



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

HISTORICAL AND CINEMATIC IMAGINATION OF WOMEN SEXUALITY: A STUDY BASED ON VADAKKANPATTUCINEMAKAL

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Abstract: Indian cinema has never attempted to capture the human's most natural and instinctive expression of sexuality. Our films either shied away from portraying sex on-screen or its portrayal did not stay true to the essence of what the word meant. Malayalam films are also no less different. While love, marriage and family have always been the favourite themes of Malayalam cinema, it turned a blind-eye towards bodily intimacy and affection, which holds an intrinsic place in a couple's life. If this was the attitude towards sexuality, the portrayal of female sexuality is completely ignored by the cinema. This stance regarding sexuality not only obstructs cinema from adopting a progressive outlook but also it caused to normalise the power and violence which is latent in sexuality. It has been observed that the evolution of nationalism formulates and controls sexuality. This study attempts to look at how Indian nationalism dictates sexuality, and also how it is projected in Vadakkanpaattucinemakal.¹

Nationalism and Sexuality

Sexuality that is supposedly 'inherent or natural' in a human being is, in reality, evolved out of various social and historical processes. It is determined by social, cultural and economic conditions of different ages. When feudalism thrived in Kerala, instances of polygamy, polyandry and fraternal polyandry co-existed with the feudal system. Their love affairs were not restricted to one person alone. They maintained relationships that could strengthen their feudal ties and power; hence their relationships were more power oriented.

But, the rise of nationalism changed this pattern of relations and sexuality forever. The existing scenario became problematic. It formulated codes of sexuality applicable to all genders. According to G. L. Mosse, since the time of its birth, modern nationalism has controlled sexuality. He says, the history of sexuality became part of the history of nationalism in two ways: nationalism not only helped to control sexuality, to reinforced what society considered normal, but it also provided the means through which changing sexual attitudes could be absorbed and tamed into respectability. Nationalism also received a sexual dimension of

¹Films which are based on Vadakkanpattukal are generally known as Vadakkanpattu Cinemakal. Vadakkanpattukal are the songs which prevailed in a region called 'Malabar' by the British and as 'Northern Kerala' after the formation of Unified Kerala. The literal meaning of the word 'Vadakkanpattukal' is 'Songs of the Northern region of Kerala'. As it is a kind of songs that tells a story, these songs come under the category of Ballads. Vadakkanpattukal are mostly sung by the people who are considered as lower castes according to the caste system existed in Malabar during Janmi – Naduvazhi system. The songs about Aromal Chekavar, Unniyarcha, Thacholi Othenan, Ambadi, Thacholi Chandu, Palattukoman, KudamalaKunki, Poomathai Ponnammamma are largely popular among the people. There are eighteen films of this kind in Malayalam. The first Vadakkanpattu Cinema, Unniyarcha got released in 1961. Most of the Vadakkanpattu Cinemakal is produced by Udaya and Navodaya studios. The trend of making films based on Vadakkanpattukal extended to the year 2016. Veeram Directed by Jayaraj is the lastly released film in this category. This study is based on Vadakkanpaatu films released between 1961 and 1980.

its own through its advocacy of beauty, its stereotypes of ideal men and women. The beautiful body as the personification of the beautiful nation was supposed to transcend its own sexuality (Mosse, 1983.)

Attempts to control sexuality are prevalent in all countries, but constraining female body and sexuality takes a stronger hold. Myth on female sexuality and body is constructed as nations take shape. Their movements are also restricted by space and geography. Gender identities and women's bodies become symbolic and spatial boundaries of the nation. Women's bodies serve as symbols of the fecundity of the nation and vessels for its reproduction, as well as territorial markers. Mothers, wives and daughters designate the space of the nation and are, at the same time, the property of the nation. As markers and as property, mothers, daughters and wives require the defence and the protection of patriotic sons (Ivekovnic and Mostov, 2002:10).

The other point of view is that the women's body is considered as the carriers of culture. Female sexuality is perceived as wild, uncontrollable, insatiable and dangerous. In fact, it is seen as a threatening factor that invites invasion. Elias Canetti writes, in a slightly different context, that men who received warning about danger are threatened only in their personal capacity. But, women who pay no heed to a warning or an interdiction about such danger put the whole community in peril (Ibid, qtd., 2002: 11-12).

Violence against women is seen as a cause for the degradation of culture, a shameless act. "The 'other's' men are collectively seen as sexual aggressors, "our" women are objects of their temptation" (Ibid, 2002:12). "Women's sexuality is seen as threatening the idealized vision of woman-as-nation. It is therefore sanctified and robbed of its unruly potential images of powerful and protective – but definitely asexual-national motherhood" (Eihorn, 1993:223). Indian nationalism also thrives on controlling and formulating sexuality, considering the female body and sexuality as holding a mirror onto the culture of the nation.

Colonization, Renaissance and Women Sexuality

Concepts of the female body and sexual politics became problematic once it forayed into the Nation – State. The journey of human beings into a more complex process of acquiring citizenship imposed unwritten restrictions on their sexual freedom. As India fell from the hands of feudal lords to colonizers, it subsequently witnessed the change from polygamy to monogamy. Victorian morality was thus implanted in the Indian culture. Reign of morality over sexuality first took shape in the European culture. According to Jennifer Harding, codes of morality and sexuality were formulated in 1800 A.D. when they marked their presence in the constitution (1998: 27). This occurred during the reign of Queen Victoria. Victorian morality refers to the moral codes of conduct that the people followed in Victorian England. Restrictions on sexuality, ensuring proper justice and strict civic sense come under the umbrella of Victorian morality. Female sexuality was seen with condescended, and women were not allowed to express the desire for sex. As Douglar points out, having sexual desire identified almost solely with men, women of the lower classes like prostitutes. During this time even male doctors were persuaded that women had no sex drive. When a woman did express sexual desire, it was seen as a disease that needed to be taken care of immediately and with drastic measures- like removing the sexual organs. Sexual desire was thought to be a quality that only men should have in this time period (Gabriella Pastor, Chelsea Mageland, et al., qtd., 1974). Only the heterosexuality was considered as Normalised or legalized sexuality. Homosexuality was criminalised in the Victorian era. Victorian values are manifesting on the basis of the concept that body and sexuality are sins. By the time, British society had transformed into a monogamous, patriarchal, nuclear family system which is configured on the basis of Victorian values.

Victorian society imposed strict codes on sexuality. Following this, in the nineteenth century, colonisers tried to impose these codes of conduct in India by incorporating laws on morality in Indian constitution and governance. Major example for such a law is the Age of Consent Act in 1891, which raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse for all girls from ten to twelve years in all jurisdictions. This act, in fact, a cunning attempt of the British to control all kinds of sexual manifestations of Indians. Moreover, this act defined heterosexuality as normative or legalized (Himani, 2001:73). 'Moral codes' put forward by the colonisers found whole-hearted acceptance in India. Reformists and nationalists showcased their interest in projected India as a country, which imbibed Victorian morality. Charu Gupta observes: there was a deliberate distancing from the uncomfortable traditions of the past, and an attempt was made to establish a monolithic, high textual cultural form (2011:40).

Kalpna Viswanath points out that women's physique and sexuality became yardsticks to measure their femininity during the Victorian era: it was believed that women had more sexual energy than men. It had to be tamed in order to protect the honour of the family since women's uncontrollable sexual energy was a threat to society (1997: 316). This fear was shared by renaissance and nationalist movements that led to imposing restrictions on female sexuality.

Such concepts became the basis of thoughts of renaissance and nationalist movements. They gave more importance to monogamy and marital sex. Nationalist leaders including Gandhiji propagated the idea that the sole outcome of sex should be procreation and not pleasure. Look at what Gandhi said: indulging in sex for attaining physical pleasure becomes animalistic. There for get away from it should be the main aim of the people (Soman, 2014:19). He firmly believed in the need to control one's sexual urge, and by controlling the urge, humans achieve a supreme position where they would be in close communion with God. He also stated that sexual intercourse should be permitted only inside marriage (Vitz, 2008). Charu Gupta points out that there were repeated warnings against the dangers of indulging in one's 'baser instincts'. Sleeping together on the bed resulted in a constant desire for sex, affecting health and beauty. Partners had better sleep in different places. After marriage, the first intercourse with a virgin woman had best impregnate her at once, and after that sex had ideally to be avoided. The prescribed interval between each sexual act varied. Some stressed once a year, others once in six months, but almost none advocated it more than once a month (2011:127 -128.)

As J. Devika observes, the fear about body and sex were planted in Kerala by the Renaissance movements. This thought about the sinful female body took a stronghold throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Governments indulged in modernising societies and missionaries who tried to teach values to people and Social reformists were successful enough in imposing restrictions on female sexuality (Devika, 2010:131). Writings and discussions on sex and sexuality were perceived as obscene.

Women Sexuality in Vadakkanpattucinemakal

The birth of Malayalam cinema took its form when Indian society was evolving into the Victorian ideals. Films accepted the Victorian norms by showcasing Victorian morality. Female sexuality was perceived as a taboo in films too. Feudal sexuality was completely nullified by Indian Cinema.

Women as desexualized or asexual object

Malayalam Cinema (Indian Cinema too) imbibed the new ideals of women sexuality which is formulated by the Renaissance movements and tried to impose those ideals upon the people. Cinema portrays women as desexualized or asexual. She is presented as an epitome of morality (Kulasthree). The sexuality of women was bulwarked by the patriarchal regimes and family system making her a reproductive tool with a passive sexual urge. Vadakkanpattucinemakal too visualised female sexuality inside the framework of constructed Victorian morality. The feudal sexuality prevalent in Kerala accepted multiple sexual relationships and polygamy. In Vadakkanpaatu, Unniyarcha is portrayed as a woman with active sexual urge, the lore sings of her infatuation with Chandu. She is a feudal lady, it is natural for her to have more than one sexual relationships. But in the film, she is portrayed as a woman whose sexuality is confined to her husband Kunjiraman only.

The film carried all the Victorian morals; monogamy became the yardstick to calibrate the quality of virtuous women. 'Kaavilum ChathothKungi' (*TachiliOthenan*), 'KadathanatuMaakam' (*KadathanaatuMaakam*), 'Unniyamma' (*KadathanaatuMaakam*), 'Thumbolarcha' (*Thumbolarcha*), and 'Baala' (*PonnapuramKotta*) became the epitome of so-called virtuous women.

Women who showed sexual desires were carved with negativity. They are portrayed as prostitutes and vamps. In the film *Unniyarcha*, daughter and niece of Aringodar are portrayed as selfish and desirous women. In *Thacholi Othenan* the love of Kanni, daughter of the king, for Othenan is portrayed in the same way.

The film gave much importance to qualities like virginity, chastity and morality. It is a must for a woman to preserve her virginity until marriage. In a way, films became a medium for setting up Victorian morality. Female heroines in films always had to prove their virginity and chastity. Their moral psyche is questioned by the patriarchal domains. In the film *Thumbolarcha*, the heroine had to do the fire ordeal (Agni

Pareeksha) to prove her virginity. Sexual desires and sex before marriage became forbidden for women. The films echoed that women who are not virgin and chaste are not virtuous enough to live, it is better for them to sacrifice themselves to the holy fire. In *KadathanattuMakkam*, Makkam was a feudal woman who stimulated the law and order of the place, but her virginity and purity were questioned leading her to a tragic life.

Women, her sexuality and body politics were part and parcel of Indian society. The concepts of chastity and virginity were also present in India, but they became the calibrating measure of womanhood when India evolved among the world nations. Topics like women, sexuality, virginity and chastity became the topic of discussion in Indian society. Society wanted to confine women into labels like 'virgin' and 'chaste' to qualify the nation's status and to fit into the so-called high-class Victorian morality. Sir. Sri Sankaran Nair wrote an article titled *Njangalde Streekalkum Charitryam Unadayirunu* (Our women too had chastity) by demanding change in Nair marriages (Sheeba, qtd.2014). The films that came at this time were also trying to redefine the womanhood in the name of the renaissance.

Vadakkanpaattu Cinemakal condemn women who indulge in premarital sex. Heroines who produced offspring out of premarital sex are elevated to heroic mothers who gave birth to heroic sons. This nullified the gravity of the premarital sex by elevating them to high pedestals, as their sexual union was for a good cause. 'Thekkambatte Kanni' and 'Kadathanattu Makkam' indulged in premarital sex, but they were never called unchaste. 'Othenan' betrayed 'Kanni' by marrying another woman, but the heroic child born out of their sexual liaison normalised premarital sex. These so-called renaissance innovations chained woman sexuality by making them creatures of procreation. The elevated position of women as mother, housewives and goddesses desexualized them. Sunil P Ilayidam observes that such forms of elevations are suppressive renaissance methodology used to stagnate female sexuality. The renaissance family setup rejected unbound feudal sexuality of women and colonised the female sexuality by designating women as housewives (2014: 202).

The women characters in Vadakkanpaattu Cinemakal never fight against the sexual atrocities they face. They consider themselves dishonoured, instead of fighting against these atrocities they take woe to kill themselves. The character Chinnu in *Angatattu* kills herself saying 'she couldn't be dishonoured while she is alive', when 'Kandarmenon' from Ponnapuramkotta in *Tacholimarumakan Chandu* captivates Mathu, she says, 'I don't fear death, but could I ever hide the humiliation and disgrace? I have become the reason for shame not only to my family but to my native place also'. In the same way, when Thumbolarcha in the film *Thumbolarchais* raped by Aaromal, instead of considering the gravity of the insult she faced, she feels that the virginity she has preserved for her husband was disgraced. This attitude normalizes the accepted authority of men over the female body.

Didi Daamodaran has put forth some observation regarding the way in which rape scenes are portrayed in the films: 1. Malayalam films show a constant obsessive tendency in visualizing rape scenes, but they never try to introspect the psychological trauma that is faced by the victims. 2. The victim is crucified for evoking sexual desire in man; she is forced to end up her life. 3. In most cases, rape scenes are used to showcase the heroism of the protagonist, thereby legitimizing the rape scenes to the standard of desirable sex (2010, 178-192).

Observations of Didi Damodaran are applicable to Vadakkanpaattu films also. All women who are victims of sexual attacks are seen killing themselves (except Thumbolaarcha, as the film doesn't perceive her as a rape victim) thus the film couldn't decode the mental agony of victims. Malu in *PonnapuramKotta*, the daughter of a priest in *Kannapanunni* are killed after rape, and Chinnu kills herself in the battlefield. They are not fighting against this violence, instead, they end their life without any choice. The violence of the heroes is praised as valorous deeds. When Aaromal forcefully developed sexual intercourse with Thumbolarcha, she was unaware that her husband Paanan and aaromal are the same person. The forceful intercourse is normalized in the film as Aaromal is the husband of Thumbolaarcha though she is unaware of it. Here marital rape is being legalized.

Conclusion

Passage of time did not change the idea of sexuality, it is still considered inside the same plane without many differences. Society has invalidated polygamy and has accepted monogamy, but the position of women as a creature of procreation hasn't changed over centuries. During the feudal time, women preserved the purity of each community through their chastity. In modern time, they are considered as the pride and virtue of the nation. They are desexualized by limiting their role as mother and housewives. The renaissance ideology failed in redefining sex. Modern ideologies on individuality, citizenship and democracy failed to distinguish between consensual sex and forced sex, and Vadakkanpaatu Cinemakal never tried to acknowledge these issues. Instead of portraying the polyandric and polygamic relationship, which was prevalent in the Kerala society, these films tried to establish Victorian morality as the inherent culture of our society.

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