

The Portrayal of Yakshi and Gandharva : Two powerful yet Subtle Characters in Folklore Adaptations

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Yakshini, an ancient often portrayed as a seductive female ghost depicted in a captivating manner and examines how Gandharva similarly engages in themes of power and seduction. Media through movies and novels often portrays myths and folklore within fantasy and horror genres to create new narratives, sustaining the importance of these stories across generations. It is a powerful medium for keeping ancient myths relevant in modern context. The portrayal of the Yaksha in Malayalam films like Anandabhadram, alongside stories of Gandharvas, appears to evoke both fear and admiration. This paper focuses on how these cinematic myths sustain local traditions and keep them from fading. By presenting both men and women as supernatural figures such as Gandharva and Yakshi, these narratives reflect our ancestors' desire to impose social order through fear. Furthermore, this paper focuses on the cinema's ability to evoke horror by grounding supernatural elements within the authentic traditional settings of a village. Focusing on Bhama in Anandabhadram, this paper examines how film recreates an era where black magic and Tantric practices dominated the human mind. It specifically highlights the tendency to label women suffering from mental health issues such as victims of Yakshi possession. Through a subordinate character, her ability to hold the audience's attention until the climax makes her stand out. Similarly, the portrayal of Gandharva in movies illustrates how this myth has shaped the audience's perception of both horror and fantasy. This paper explores the origins of Yaksha and Gandharva folklore and how faithfully the film, a novel adaptation, represents these myths in modern cinematic context.

Key Words: myth, folklore, yakshas, gandharvas, gender, media representations.

Introduction

Indian Imagination is filled with variant mythical figures from Hinduism and Jainism, including semigods, supernatural beings, and hybrid creatures (part human, part animal). They serve as protectors, natural spirits, or figures of terror and they possess supernatural abilities. These figures such as Yakshas, Gandharvas, Nagins, Apsaras and Rakshasas are prominent in puranic stories, ranging from the Mahabharata and Ramayana to other major works of Vedic literature. While many of these narratives originated in oral traditions they have been recorded for centuries in sanskrit text. These are mostly stories relating to supernatural entities that turn into traditions. They become part of the belief system that can be told as a cautionary tale or as the background of a proud custom.

The Yaksha tradition exists as a myth especially from the 19th century as part of the lore of nagas and black magic. The yakshi is a female haunting ghost or entity that has the ability to seduce and attain her desires. Similarly they are shown as rakshasas that are in thirst for the blood of humans. The Gandarvas are the male counterparts, unlike yakshas they are not just seductresses and not always associated with horror. Instead, they fall under the category of men with the supernatural ability to seduce virgin women. They are part of cautionary tales to prevent young girls from falling into the traps of love or associated feelings, as they were considered taboo in families during those days. Myths are not just stories but the framework through which societies have interpreted cosmic beliefs and existential questions. Folklore arises from the everyday lives of local or regional communities. Their representations in movies and stories is very important since it helps connect the future generations to the past, where traditional beliefs and customs played an important role in sustaining our society. Moreover, the idea of movies grounding these myths is for commercial success, but it still piques the curiosity of the viewers to know more about them.

Yaksha Tradition

Yakshas are mystical beings whose main purpose is to guard nature, forest and wealth. They are represented either as beautiful, seductress or as scary and horrible varying the context. Yakshi and Yakshas are mainly found in Buddhist, Hindu and Jain art and text. Yakshas are the male counterparts and Yakshi are their female counterparts. Their presence on temples and paintings suggests the purpose of protection for land and nature. Jain texts claim that they are reborn as mortal human beings once their merits are exhausted. Their representation in the sculpture can be seen from the Mauryan and post Mauryan period. In fiction and movies they are shown as symbols of horror which ultimately led to gaining popularity and commercial success. The Yakshi in movies appear as female figures wearing white sarees and appear as beautiful as can be to trap people. They are tamed by tantriks and other superior priests. Yakshi in these movies appear as wenchful souls of women dead by injustice mostly committed to them by men. So their only way to attain revenge is by becoming a scary entity that not just scares the men but also the people associated with them. So here they used the myths as an element for stories embellishing them for the purpose of story telling. The novel *Yakshi* by Malayatoor Ramakrishan, published in 1967 is a significant portrayal of the yakshi myth. It can be interpreted as either the psychological manipulation of a character or the presence of supernatural figures. The film *Anandabhadram*, released in 2005, is a malayalam movie that contains supernatural elements including black magic, tantric practices and many other myths. There is a minute scene where a yakshi guards the magic realm that the antagonist Digambaran's grandfather is trying to enter. This shows the primary purpose of Yakshas, which is guarding wealth and nature. However, there is another character in the

movie that resembles the qualities of a Yakshi and plays a significant role. The character of Bhama in Anandabhadram appears to be more than just a side character, She is beautiful and portrayed in a seductive light. From her initial representation as a girl used in black magic by Digambaran, she becomes a central part of the plot and a manifestation of the Yakshi as the myths suggest. The character of Bhama is a female representation of how supernatural powers are used to resist oppression. Her transformation can be described as a rebellion against such injustice. In the movie, we see Bhama who is initially used as a mere tool and faced oppressions from the antagonist as well as accusations from the villagers, eventually turns into an epitome of power. By the end she plays a cruel role in taking down the antagonist. In the supernatural film, her character gains strength by adopting the qualities of a Yakshi to reclaim the agency. At the beginning of the movie, there are other major representations of Yakshis guarding the magic realm in the movie at the beginning itself as guarding the magic realm where the nagamanikam, another symbolic factor of power exist. So in that manner the movie brings out the main attribute or characteristics of Yaskhi from myths such as guarding the magic realm or nature. This paper uses the character of Bhama as a representation of Yaksha's powers even though the movie doesn't directly portray her as the yakshi. Since the characteristics of Yakshi are portrayed through Bhama's character she could be used as study for understanding these characteristics of Yakshi. Bhama could be represented as a tragic heroine since she lost her life itself in revenge. She was not being saved by anyone even though her brother tried from the beginning and people just considered her to be possessed. It can either be a mental illness too but the villagers were focussed on pertaining it as possession rather than providing the medical treatments. This is another factor that could be seen in rural areas and villages where people are blinded by religion that they lose their rationality in taking decisions. When their child, especially a girl child gets sick it will be termed to be possessed by spirits or Yakshis. Their first remedy is to take her to a priest or tantric rather than to a proper hospital. This act is still seen in villagers but a change is going to happen as education becomes a major factor that may change the mindset of people around us.

Gandharva Tradition

While Gandravas are the male counterparts of Aaparsa, their purpose is to provide entertainment to the gods in heaven. Some Gandharvas are ostracised and forced to wander the earth as punishment from deities. As celestial musicians and messengers they are typically depicted with handsome appearances and ornate jewellery symbolizing music and art. These archetypes are adopted by many writers and filmmakers as beautiful devils who lure young women. A prominent example is the 1991 romantic fantasy film *Njan Gandharvan* directed by P.Padmarajan, which features Gandharvan as the central character. The plot explores the myth of Gandharva who seduces young girls, but Padmarajan's treatment helped reconnect modern audiences with forgotten folklore. These representations made it impossible to forget such stories which are inspired from Vedic Puranas. While Gandharva is used as a submissive character, Yakhis are mostly portrayed as symbols of horror and fear. The character of Gandharva is used in folktales and myths as a tragic hero at the same time a luring entity that should be cautioned for the young girls. The gender disparity could easily be viewed here. The possession of Gandharva is on girls in this case too, since the presence of Gandharva appears to take away the purity of young girls. In the movie however, the representation of Gandharva appears as a hero who becomes the companion of a young woman. Their love story captured the audience's attention, and the songs in the movie possessed a quality as if they were sung by Gandharva himself. As the plot unfolds against the backdrop of the Gandharava myth portraying him as a celestial

musician, the movie succeeds in presenting him as exactly as he appears in folklore. Several critics argue that Gandharva is merely a figment of imagination of Bhama, a lonely young girl who shaped his image from her grandmother's stories. These tales create an illusion of someone who does not exist. Through this ambiguous storytelling, the director leaves the truth open to interpretation. Gandharva marriage originated from this concept, where a union between two people based on mutual consent is considered to have taken place in the presence of Gandharvas.

The Interaction of Mythical and Human world

The representation of these myths can be examined through the lens of gender studies, as the portrayal of male and female figures differs significantly within our tradition. Although the stories told by our grandparents remain in our hearts for years, it is through these narratives that we gain insight into moral and social well-being. Both Yakshas and Gandharvas exist in our puranic texts like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In *Mahabharata*, there is Yaksha Praksha where Yaksha challenges Yudistra with Philosophical questions and Gandharva Chiterasena who taught Arjun music and dance in Indra's court shows their presence in these texts. In Valmaki's *Ramayana*, the appearance of Vishvasu, a Gandharva and the origins of Yaksha as protectors of water are mentioned. Folktales play an important role as they are not merely stories, but frameworks that provide answers to unexplained religious customs. As many of these tales fade from memory, media representations and fictional narratives became essential materials that preserve these myths. These figures are not supernatural entities but to symbolise various motives. The Yakshi as an epitome of revenge and the Gandharva as a romantic hero. Both beings are neither fully humans nor divine; they occupy an intermediate, hybrid space between supernatural realm and the human world. While Yakshi appear to humans to instill fear and are thought to inhabit dark, mysterious places, Gandharvas are seen as divine entities who descend to earth to maintain romantic relationships with humans. This divine creates a mystical connection between the divine and human life. Yaskhi interactions, however, often disturbs the status quo representing a frightening intrusion of the supernatural into everyday reality. Ultimately, this intermediate space allows for the blending of semidivine mysticism with the vulnerability driven by a sense of injustice and revenge or Gandharva's feeling of love and longing. For Yakshis it is about their feeling of revenge and injustice that made their souls unable to leave the worldly relations. The entrapment of their souls in this world may represent the burden faced by women in the society where they are under the control of men, leaving them with the sole identity of nurturers and caregivers. It can be interpreted in various contexts depending on the characteristics given to Yakshas in our vedic text, and certain retellings have already placed them in different contexts.

Gender Disparity and Obsessions

These myths serve as effective story telling techniques until they become part of an obsession with taming a specific gender, particularly women. In the case of both the Gandharva and the Yakshi, women are the primary recipient of the supernatural label. Historically women were often subjected to abuse under the guise of yakshi possession instead of receiving treatment for mental illnesses. Similarly young girls who expressed interest in choosing their own partners or delaying marriage were often frequently accused of being possessed by Gandharva. These myths become a shroud of superstitions that mostly affect women. On the other hand, these stories can be read as the form of resistance against gender norms. Granting supernatural powers to women that were denied to them in life allow them to be represented

as strong female characters. Through the element of fear, they are able to demand justice against those who harmed them. The desires of women are often being ignored, they are forced to possess the characteristics of diligent wives, dutiful daughters and lovable mothers. The desires of men are often celebrated in poetry and other works. When women's desires and longings are written or talked about they are treated as taboos. In those days, a woman's virginity was considered as a sign of purity, which in turn brought prestige to the entire family. Therefore, to protect the girl child from any inclination towards losing it, she was subjected to Gandharva pujas. Taming her in the name of being under possession of Gandharva helped to create fear in the minds of these girls. The myth of the Gandharva is one such tale that explores the female desires. The image of a lovable and supportive partner, as seen in the movie *Njan Gandharavan*, represents the qualities that women wanted in men who they chose as their partner, which is so rare in those days. So thus the myth of Gandharva fulfils the imagination of young girls. However on another level, the character of Bhama is exploited by Gandharva to attain his own purposes. He takes away her virginity and leaves her alone with his memories that may drive her to insanity, showing that it is women who suffer the consequences. This shows the one who suffered the aftereffects of Gandharvan's actions in the movie is Bhama herself. So both traditions of Yaksha and Gandharva are more or less associated with women. Even though the movie portrayed Gandharva as a tragic hero, the one who appears more tragic is the character of Bhama, herself. Even if it's her imagination, she will be trapped with the longing for someone who may not come back into her life, which appears like a life sentence. In the movie *Anadhabadram*, although the character of Bhama is used to provide aesthetic pleasure to the audience through songs and her appearance, she also forces the audience to confront how society views women. The villagers too gain sort of pleasure in looking at the cruelty she faces in the hands of Dhigambaram, this represent a real world plight of girls who face assault while being taken to tantrics for cure. On the other hand, the character Bhadra represents the divine burdens, she is the virgin daughter forced into religious positions. The burdens that are laid on women in the name of customs is well evident through her character. So both Bhama and Bhadra are two sides of the same coin. One is used for black magic, while the other is forced into religious customs. Both face oppression from men. Bhama's defiance at the end can be read as a method of breaking her shackles, even though she knows death awaits her in the end. Ultimately in these narratives it is women who suffer the most.

Temples and Shrines of Yaksha and Gandharva Cult in Kerala

Temples and Shrines dedicated to Yakshis and Gandharvas are found across Kerala preserving these unique folk traditions. The Kottarakkara Sree Mahaganapathi Temple and the Kunnil Sree Bhagavati temple in Thiruvanthapuram are notable examples where yaskhis are worshipped as guardian spirits. Devotees offering prayers at these shrines reflect how Yakshi spirits have been absorbed into temple worship. Yashi as a mesmerising deity also appears in Theyam ceremonies in Kerala. As per the ancient text of Puranasaglpa, the thaikolams of Chamudi and Bhagavathi are believed to embody the essence of Yakshi concept. The Theyam artforms draw upon various hypotheses including Yakshi, Gandharvas and Kamadeva (identified in Atharvaveda as a deity) all of which are closely related to the Yakshi myth. The tale of Brahmayaksha and Brahmuyakshi, represented in thaiyam portrays a celestial couple whose stories highlight the themes of love and transformation. So not just through movies but also through ritual artforms like Theyam, we can gain a profound insight into Kerala's unique belief systems. There are some Gandharva temples in Kerala like Urulikunnam Gandharva Swamy Temple in Kottayam district, Vazhappully Temple in Trichur and the Sree Vaishnava Gandharva Swami temple in Chambakkara, Ernakulam.

These shrines are intended for offering to get the blessings on marriage, fertility etc and to prevent Gandharva dosha. The portrayal of Yakshas as horror icons, causes people to forget that the primary purpose for their existence, according to the myths, is as the guardians of nature. They were believed to inhabit sacred groves like Kavus, which were intended for their conservations. The element of fear and horror mixed in these stories helped to conserve nature, thereby respecting it. In a way, modern adaptations that portray Yaskhis just as horror icons reflect a change in their relationship with the environment. There were beliefs that say destroying nature by damage or pollution causes the wrath of Yaksha, which in turn leads to crop failure or disasters. As they remained undisturbed these areas became home for several medicinal herbs preserving flora and fauna. Instilling fear was a way of protecting the environment, which might otherwise have faced destruction. However, as these beliefs were slowly discarded, the environment began to be degraded. Either way, these practices are considered part of their ancient traditions.

Conclusion

Myth and folklore are not merely tales, they are pathways to our ancient traditions. Constructed upon indigenous beliefs, these myths help us to understand our past. This paper has primarily focused on Yaksha and Gandharva traditions, examining how they are retold in modern representation such as novels and films. The inherent gender bias in these stories allow us to witness both oppression and resistance among men and women. The myth of Yakshi can be read as a resistance against patriarchal oppression through supernatural power, while the myth of Gandharva portrays the hidden desires and loneliness of women. Thus these myths can be interpreted through various lenses. We continue to preserve these myths through traditions and customs, offering prayers to them as deities in shrines. As guardians of nature, these figures remind us of the importance once placed on protecting the environment allowing us to revisit the ecological changes occurring today.

Modern movies provide a new version of these stories, helping to ensure that folklore is not destroyed or forgotten on time. These stories once provided comfort to people during their hard labor making their burdens easy to bear. By reviving these stories, modern media helps future generations reclaim their heritage and nostalgic memories.

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Abhirami.S.S is a postgraduate student of English at Government College for Women Thiruvanthapuram. Her areas of interest range from female-centric thrillers to domestic suspense. She also enjoys exploring a wide range of other fiction genres and artforms. She has been a blogger for three years. Her blog includes the writing of articles, her own writings and her art. With a keen interest in interdisciplinary studies, she actively explores new methodologies through seminars. She likes to talk about anything that grabs her attention and wants to explore more about what's happening around her.