6. CONCLUSION

With a nuanced understanding of her actions, the article finds out how Thatrikutty ingeniously leveraged her erotic capital to challenge the oppressive system of *smarthavicharam*, within the *Namboodiri* community of Kerala. By naming sixty-four men (with evidence to identify them) as accused, Thatrikutty demanded equal punishment for all involved and marked an end to the chastity trial. The article also strengthens this argument with propositions from Lalithambika Antharjanam's "The Goddess of Revenge" and Matampu Kunjukuttan's *Outcaste* or *Bhrushtu*, which have attempted to provide the story from Thatrikutty's own perspectives.

The article also argues that the 1994 Malayalam movie *Parinayam*, which is based on the story of Thatrikutty [Amrita TV Archives. \(2023\)](#), [Asianetnews. \(2013\)](#), falls short in portraying her use of erotic capital to question the system. The film's omission of the explicit use of erotic capital, which was a significant aspect of Thatrikutty's resistance, reflects societal expectations and cultural norms that often

suppress womens' erotic power. *Parinayam* presents a sanitised version of Thatrikutty's story, thereby redesigning her to fit the cultural and moral framework of its time. This analysis calls for the need to bring more authentic representations of womens' use of erotic capital as a resistance against patriarchal oppression.

Although Thatrikutty is widely acknowledged among literary writers and thinkers for her use of erotic power, she continues to face criticism and rejection from her local community. However, the article underscores the pivotal role of a woman's erotic capital in challenging the patriarchal beliefs and customs that have restricted womens' sexual freedom. Overall, this study contributes to the ongoing discussions about the benefits of erotic capital, focusing its potential for empowerment when used intentionally by women.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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