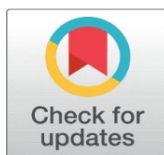
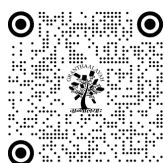


RE-READING OF VULNERABLE MINDS IN COSTUME- A SELECT STUDY ON TWO MALAYALAM MOVIES

Cynthia S. Karmel ¹, Dr. Aiswarya Lakshmi M ²

¹ Research Scholar from Amrita School of Arts and Science Kochi, India

² Assistant Professor in English, Amrita School of Arts and Sciences Kochi, India



DOI

10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.1679

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Masculinity as depicted in visual culture is often appropriated as the ideal to adhere in most of the representations, whether it is cinema or performing arts. Patriarchal order tends to project masculinity as the source of power from which the matrix of a society is outlined. Representation of masculinity on screen and their dimensions convey human experiences in a hitherto unperceived way. Apart from being a muscular figure which is categorized against a vulnerable woman, the dawn of 20th century has witnessed varied representations onscreen including sensitive, vulnerable, possessive protagonists trapped in a well-toned muscular body striving for an identity. Performing arts, unlike movies gives space for representing varying emotions pertaining to their role in society using costumed characters and images.

Keywords: Vulnerable Minds, Malayalam Movie, Masculinity

1. INTRODUCTION

Willeman(1981) observes that “The voyeuristic pleasure for the viewer in seeing the man on screen is frequently punished because the star is shown undergoing brutal masochistic trials. The sadistic treatment of the male star is the reaction to the erotic energy of the image. In order to divert any homophobic or homoerotic feelings, the male body is defaced in some manner as a way of relieving the sexual tension.” (196)

Some of the movies released in Malayalam language during the end of 90s served or involved characters who are adept performers of an artform which offers little social uplifting and the resultant traumas they face due to the downtrodden status. Jayaraj’s Kaliyattam is an adaptation of Shakespearean Othello, here a famed theyyam artist who is in place of Othello struggles with his childhood trauma and societal opprobrium, when a high caste woman, thamara elopes with him, he sees

her as a source of comfort and tries to redirect his confused mind as love towards her, later when he mistakes her for an adulterous relationship, the artform; theyyam as theechamundi remains his source of comfort. Apart from the theme of sexual jealousy, the movie gives an insight into the brighter and darker shades of theyyam including the harsh physical effort involved. Shaji N Karun's award winning *Vanaprastham* picturizes the trauma of a similar low borne kathakali artist and the various shades of him after getting rejected by his father and latter getting distanced from his son. Both the movies subtly portray the troubled masculinity hidden under the costumed character; auteurs succinctly present how their stable mind is taken over by the art form. Both characters are low borne, tied to a high caste woman to carve out their identity, dumped by them finds solace in the artform. Mental health and the nuances involved to maintain a stable mind through societal forces is detailed here. When caste comes into the fore, how the art form and the political power which views humans as mere subjects is shown.

Performing arts mostly relies on religious or mystic discourses for narrative, performers in a symbolic costume stages a certain event from the epic. Theyyam, an artform mostly considered as an image of God being performed before devotees, even though derived the idea from animistic pre- Hindu times, performers are limited to 15 specific low caste Dalit groups, unlike the practiced caste system, they are treated with reverence. There are more than 400 forms of theyyam practiced in northern Kerala. Each theyyam got a different mudi and facial décor, with tenuous physical effort needed in their performance. In *Kaliyattam* central characters have their designed roles in the artform and their vying for the prestigious one leads to conflict. *Perumalayan*, the protagonist dons the role of theechamundi, in a significant scene after the divination, he elaborates how the high borne heroine fell in love with him after initial empathy for his personal losses and physical effort involved in the act. An evident commingling of emotions can be seen in his narrative where he mixes the effect of personal losses with the artform. *Vanaprastham*, on the other hand as the title suggests is about a man's resignation from his life, consumed with love, he endeavors to play the role of heroic arjuna and later getting rejected by the high caste heroine decides to opt for grey characters.

This Paper attempts to dissect the two movies, both adaptations from literature with a popular performing art remaining on its narrative center with an eye on the mental health of central characters and how various shades of the artform including costumes, lighting, color pattern and specific story line corresponds with their turbulent life. In the first part of the paper, using psychoanalytic film theory and Dalit literary theory, I will draw out the way subtle characterization of vulnerable mind is projected by appropriating it with the corresponding artform. In the second part of the paper, using the theories of masculinity and biopolitics I intend to undertake a detailed textual analysis of the two movies. With a premise linking two low borne characters with a confused mind who strives to achieve perfection through an artform will show the arenas of power in society.

Kaliyattam begins with two men, presented as calculating and cunning (evident throughout their talk) is out to inform the landlord about his daughter's elopement with a theyyam performer (usually Dalits), landlord angrily proceeds to confront him. The protagonist heavily clad in his theyyam outfit passively reacts to his acquaintances that his elopement and subsequent life with the heroine is decided by fate and he refuses to undo whatever has happened in front of the lord. Here, a peculiar scene commingles the unique religious significance of theyyam which forbids the high caste armed men from attacking *perumalayan*, the protagonist terming him as 'deiva'. This scene encompasses the huge attraction the artform enjoys among the group and the resultant rivalry for its various positions. In

whatever artform, they chose to perform, they see it as a vehicle to transform their repressed feelings. The intense red color and the fiery goddess which commands power lays bare their expressions of anger, guilt and jealousy.

“The Jaggedness of word, the granulated structure, the roughhewn expression the scarcely muted anger- anger which may spit fire like wrath, burn lambently like satire, scorch like cynicism, kindle like anguish and enflame like tragedy”.

In Vanaprastham, a dejected Kunjikuttan decides to opt for Kari roles after getting rejected by Subhadra, he plans to avenge her for hurting his feelings by repeatedly portraying negative roles in kathakali, unlike the ones she previously admired for their heroic charms. The two movies effectively use the symbols in both the art forms to signify the turbulence in their protagonist's minds. This is an attempt on their part to evolve a new aesthetics because they feel that the genteel expressions of the elite literary standards cannot do justice to the quality of life they know. Kunjikuttan is literally powerless in his life except for the artform, he is never complemented by anyone unless he appeared as a costumed character. Perumalayan is insecure about his skin color and looks and considers himself inferior to kanthan. In Juxtaposing the heightened masculinity of the adult male with the vulnerability of the child, the meaning of the body is transformed from competitive machismo to one of refugee and protection.

The male of the past twenty years has become more thoughtful, more gentle. But by this process he has not become more free. Many of these men are not happy. You quickly notice the lack of energy in them. They are life- preserving but not exactly life-giving. (1991, pp1-2)

The narrative space of the two movies moves through the viewpoint of the protagonists. Both perumalayan and kunjikuttan performs their role with a facial mask and they, as persons have access only to their eyes. Perumalayan sees the burning fire when he gets adorned as a deity, but those around him expects him to jump to fire symbolizing Parikshit, the physical injury is perceived only by him, the close shots of his eyes burning with fire shows the turbulence in his mind which is shared by nobody. Kunjikuttan in Vanaprastham looks through a torn sheet to identify the way he is perceived by others, he clings to the position after repeated insistence by others to show up, this can be read as his preference for repression or desire to view the world only as a performing artist, not as a vulnerable Dalit man. They are in fact, missing as persons in a narrative with no hint. In this sense, what is missing that which is unaccounted for in terms of the role or place which persons are allocated within a social or symbolic order.

In the biopolitical account provided by Agamben, persons are produced in relation to sovereign power. The Foucauldian account of the biopolitics, upon which Agamben draws, argues that persons are no longer the focus of politics. Instead, politics is organized around populations. The body of the individual is not the site of political investment and authority, rather the location of politics as administration shifts and the spotlight is on population as a whole- population is produced as a site of regulation, control and intervention. The person as such is missing. (130)

Subhadra in Vanaprastham is an epitome of femineity, a femme fatale in a sense, she is placed against kunjikuttan's nagging wife, her use of colors appropriates with the colors used in kathakali, in her he receives a sense of appreciation and falls for her deceiving and that finally leads to his downfall. As an illegitimate child to a high caste father to an illegitimate father to a high caste son, he realizes his yearning for legitimacy is achieved only through costumed characters. The childhood incident in which he got thrashed during a kathakali tutorial for him coming forward during the class constantly haunts him as if in a

dream. He, in future decides to avoid such endeavors fearing backlash, but Subhadra's consistent pressure veiled as love forces him again without realizing that her love is aimed to the mythical character he is portraying. Their affair, is again an act of coming forward and Kunjikuttan's reasonable state of mind crumbles after that relationship. Subhadra's fascination with the art is limitless, there are scenes in which a hint of doubt pervades her reasonable state of mind. After an intimate night, two parallel scenes depict how kunjikuttan cleans his colourful costumes and rejoices after remembering the act of love, whereas Subhadra in a hysterical mood fills her face with colors.

"A typical film noir narrative would involve a male protagonist being led astray by an overpowering *femme fatale*. The females in these films were stereotypically seductive and manipulative, whilst the males easily succumbed to their feminine charms, willingly breaking the law to win their affection. The males were at risk of being metaphorically emasculated. This served as a warning to women that they should return to the domestic sphere after entering the work force during the war in order for patriarchy to be restored." (201)

Thamara in Kaliyattam clings to perumalayan's half costumed face in her attempt for life during the final asphyxiation. Thamara's love for the man and Subhadra's love for the character is both contradictory and proves one point that the social stigma faced by a Dalit artist which immensely affects his mental health is cured to an extent by the artform. Even after repeated insistences, Subhadra refuses to acknowledge the man behind the costume. Vanaprastham subtly delves on how appropriating with mythology, a Dalit got access to higher social mobility by playing the character arjuna. Arjuna is the one who killed his marginalized half- brother Karna who is a Dalit icon, illegitimate in the same way as kunjikuttan is. The social inequality faced by the artists is hinted, even though the art is revered, a bedridden senior artiste never gets any due care. Thampuran promises to do whatever he can, but never initiates any action.

Perumalayan in Kaliyattam reminisces how his emotions were mocked by the landlord, but the same received empathy from the heroine which later becomes love, a nasty comment from his bride's father about the girl's chance of cheating him haunts perumalayan for too long. Here the protagonist is doubly binded, he is a Dalit artiste who is not good at his looks. Right from the beginning scene, perumalayan's sexual jealousy is evident when he prevents a young boy from touching thamara's hand. Childhood trauma and subsequent victimization through an artform which he reveres but physically taxing convinces him that thamara can't love him. There are instances of uncanny with him dreaming about an approaching Kolam shouting his anger and finally falls from a cliff, another with him discovering his wife in a compromising position. This surreal images wrongfoot the audience, so that a sense of disquiet prevails.

"This is not the line of chronological time (which is representable, but unthinkable) nor the instant of its end (which is just as unthinkable); nor is it a segment of cut from chronological time ; rather it is operational time pressing within chronological time, working and transforming it from within; it is the time that is left to us"(153

In fact by appropriating subaltern emotive experiences through the performing arts, auteurs seeks to dismantle the notion of otherness pervading in cultural context. Kunjikuttan is at first rejected by the superiors from learning the art, but he later achieves recognition as a veritable artist who is held in high respect. Even after climbing the echelons of art, true recognition is considered only with the acceptance of the high caste land lord. The subtle infusion of power hierarchy which offered

limited access is evident throughout the two movies, the very first scene in kaliyattam shows how paniyan communicates with the thampuran from a lower level, but the scene is projected from Panniyan's side offering him alternatives for the said communication. Paniyan in Kaliyattam aspires for a recognized position in the artform than a joker, thus he schemes again perumalayan. He, sarcastically remark how his performance is marked by lack of identity, while the very simple ones got names. Here, the artform theyyam is usually performed by lowercaste Dalits, there too antagonist panniyan is still attested a lower status among them which irks him. Similar to the trauma infused by the colonial hegemony, graded caste system prevailed in the era-maintained power through rituals, performances and religion. In a series of scenes, right after an emotionally charging personal experience, Perumalayan opts to perform, theechamundi, the one kolam he performs is a symbolic re- presentation of the purification undergone by the legendary Parikshit to attest his faith. This acts of performing aids as a catalyst in re-living the traumatic episodes and the culmination of the rituals offers a cathartic experience.

To be thrown by the enigma of legitimacy is to be seduced by the prospect of an exception to the space of social reality and meaning, by the fantasy of an advent, boundary or an outer limit of that space that would serve as its constituting frame and power, its final self-legitimizing ground. (136)

The ritualistic significance of theyyam and the immense artistic import accorded to Kathakali helps the protagonists to climb the social ladder which hitherto sought to downsize them. Instead of being part of a community which got no assurance regarding social upliftment or chance of bonding, protagonist here through the artform works for their individual good by holding no bars against the hierarchical order which shunned them. Kunjikuttan's mentor pleads before the thampuran to let him learn the artform which might be useful in easing his poverty, but the film proves that the practicing of the artform never lessens poverty but offers a chance for better social standing. As suggested in psychiatric circles, talking offers a better cure for psychological harm, perumalayan after losing his family in a plague mourns them and laments his loneliness, residues of what took his family's life is evident in his face as black spots. Thampuran offers him a platform to pour his sorrows out, but he considers the same as a means of pleasure. Through Perumalayan, he is trying to find his 'self' as a better alternative against the under privileged theyyam performer. The principal narrator's mentality has been afflicted by a gender and class driven world order; his mind is social in its inhibitions and sense of duty and fear and operates within places of confinement, he chooses a dark night with half made costume to kill thamara. Subhadra, meanwhile communicates earnestly with kunjikuttan about her artistic pursuits and her immense fascination for a mythological character, throughout the movie she is alone apart from kunjikuttan no one shares her taste. Even after being part of a socially affluent society, she decides to choose the low caste performer at the end after perceiving the immensity of his potential after witnessing his performance with his daughter. Instead of an intimate union, for both the characters the relation provided the benefit of talking cure. Intimacy in both movies is shown in the backdrop of immense colors, the loud portrayal of the act signifies the imminent doom. Kunjikuttan and Thamara, through intimacy hopes for a relieving of their past pains, while Subhadra and perumalayan refuses to part away with the colors which shows their state of mind in the relationship.

A linking function whereby the narrator, in presenting a character's consciousness, connects it to its surroundings. The use of this device emphasizes the

nature of consciousness as mental action and thereby brings together consciousness and physical action. The mode of thought report is ideally suited for informative presentations of the purposive and directive nature of thought as well as its social nature. (139)

In a pre- colonial society, lower caste was banned from entering temples, Theyyam begins with their resolve to reanimate their faith with the female goddess offering solution to the issues confronted them. Slowly, Brahminical intrusions crept into the artform and performances and their significance were described by those in power positions. Perumkaliyattam is decided by the landlord and the particular event negates the agency of the performers to mere role players instead of decision-makers. Kaliyattam adapted from a 17th century play is about the moor's consistent insecurity regarding his wife's exquisite beauty and unconditional love towards him. Jayaraj in one of his interview comments:

"When the artist dons the make-up, he is considered as God, when he removes the make-up, he become a man once again. I saw in Theyyam the best opportunity to express a split personality-I saw the same dichotomy in Othello's mind also"

Subhadra, in Vanaprastham is an admirer of power which seeks to establish social order in a hierarchical fashion, her love for the mythical arjuna is similar to a maniac's addiction to heroic male qualities, she sees kunjikuttan as a subject to serve her interests. Similar to the racist fashion which assigns role to the subject and later dehumanizing them by robbing off their roles with fascist tendencies, kunjikuttan is shunned from his role as a son and later as a father. He attempts to reclaim the roles in a protesting fashion by performing the last rites of his father, later he reassigns his daughter's role as her successor instead of a son. Kunjikuttan's final act, in which he positions his daughter in a romantic position against him affects him badly and he dies. In a final scene, through a letter, he confirms to Subhadra that the power hierarchy is restored and the son from their incestuous union is considered as the divine born with nothing that corrupts him. Subhadra, kunjikuttan and his low borne wife were entitled recipients of various power hierarchies, while wife walks out of the structure prevailing her mental health and wellbeing over social conditioning, Kunjikuttan and Subhadra succumbs to the power design. Thamara in Kaliyattam decides to opt for love instead of privileges of a high-born woman, she instead craves for maternal love, and willing to part her maternal love with perumalayan after empathizing with his sufferings, finally dies in his arms which shuns her dreams. None of the characters in the movie who aspired for upliftment gets their due including paniyan who becomes crippled in the end.

Characters, throughout the narrative is haunted by the trauma and that prevents them from taking another step that results in ultimate tragedy for all the characters involved.

"Laura Brown coined the notion of 'insidious trauma'- a term that conjures biopolitics capillary and invisible mode of operation- to refer to the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily wellbeing at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit." (192)

2. CONCLUSION

Performed masculinity and the positions of power which kept it reins tight over vulnerable human beings can be seen in both movies. Childhood trauma and the subsequent victimization's effect on an individual's formative personality is discerned from the two movies considered for study. In Post colonial nations, how the colonial residues along with graded caste system forced the vulnerable to end

up as mere subject is an area demanding attention. In the two movies Kaliyattam, the characters perumalayan, thamara and paniyan are traumatized individuals which initiates their actions, two of them relies on the artform for a better social role, while the other willingly breaks societal shackles for personal desires but their lives end up as tragedy. Kunjikuttan, his wife and Subhadra, aspires for personal entitlements from a childhood ridden with shackles, while the two of them end up as victims acting themselves as if in a stage, the other embraces freedom disregarding societal forces in the end. Both the movies Kaliyaatam and vanaprastham powerfully depicts power positions and mental health employing the narrative texture of performing arts.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge Classics, 1994. Print.
- Kuhn, Annete&Guy Westwell. *Oxford Dictionary of Film studies*. OUP, 2012. Print.
- Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Literature and Criticism*. Orient Blackswan, 2019. Print
- Doughty, Ruth and Christine Etherington -Wright. *Understanding Film theory*. Palgrave, 2019. Print.
- Balaev, Michelle. *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.
- Ringel, Shoshana and Jerrold R. Brandell. *Trauma: Contemporary directions in theory practice and research*. Sage Publications, 2012. Print.
- Kaliyattam, YouTube, Movie time. 1997
- Vanaprastham, YouTube, Evergreen classic. 1999