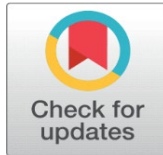
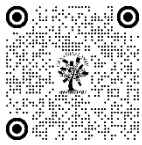


FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THEKKAN PATTU

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ABSTRACT

This study titled, Feminist Perspectives and Representation of women in Thekkan Pattu, is outlined on the Malayalam traditional poetic form known as Thekkan Pattu in Kerala. It reflects Kerala culture and offers a window into societal attitudes toward gender roles and women's agency. This paper uses feminist theory, to observe in detail how women are depicted—as empowered individuals, passive subjects, or embodiments of societal ideals of femininity. The study also attempts to highlight how traditional art forms like Thekkan Pattu serve as a medium to either challenge or perpetuate gender stereotypes. research contributes to feminist discourse, emphasizing the intersections of culture, gender, and identity within regional literature and the broader socio-cultural framework.

Keywords: Thekkan Pattu, femininity, culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Folklore genres reflect their relevance to contemporary society when interpreted through the lens of modern ideas and theories. Among the most significant folklore genres are storytelling ballads (*Kathaganangal*), a prominent branch of Malayalam literature. This genre comprises various eco-types tied to regional distinctions, such as southern, northern, and central styles. Within these forms, the depiction of folk life in Thekkan pattu offers a unique opportunity for reinterpretation through feminist perspectives.

Feminist literature emerged prominently in the latter half of the 19th century, producing works celebrating the strength and significance of femininity. This movement arose as a response to the marginalization of women as second-class citizens in the West, and enriched the narrative of feminism. Simone de Beauvoir, the French Philosopher, in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, unveiled the historical oppression and gendered subjugation that women had endured since prehistoric times. Her powerful critique served as a bible for urging women to claim their rightful place in the mainstream of society.

Long before the rise of feminist narratives that carved out an identity for women in the West, the people of Kerala recognized and respected women, referring as “Pennmalayalam.” The folk songs of southern Kerala hold a wealth of information, offering insights into the socio-political histories of a region at the southern tip of India, which separated as the state of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Before the Aryan invasion, women occupied a central position in social structure of Kerala. This prominence is vividly reflected in the folk story songs—Kerala's distinctive oral recitations—illuminating women's role and status in society. These narratives provide a unique perspective on the cultural and historical significance of women in early Kerala life. It is evident from the folk songs of Kerala high as the subjective representation of women in equal position in the regional folk traditions, compared to Western and Eastern poetry which usually objectify them. While Vadakan pattu started celebrating the valour of women like Unniyarcha, Thekkan pattu portray the lives of idealistic, self-sacrificing women who defied patriarchal norms and challenged societal expectations.

2. FEMININITY IN THEKKAN PATTU

The female characters in *Thekkan Pattu* embody idealism and bravery, defined by their strong sense of purpose and noble character. For these women, values such as sacrifice and self-respect held greater importance than any other aspect of life. Women are prominently featured in various forms of traditional songs, including ritual songs, heroic ballads, and labor songs. When the life of Archa and other courageous heroines is vividly depicted in Vadakkan pattu, the passionate stories of brave heroines who face challenges of life not with weapons, but with their resilience and determination are portrayed in *Thekkan Pattu*. These women depict various roles: as wives who create marital conflict, as strong family figures who support their husbands and children, as mothers who take charge of the country and its governance, as women who sacrifice everything for the man they love, as rulers who resist patriarchy, and as working women who challenge labour exploitation with their sharp words.

3. FEMININITY IN PROMINENT POETRY

Thekkan Pattu contains numerous poems featuring prominence to heroines, such as *Neelikatha*, *Chamundikatha*, *Ponnirathalkatha*, *Purushadevipatt*, and *Chembakavallipatt*. The image of femininity is notably highlighted in poems like *Ulakooda Perumalpatt*, *Iravikuttipillaporpatt*, *Kannadiyan Porukatha*, and *Thambi Markatha*. In both ritual songs and *velapats* (especially in *Krishi geetis*), female characters often receive more focus than their male counterparts. Many other lesser-known songs may exist within this tradition.

4. THE MOTHER GODDESS IN SOUTHERN KERALA

Thekkan Pattu portrays numerous vivid images of motherhood. In the agrarian society of Kerala ancestors, the goddess of agriculture was envisioned as a female figure. The Mother Goddess, representing the lower classes, received a great acceptance across various parts of India, especially within the medieval society.

The worship of the Mother Goddess was deeply rooted and widespread in the agricultural villages of ancient India. Unlike the Brahminical upper classes, who conceptualized God through yajnas and other rituals, medieval peasants honoured the Goddess using the *panchamakaras* like *maithuna*, *malsya*(fish), *mamsa*(meat), *madhyam*(alcohol), and *mudra* (Linga worship). Their form of worship often considered their paat (songs of expletives) as their '*Gayatri mantras*'. Over time, the traditions and concepts of the Mother Goddess were also integrated into the practices of Buddhist, Jain, and Vedic religions.¹

The communities worshipped the goddess, known by various names such as Kali and Durga, through rituals that included offerings of agricultural tools and crops. Since ancient times, each village in South India had its own unique deities. Before the influence of Aryanization, the Dravidian community practiced a form of worship known as *Ammadaivaradhana*. Female deities like Mahakali, Angalamma, Kamachiyamma, and Mariamma, along with male deities such as Ayyanar, were widely revered across South India.² The prominence of *Amman Temples* and *Bhagavathikavs* in the region serves as a symbol of the deep respect for womanhood prevailed in Dravidian society.

The foundation of Mother Goddess worship in Kerala is closely connected to Kali. Bhadrakali embodies the essence of Indian femininity, symbolizing dignity, courage and vengeance. She is worshiped as the goddess of both creation and destruction, a concept rooted in Dravidian philosophy. In contrast, Aryan traditions placed more prominence on male deities over Kali.³ In the *Thotam* paatt performed in the *Mudipur*as of southern Kerala, Kali's fierce anger is a recurring theme, celebrated and revered in the verses.⁴ In the Southern *Thottam Paatt*, Kali is portrayed as a rural woman embodying strength and determination, ready to confront evil forces and defy patriarchal norms.

5. FORMS OF IDEALISM

The female characters in *Thekkan Pattu* embody ideals and principles, approaching life with profound seriousness. The heroines of these Southern ballads are unwavering in their convictions, willing to sacrifice their lives if their ideals are compromised. They refuse to live in fear of death or succumb to the fear of life. These women stand firm, surrendering only in the face of love.

Purushadevipaat, a prominent song in *Thekkan Pattu*, is the story of the brave Purushadevi. Purushadevi was as skilled and talented as a man. She was the daughter of Queen Thiruvanantham. The name of that country was Pennarashunad. It marks the age of femininity. Women were posted as bodyguards and army personnel. Purushadevi, perfect in all abilities, was born as a result of Thiruvanantham's austerity. She excelled in horse riding and weapons training at a young age and became a ruler in her youth. At that time, Chempan Mudi, the neighbouring king, had to cross the country of the Queen and continue a pilgrimage. She permitted him only after leaving his army to leave. The king wanted his forces.

Inspired by the fiery energy of Purushadevi's words, the king rallied his army and prepared for battle. When defeat in the war became inevitable, Purushadevi, despite being pregnant, displayed extraordinary courage by piercing her belly with a skewer. In a symbolic act of protest, she threw her child after the enemy and embraced a heroic death. The song further narrates how king Chempan Mudi, committed suicide with a sword for having dishonoured by her.

In *Chembakavallipattukatha*, the theme of self-sacrifice as a noble ideal is portrayed. Chembakavalli, the wife of Ananthan Kuttipattar, faced an extraordinary ordeal when her husband, returning with a merchant group, was attacked by bandits during a nighttime rest on the road. Ananthan was killed in the attack, and his separated little finger was brought to Chembakavalli by his companions. In grief, Chembakavalli shaved her head, disguised herself as a widow, and sought permission from the village ruler, Kulasekharaperumal, to perform *sati*. Despite he offered her wealth and resources to lead a new life, she remained resolute in her decision. With the Maharaja as a witness, she performed the ritual of *satiana*, to end her life. Such a striking act of devotion and sacrifice, as depicted in this story, is unparalleled in the history of Venad.⁶

6. LOVE AND IDEALISM

The heroines of *Thekkan Pattu* exemplify idealism not only in life but also in death. Even in the current world, where many young women find it challenging to openly express their love to their parents or win the affection of a man, the heroines of *Thekkan Pattu* stand out as figures of admiration. They are celebrated for their courage and resilience, surpassing even the heroines in Malayalam romantic poetry.

In the renowned song-poem *Kannadiyan Por*, the daughter of Vaduka king Kannadiyan falls in love with Ponnum Pandya, the enemy king and informs her father of her feelings. Respecting his daughter's wishes, Kannadiyan conveys her desire to Pandya, but Pandya refuses, mentioning their enmity. In response, Kannadiyan wages war, captures Pandya, and brings him to his homeland. However, Pandya ultimately takes his own life at Manchal. Overcome by love and grief, the princess garlands his lifeless body and later performs *sati* on his funeral pyre.

Many *Thekkan Pattu* celebrate the heroic mothers who pray to have brave sons. In the *Ulakudaperumal pattu*, Malayamma is looking for her son with great determination. However, in *Purushadevipat*, Thiruvanantham prepares to welcome a daughter as her heir. The *Purushadevi pattu* stands as a powerful example of feminism, challenging those who view the birth of a girl as undesirable or dismiss the value of women. True feminism will only thrive when society recognizes and cherishes the birth of a woman as a blessing.

7. AGAINST PATRIARCHY

The heroines of *Thekkan Pattu* are not the individuals who withdraw from the crises or the blows of fate. Many of these women boldly challenge male dominance, as seen in songs like *Kalliankatu Neeli's Katha*, *Purushadevipatt*, and *Yakshipatt*, which strongly oppose patriarchal supremacy. In *Ponnirathal Katha*, the heroine becomes a victim of patriarchy, yet she fights valiantly and alone until the end. Following the Aryan invasion, patriarchal systems began to take root in Dravidian society. However, this intrusion primarily affected written literature, while oral traditions continued to resist patriarchal norms. A striking example of this resistance is Purushadevi's fierce confrontation Chempan Mudi king, symbolizing her defiance and strength. Finally, he commits suicide because of his defeat to a brave woman.

The character of Neely in *Neelikatha* stands as a powerful symbol of vengeance. Betrayed and killed by Nambi, who was driven by greed, Neely is reborn with an unrelenting desire for revenge. Nambi, too, reincarnates as Ananthan Chetty,

and Neely, fueled by her determination, tracks him down in her new life. Disguised as a vengeful man, she confronts and kills him, fulfilling her quest for justice. *Neelikatha* powerfully illustrates that the strength of a determined and united woman is unstoppable.

Oral literature reflects the characteristics of the society in which it evolved and interacted, often serving as a tool for understanding societal history rather than just as a form of artistic expression. In this context, *Thekkan Pattu* functions as historical narratives that offer valuable insights into the era they represent. When observed from the present scenario, where women often require reservations to ensure their space in society, the leadership, and prominence of women in *Thekkan Pattu* are strikingly remarkable. This form of Malayalam literature reminds us that true female strength lies not in quotas but in willpower, determination, and pride.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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None

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