

The Aphrodisiac Ghost of Kerala: Telling and Retelling the Yakshi tales

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Abstract

The paper explores how the Yakshi tales, a popular subset of oral, mythical narratives, are retold in contemporary Kerala analysing select representations, considering how the mythical Yakshi tales have become a space to analyse gender and sexuality. The tales transform into a discursive platform, countering the patriarchal-feudal narrative on the eternal feminine. The paper discusses some popular Yakshi tales and analyses their political significance. The paper also places how the religious texts otherwise identify the position of women in society and how Yakshi tales become a counter subset. The paper tries to redraw the contemporary significance of these tales and read the contemporary retellings of the tales.

Keywords: Yakshi, ghost, sexuality, stories, femininity

Kerala, the Indian state, has a history of folk tales and oral narratives which are transferred from generation to generation, often as moral lessons. The myth of Yakshi is a popular subset of such oral narratives which performs the function of injecting fear in the

conservative patriarchal setup of Kerala. Yakshi is supposedly the ghost/spirit of a woman who had an unnatural death, returning to the world to avenge those who destroyed her life. To bring an end to the commotion she creates, she is conjured by black magicians or priests through the process of 'uchadanam'¹ and sometimes is made into a deity. Yakshi tales are often narrated by the feudal project to create a discourse of fear for those who resist it. Yakshi narratives are widely retold in contemporary society through literary and cultural adaptations. The paper explores how the oral Yakshi tales are retold analysing select Malayalam representations from recent times, considering how the mythical Yakshi tales have become a space to analyse gender and sexuality. Vishnu Namboothiri observes,

All folk tales in the root intend to make morally concerned citizens. As John Butchen comments, these tales create a popular philosophy. But these tales do not shrink due to this 'morality concern'. They can teach and give an insight on the traditional customs and regional culture. (505)

The mythical figure, Yakshi can be equated to that of a brave young woman who leads an independent and free-spirited lifestyle. The physical charm of Yakshi is connected to diabolism differing from the traditional notion of the beauty myth. The sexuality of Yakshi portrayed in these stories is unconventional, mystified and uncontrollable, against the concept of the 'eternal feminine'. Yakshis at times possess people, and it is generally unmarried girls who are the victims. At midnight, the diabolic, lustful Yakshi appears in front of men and the men who get charmed by the spell of the Yakshi's beauty are killed. The Yakshi tastes success by drinking her victim's blood. The fear for the Yakshi can be seen as fear for women who are brave enough to avenge or rebel. After the stories of potential activity and independence, the Yakshi is made into

a deity, thus clinging to traditional patriarchal norms and a mother figure. The interesting part of the story is that the story's protagonist is always the savarna priest or the magician. The heroic legend of Kadamattathu Kathanar, a mythical Syrian orthodox church priest who is believed to have supernatural powers is connected to several Yakshi tales where the priest has exorcised the Yakshi. The binaried politics in the representation of Yakshi and the priest figure is a part of the patriarchal hegemony and moral panic of Kerala society.

According to the Yakshi myth, a Yakshi can haunt a family or a house for generations, and the tale of this demonic Yakshi will be passed through generations. As mentioned earlier, the supernatural Yakshi, in some cases, gets transformed into a deity through the process of 'uchadanam' and gets a supreme status as the local deity over the place. There are certain temples in Kerala where the primary worship is Yakshi. The history of Panayannarkkavu temple, Pathanamthitta history claims the story of Panayannarkkavu Yakshi/ Parumala Yakshi, who was exorcised by the legendary priest Kadamattathu Kathanar. Similarly, the central worship in Melancode Yakshi temple in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, which earlier belonged to Kerala, is Yakshi.

While conducting a close perusal of the mysterious folk tales of Kerala, one will be astonished by the absence of the male ghosts. The absence of male ghosts and the celebrated male heroism in the Yakshi stories reveal the hidden curriculum of these stories. The principal element in these stories is the element of fear of the independent woman; a success of the repressed against the oppressing. Men who fall prey to their 'sexual impulses' of the independent activism of women are the ones who get killed. The systemic categorisation of women into

‘good’ and ‘bad’ based on their sense of independence and obedience to patriarchal religions and agents is reflected in the Yakshi tales. The ‘bad’ woman who falls in the other pole of the binary becomes Yakshi or an outcast from the generally upright society ruled by men.

The book *Aithiyamala* by Kottarathil Shankunni is a store of ancient folktales in Kerala with two stories about two legendary magicians in Kerala, Kadamattathu Kathanar and Sooryakaladi Bhattathiri. The book is a store of ancient folktales in Kerala has two stories about two legendary magicians in Kerala, Kadamattathu Kathanar and Sooryakaladi Bhattathiri. The former was a legendary Christian priest who became famous by exorcising a Yakshi who created turmoil in Travancore. Kathanar exorcises her in Panayannarkkavu though she tries to escape from him (Sankunni 529). Sooryakaladi Bhattathiri is a Hindu Brahmin black magician who was also known for his mighty deeds of exorcism. In the story of “Sooryakaladi Bhattathiri”, we are told the tale of two Brahmin young men on their way to a temple seeing two beautiful women and are invited to stay with them in a palace nearby. While Bhattathiri’s friend dies in the attack by Yakshi, he holds the holy book under his pillow and got escaped. The very next day, he finds his friend’s bone under a palm tree and even the palace to be an illusion. The locals there tell Sooryakaladi Bhattathiri about the presence of Yakshi there. Realising the deception a Yakshi (a woman) had done to them, Bhattathiri starts his mission of exorcising Yakshis, regularly learning ‘thaanthrikavidyaⁱⁱ’ (Sankunni 545). In the story “Vayaskara Bhattathiri and Yakshi”, the Yakshi falls in love with the Bhattathiri and a daughter is born to them. At the time of his death, he introduces his daughter to his family, who is only visible to her father. She becomes a deity. Thus Yakshi tales have an aura of fantasy and sensuality around them. As T.K Ramachandran observes:

The element of fantasy that has entered into the depictions of the feminine is particularly marked in the legendary figure of the Yakshi that had become entrenched in popular imagination. The Yakshis of Kerala are vastly different from their Northern counterparts. They are blood-sucking vampires who lure way-fares to their doom using their sexual charm. The fear and aggression in the male psyche is clearly projected onto these figures and it is perhaps possible to see them as typifying feelings of post-coital rejection and guilt. (121)

The myth of Kalliyankattu Neeli/Panchavankadu Neeli is the most notorious ‘Yakshi myth’ in the history of Kerala. The story of Neeli has been retold in several literary texts. The paper would analyse some of the retellings and discuss its relevance. Neeli is a significant character in C.V Raman Pillai’s *Marthanda Varma* (1891). In the novel, she is referred to as “a blood sucking vampire” from whom “no mortal man can return alive”. Neeli’s story is narrated as the murderer of the character Ananthapadmanabhan in the novel. She was a young Nair girl who lived in Nagercoil and was relatively inexperienced and alone in the world. A Pattarⁱⁱⁱ took advantage of her hapless condition and prevailed upon her to accompany him to Padmanabhapuram for her confinement. On a certain Friday noon, they reached a place known as Panchavankaadu. The pregnant girl got tired, and she took a rest beneath a cactus bush in the lap of the Brahmin. To grab the gold ornaments and bag in her money, he, after setting down her head on a slab of rock, bashes her head with a bigger slab of rock. The narrator continues, “Opening her eyes in mortal agony, she saw her husband standing over her like a fiend in human shape, with upraised hand to strike again if need be. Calling upon the cactus bush, which alone of God’s creations stood near, to witness the cold-blooded crime, she fell back in death” (Pillai 50).

The Brahmin picking up her bundle, walked away, leaving the corpse alone. After one year, the Brahmin travelling to Sucheendram temple saw a beautiful girl sitting beneath a banyan tree with a sweet child in her lap, smiling and making eyes at the passersby. The Brahmin man got stuck by her beauty and bewitching smile, which followed her unconsciously. They reached near the same old cactus bush, and it was another Friday noon where the rock slabs having the bloodstains remained where “Once more the drama was staged. Only the position of the actors seemed to be reversed” (Pillai 51). The girl sat in a semi-nude appearance and the Brahmin rested on her lap. Suddenly, she took her actual form, and his squeal of fear is described as “enough to uproot the tallest trees in the forest” (Pillai 52). His foot got stuck in between the two slabs of rock while running away, and he saw the girl who was in her seventh month of pregnancy, with flesh and blood and her eyes with pain and distress. He saw the figure towering in front of him inch by inch. It tore the Pattar into a thousand sheds and drank his blood. “Even now for all the hidden treasures of the world, no one would pass that way on account of that unknown Terror” (Pillai 53). This is how the bloody avenging tale of Neeli is recorded in history.

The story of Neeli narrated in the novel portrays Neeli as a victim of patriarchy. Her reaction to the Brahmin can be seen as an avenge to the suppressing masculinity. It has also been mentioned that Neeli did not attack the Brahmin alone. She continued attacking people, especially men who fell for her lustful smile. In one version, she was led to exorcism by Kadamattathu Kathanar, and it was Neeli who gave the priest the exaggerated popularity. Neeli and her background faded while Kathanar evolved as an ultimate hero who washed away a contemptuous and dreadful demon. Neeli’s revenge against the Brahmin can be read in the contemporary context of feminist movements against the atrocities women face in contemporary

society. Like Neeli, all yakshis are supposed to be beautiful women, and they ‘use’ their smile and beautiful face for catching their prey. ‘Beauty’ was equated to well-mannered behaviour in the conventional terms as it has been said:

The feminine beauty ideal can be seen as a normative means of social control whereby social control is accomplished through the internalisation of values and norms that serve to restrict women’s lives. In this way, women internalise norms and adopt behaviors that reflect and reinforce their relative powerlessness, making external forces less necessary. Value constructs such as “nice girl” or “feminine beauty” operate as normative restrictions by limiting women’s personal freedom and laying the “groundwork for a circumscription of women’s potential for power and control in the world. (qtd. in Baker-Sperry 712)

Here, beauty is manifested as a weapon to gain the upper hand over patriarchy and masculine hegemony. The Yakshi becomes an ‘other’ to the ‘family woman’ whose sexuality and identity are controlled by her husband or other male family members. Yakshi does not succumb to the patriarchal customs; instead, she questions and mocks the womenfolk who lives in the continuous conditioning forced upon them by the patriarchal ideology. We have examples from popular Malayalam movies such as *Manichithrathazhu* (1993), where the central character Ganga attacks her husband when possessed by the spirit of Nagavalli, who shares the story of a patriarchal suppression. Ganga is otherwise the ‘beloved’ and ‘well mannered’ wife which is visibly performative. Here, the magician is replaced by the psychiatrist who hypnotises the possessed woman and confirms that she is Ganga Nakulan when the spirit leaves her, with the last name taken from her husband’s name. The process of hypnotism acts as the parallel of

exorcism popularised in the tales. The commercial popularity of the movie has resulted in several readings of the movie, where it has been often pointed that the possessed woman was depressed by her husband's disregard on her sexuality.

This successful revolt against the social construct of femininity can also be seen in the stories written by popular Malayalam women writers Chandramathi and Gracy. In the writer Chandramathi's short story "Gramayakshi" (the village female ghost) included in the anthology *Ente Priyappetta Kadhakal*, (My Dear Stories, 2014 pub.) the protagonist Bala is a woman who uses her beauty for material interests, lured by men and hated by the so-called "well-behaving wives" of the society. She successfully leads a happy life using the advances of the upper-class and upper-caste married men in her neighbourhood. However, the character is not entirely happy in the deep as she cannot move with well-settled family life and goes to a tragic turn when in the end, she has no other way but to live alone with the trauma of cancer in her uterus. In the story, the woman is referred to as 'Yakshi' by other women. Her laugh is compared to 'lightning', and her long, thick hair is often envied. She comments that "A woman should be smart enough to keep her husband with her till the end of her life or else he might get lured by the charm of Yakshi" (Chandramathi 64).

In writer Gracy's story "Devimahathmyam", meaning the greatness of goddess, the central character Neeli is a woman who leads her life alone. The story begins when her friend and her husband visit her. She lives alone in a flat named Kalliyankaadu, and has several bonzai palm trees in it. Her friend Devi, who was very beautiful in earlier days, lost her charm after her marriage, while Neeli has become more beautiful now. They have a past to share where the person Neeli loved was attracted to Devi. The story ends when the reader knows that Neeli's

charm lures devi's husband. The conscious choice of the writer in giving the names Neeli to a woman who lives independently, and her house name as Kalliyankadu is contrasted to the once beautiful Devi whose name means goddess. The woman labelled as a goddess by the patriarchal society is not considered a sexual charm by her male partner who is attracted to the independent Neeli. The short story retells the binary of independent women with given sexual liberty and the well behaved wife equated to Devi or the female diety. The constant practice of the patriarchal feudal society is to train the Neeli to become Devi or female diety so that her sexual liberty or choices can be authorised or controlled. Regarding the story "Devimahathmyam", the writer Gracy once commented in an interview that "The Yakshi stories always moved me; the Yakshi who can use and frighten men as she wishes."

The fierce exorcism of Yakshi and her transformation into a deity is an agenda of forcefully framing the woman into a mother identity. As Shri Vivekananda in his famous Chicago speech pointed out, the sole esteemed identity of a woman is motherhood. He wanted all women to be the ideal Seetha who was tolerant of everything. A woman's birth will become fulfilled only with her motherliness and tolerance (*Vivekananda Sahitya Sarvaswam* 1963). The Yakshi stories come as a sole or counter in the world of male chauvinistic folk tales and mythologies as Kathleen. M. Erndl points out:

Disfigurement of the woman is the most common punishment for crimes of a sexual nature, such as adultery—or even attempting to poison one's husband—and Indian mythology and folklore abound with examples of the motif. Interestingly, such incidents are often presented in a humorous light. Thus, in many North Indian Ram Lilaq performances the Surpanakha episode is a kind of

burlesque, to which the (predominantly male) audience responds with ribald jokes and laughter, perhaps again betraying a certain male anxiety about female sexuality. (82)

Frederick Smith notes so in *The Self possessed: Deity and Spirit Possession in South Asian Literature and Civilisation* about the preponderance of women in possession.

One reason often attributed is psychosocial: Possession is a refuge and an empowerment for the oppressed and marginalised woman in patriarchal society. In this sense, possession is a ritually protected means of enabling a woman to interact from a position of authority and status. Many studies of South Asian possession bear this out, though not all are in agreement about how this occurs. (68)

Yakshi can also be seen questioning the sense of independence that women were always denied in the Indian tradition. Quite a few examples can be taken on how women's sense of independence is interpreted in Hindu holy texts “asvatantra dharma stri naticared bhartraram vak caksuh karmasamyata (*Gautama Dharmasutra*, 18.1-3) which means a wife cannot act independently in matters relating to law. She should never go against her husband and keep her speech, eyes, and actions under strict control. (qtd. in Smith 167) ; pita raksati kaumare bharta raksati yauvane raksanti sthavire na stri svatantryam arhati (*Manusmriti*, 9.2-3) which means a woman should be protected by her father in her childhood, her husband should watch over her in youth, and her son should maintain her in old age. A woman never gains independence (qtd. in Smith 115). Naradasmriti notes on women's independence so, “svatantryad vipranasyanti kule

jata api striyah asvatantryam atas tasam prajapatir akalpayet” (*Naradasmriti*, 13.30-31) It is through independence women go to ruin though be born in a noble family; therefore, the Lord of creatures ordained dependence for them (qtd. in Smith 98)

Thus, we can see that here all, women is subjected to a ‘loss of identity process’ quite different from the very rebellious Yakshi, who is brave enough to encounter the traditional norms of the society with her long hair and magical smile. Her sexuality or sense of independence is never pointed towards a sense of control. But Frederick Smith further notes that the possessed body in its state of spoken through and speaking does not impede or nullify power in the form of cultural rebalancing.

Much of this power is ritualised, which tends to reinforce cultural conservatism as both the textual and ethnographic evidence reveals. Most women’s possession practice tends to maintain, rather than threaten, the power distribution between men and women by functioning within orbits of culturally sanctioned ritual control. The release of the energies of women’s oppression into possession states does little in the end to rectify the power imbalance between the sexes in the “traditional” cultures of South Asia (69).

Thus Neeli was a rebel. She questioned all these laws, which made her existence as an individual problematic. The suggestion that women go ruined when they are ‘granted’ liberty is questioned by Neeli, who avenges her husband and the male community which suppressed her. The free-spirited individual arises as an element of fear in the forest which was supposedly the

place that was only 'safe' for men to travel. Neeli's transformation as a deity and the immense popularity Kadamattathu Kathanar achieved was the patriarchal way of 'suppressing activism'.

However, Neeli has a significant impact even in the 21st century through the never-ending film adaptations. The increasing incidents of moral policing, rape cases and other countless cases of the violation of women's rights all point to the freedom that Neeli was granted in the very conservative patriarchal society. Now, no Indian woman can imagine herself to be in the midst of a dense forest humming lustful songs and enchanting men to death with her diabolic yet miraculous smile. The world is appearing more and more normative to women, and we get continually accustomed to a process of 'normalisation of femininity' as Barthes in *Mythologies* puts it so, "the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world: he uses it" (54).

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ⁱ Exorcism

ⁱⁱ A branch of religious ritualism, knowledge of spiritual doctrines

ⁱⁱⁱ Someone who belongs to a Tamil Brahmin community