

**Re-fashioning ‘Gender’ in Kerala Modernity: A Study of Women, Goddesses and Yakshis
in *Aithiyamala***

Nila Rajeev

Research Scholar

Department of English

St. Thomas College, (Autonomous), Thrissur

emailid: nilarajeev@gmail.com

Mob: 9645360958

Abstract:

Kerala Modernity was emblematic in ‘re-imagining’ the lives of women in Kerala. This concept of ‘ideal’ woman was construed on the basis of the familial relations, reform laws, the growth of education and the dogmatism of the religion. *Aithiyamala*, envisioned by the prolific writer Kottarathil Sankunni is a repository of the myths and legends of Kerala. The study focuses on the complex historical process of the state’s encounter with modernity and its role in shaping the socio-political conditions, aesthetic sensibilities and gender construction with respect to the specific tales from *Aithiyamala*.

‘Renaissance’ ideas along with the burgeoning print culture awakened a ‘social consciousness’ among the people. The period under consideration for this study begins in the early years of the nineteenth century and ends with the final decade of the twentieth century. The paper also analyses the way in which the representation of women, categorized into ‘Goddesses’ and ‘Yakshis’ in *Aithiyamala* adhere with the construction of ‘gender’ in the realm of Kerala Modernity.

Keywords: Gender, Kerala Modernity, Women, Goddesses, Yakshis

Re-fashioning 'Gender' in Kerala Modernity: A Study of Women, Goddesses and Yakshis in *Aithiyamala*

Kerala Modernity which resulted in the territorialization/de-territorialization of the 'region' was emblematic in 're-imagining' the lives of women in Kerala. The reform laws, education, political agitations and cultural productions of the period played a significant role in the construction of gender in the land. 'Renaissance' ideas along with the burgeoning print culture awakened a 'social consciousness' among the people. The period under consideration for this study begins in the early years of the nineteenth century and ends with the final decade of the twentieth century. This paper further analyses the construction of gender in the cultural context of Kerala.

The Namboothiris/Kerala brahmins were the highest caste in the social structure of Kerala. Though it was the highest caste, the patriarchal structure of the society oppressed the lives of the Namboothiri women with its rigid customs and traditions. They were confined within the claustrophobic spaces of *illoms*. Marriage as a social institution enforced stringent rules of matrimony. The marriages were not performed out of love but only as a part of social obligation. Only the elder brother of a family was able to marry legally within another Brahmin community. He could marry upto four women from his own caste. All the other members had to be satisfied with *sambandham*. In this practise of *sambandham*, the younger ones of the family could consort with women from the *Nair* or *Ambalavasi* community. It was in April 1925 the Legislative Council passed a bill terminating matrilineal system, permitting partition of property, legalising all *sambandhams*, and essentially inaugurating the age of the patriarchal family structure in Travancore. The bill was sent to the Maharani for her assent and on 13 April 1925, she signed the historic Nair Regulation Act, giving matrilineal kinship the unique distinction of being the

only system of inheritance. Vineetha Menon in her essay “Matriliny, Patriliney and the Postmodern Condition: Complexities of “Family” in Kerala” states:

It is scripturally and ritualistically ordained family life that gets projected under Brahmanism. Individual intimacies or affect or considerations of love are of no prime significance, but conjugal duties and duties to ensure moksha (salvation) after death. (48)

The dowry system was also prevalent among the Namboothiri’s of the state. In the *Malabar Manual*, William Logan says, “In order to get their daughter married, a Namboothiri must be rich, for with each of them he has to pay the bridegroom a heavy dowry and many illom’s resources have been drained in this way” (210).

The new ‘Malayalee woman’ was moulded by the patriarchy under the influence of colonial modernity. The educated middle class of India imbibed the ideals of colonial modernity and they wanted to reform the outdated practices within their communities. Modern definitions of ‘female sexuality’ in Kerala, was shaped by the reform laws of land and marriage implemented by the colonial government. The marriage laws that redefined the kinship structure of the state from matrilineal to patrilineal were “the cultural production of a new morality than legal infringements” as observed by G. Arunima (*Matriliny and its Discontents* 159).

The legal reforms brought by the colonial modernity had thus transformed the kinship structure of Kerala. It is within this new familial setting that the ‘sexuality’ of the modern woman got re-imagined. Monogamy became the new norm under colonial morality. As a result of the transition from the matrilineal to the patrilineal system, the male became the head of the family replacing the figure of the *karanavan* or the elder family member of *tharavadu* (ancestral

home). The role of the women was re-defined into the realm of a domestic space headed by a man.

The educational reforms that took place in the early eighteenth and the nineteenth century created a new social order. Even though women were educated, she was not able to break the shackles of patriarchy. In this system, women were relegated to the status of the 'other', whereas men were allowed to pursue their intellectual domains of knowledge. The notions of 'motherhood' and 'ideal women' were thrust upon her.

The sexualisation of the female body had far-reaching consequences in the cultural 'space' of Kerala. Only the upper caste women were allowed to cover their breasts till then. Channar women of South Travancore started a rebellion, for the right to wear upper clothes over their bosoms. This agitated the upper caste members, who attacked some of the women who covered their upper part of the body. This leads to a widespread revolt and as a result on 26th July 1859, the King of Travancore, under the insistence of Madras Governor announced the right of Channar women to cover their breasts. As a result of this proclamation, women from all castes started covering their breasts. Thus, the right to cover her body was exhorting as a powerful political statement that redefined female sexuality. As B. Rajeevan observes,

This event in which the female breast in Kerala transforms itself into an object of sexuality through a sense of nudity and self-consciousness clearly illustrates a significant moment in the history of women's body in Kerala . . . The series of struggles in South Travancore from the beginning of the nineteenth century regarding the right of low caste women to cover their breasts also deserves a detailed analysis disregarding the humanist and progressivist notions in the context of the emergence of the new sense of nudity and

the sexualisation of women's breasts and the transformation in the concept of women's body as a major event in the history of sexuality and subjectification in modern Kerala.

(*From Caste to Sex*56)

Women's sexuality came to be feared in the new social system. Subjugating the desires of the female became an important dictate of the patriarchy. Lalithambika Antharjanam mocksthis tendency of the male-dominated society to confine a woman into either as a 'saint' or as a 'prostitute'. Lalithambika Antharjanam in her book, *Lalithambika Antharjanathinte Lekhanangal* suggests, "If a woman willing to subjugateherself to patriarchy to take care of the domestic is viewed as a saint, a woman who had ambitions for herself, outside the realm of the domestic was always understood as a transgressive being" (90).

Myths and legends were the tools of oppression that carried out this religious agenda of denigrating 'women' by trying to confine her into the ideations of patriarchy. In *Aithiyamala*, the representation of the 'gender' is problematic. Sankunni had broadly classified the women in the text into that of 'divine' and 'diabolic' nature. The ideal 'feminine' in *Aithiyamala* is attributed to the qualities of chastity, honour, obedience, meekness, etc. Anything outside this pattern was branded as the 'other'. Therefore the representation of women in the text needs to be read by placing them in the socio-cultural milieu of the construction of the 'feminine' in the Kerala history. Bini B.S says, "Threads of mythology, legends, popular beliefs, customs and rituals weave together the texture of the past. Thus, these legends and myths can be read as subtexts to history that capture an indeterminable period of time as lived experience" (*The Divine and the Diabolic Feminine* 29). *Aithiyamala* legends are full of recondite information about social practices, customs and traditions of the past, familial and ritual status of women, and the complex circulation of land rights, etc.

In *Aithiyamala* stories, Sankunni documents the origin stories of various ‘Goddesses’, the voluptuous ‘Yakshis’, and other noble women from the royal families. In the former category, the author mentions about goddesses connected to a particular place. He also describes pious women being elevated into the status of a goddess and the tale of chaste women attaining divinity. The legends of many goddesses like ‘MakkamBhagavati’ and ‘Muchilottamma’ in *Aithiyamalais* about the virtuous women being transformed into goddesses. The text gives an account of the legends of women, who belonged to the royal dynasties such as *The Queen of Kaippuzha*, *The Queen of Chembakashherri*, *Vattaparambil Valiyamma*, *Arakkal Beevi*, etc. These tales which are replete with eulogies for the ruling class in turn depict Sankunni’s sycophancy. In the legend of Arakkal Beevi, she is presented as a Hindu princess who embraced Islam to respect tradition, and she started a new dynasty in order to resolve a crisis with justice, courage, and tolerance. In the narrative of “The chastity of Pakkanar’s wife”, Sankunni attributes a divine quality to the chastity among women. Pakkanar’s wife is treated as the embodiment of ‘pativrata dharmam’ or chastity. She is depicted as a passive subject who doesn’t defy her husband’s orders, not even once. The author of the text builds the notion of ‘gender’ depending upon his imagination which was obviously the popular ideals associated with ‘femininity’ in his time.

In the tales of goddesses like ‘Kumaranalloor Bhaghavathi’, she is depicted as an incarnation of ‘Madhura Meenakshi’ in the Pandya Kingdom. The goddess had left her abode and migrated to a new place fleeing the socio-political turmoils of the kingdom. In *Aithiyamala*, the manifestations of goddesses could be seen in stone, pond, well, etc. waiting to be discovered and consecrated into power. The story of Cherthala Bhagavati, the reigning goddess of the Cherthala temple is often narrated as an origin myth of the place ‘Cherthala’. The word in

Malayalam for mud is *cher* and head is *thala*; hence the name of the place and the deity means ‘the muddy head’. Her story goes like this, once Vilvamangalathu Swami, a brahmin catches hold of seven divine virgins and installs them as goddesses in temples at different locations. The seventh one among the virgins tries to escape into a pond filled with mud. The sage annoyed by her resistance against being evoked into an idol, uses an obscene word (meaning a slut) to address her, pulls her out of the mud and installs her as the divine feminine without even cleaning the mud that is smeared on her head. Thus the story of the goddess becomes the origin myth of the place Cherthala where she is incarnated as a *gramadevata* or a village goddess of the region.

There are goddesses of disease and cure like ‘Kodungalloor Vasoorimala’ (a goddess of smallpox installed in the Devi temple of Kodungalloor). They communicate through ‘velichappadu’ who was the ritual emissary of the goddess. Kodungalloor Bhagavati, the main deity of the temple is believed to be an incarnation of Kannaki, the protagonist of *Cilappathikaram*, a samgha text by the sage Thiruvalluvar. Kannaki was a chaste woman, pativrata, who proves the innocence of her husband falsely accused of theft and killed by the king. Kannaki metamorphoses into a powerful goddess after taking revenge on the king who had turned her into a widow. The rituals in the temple use several sacrificial rites. Songs in obscene language are sung to please the goddess. Paradoxically, the songs used in the worship of this chaste goddess are overtly sexual.

In the legends of the divine ‘women’ in *Aithiyamala*, one can find many recurring motifs and incidents which point to the hegemonic caste structures that existed in Kerala. The idol of the goddess which lies in a desolate place will usually be found by a ‘lowercaste’ woman. Sometimes, the idol manifests in the form of a stone that starts bleeding when a ‘lowercaste’

Mannan or Pulaya woman sharpens her sickle on it. Then the goddess will immediately demand purification since she was polluted by the touch of a 'lower caste women'. The emissary of the goddess, (velichappadu) will communicate the demand of the goddess to the people assembled there. Immediately, a brahmin priest will arrive and perform rituals to sanctify her into a newly constructed temple. Once she is consecrated into the temple, the lower-caste women who discovered her idol would be denied entry. The idol of *Chengaannoor Bhagavati* is believed to be found by a pulaya (an untouchable caste) woman though the temple was later appropriated to dominant Hinduism by the 'upper castes'. It was only after the Temple Proclamation Act of Thiruvitamkoor in 1936 that the untouchables had access to the temple premises.

Temples of Kerala had acquired immense wealth under the control of the brahmins. In most of the temples in Sankunni's *Aithiyamala*, the brahmins were the priests and priesthood had long been a male privilege. The *ambalavasi* community performed other tasks of the temple such as cleaning the premises of the temple, preparing the offerings, collecting flowers for worship, making floral garlands, etc. The 'Nair' caste took care of the administrative and property matters. The upper caste members of the society worshipped the goddesses by elevating her into a 'savarna' status. There are several incidents in *Aithiyamala*, where the goddesses demand land, gold and elephants through their oracles. Diseases and famine were seen as punishments from the angry and discontent goddess. For redemption and exoneration, the mysterious emissaries of the goddess (velichappadu) claimed valuable gifts. The goddess will not be appeased unless her demands are fulfilled.

Aithiyamala stories reveal the goddess as a 'mother' figure who is benevolent to her Brahmin devotees, grants their wishes and protects them from the ire and vengeance of the ruling class. In the story of Muttassu Namboothiri, the goddess remains kind and compassionate to

Muttassu Namboothiri, even though, he stealthily ate the Thrimadhuram (sacred sweet offering) of the goddess Mookambika and achieved peerless scholarship. Similarly, in the story Puliampilly Namboothiri, the goddess protected him from his enemies who tried to tarnish his reputation when they found out that he was offering meat and alcohol to the goddess in order to please her, this was strictly against the tradition of the brahmins. In *Aithiyamala*, Sankunni observes that the worshippers of the goddess become immune to *badha* or possession by demons or evil deities. The Valassery Nambi's tale in the text is about the zealous devotion of an 'upper-caste' male to the goddess and he was unbeatable in exorcising the evil spirits or *the badhas* due to the blessings from her.

Women in pre-modern Kerala had to suffer from the tri-partite structure of oppression in the form of caste, class and gender. They existed in the margins of the familial and social structure. The lives of the women illustrate their miserable plight in society. Even though the modernizing project of the social reformists and missionaries of the early twentieth century resulted in challenging the caste system of the society, but it couldn't liberate women from the fetters of the patriarchy. The women's sexuality came to be feared in the Kerala society. The *Yakshi* narratives of Kerala are constructed around the patriarchy's fear over the sexuality of the women.

The *Yakshi* was symbolic of any woman who wouldn't conform to these ideals projected by modernity and religion. The *Yakshi* who became an abject or the other was feared for her sexuality and the power she wielded over the men. Julia Kristeva in her *Powers of Horror* states "An abject is a source of horror within patriarchal structures. It does not respect borders, positions, rules . . . that which disturbs identity, system and order" (4). When patriarchy controls the movement of women, *Yakshi* moves on her free will. *Yakshi* with her excessive sexual energy

challenged the practise of monogamy evolved from Christian morality, by seducing a large number of men. Thus the practices that are employed to tame the *Yakshi* again symbolize the policing of patriarchy and religion over the female body.

The *Yakshi* trope in Kerala had its roots in ‘Buddhism’ and ‘Jainism’. *Yakshis* in Buddhism were symbols of motherhood, fertility and femininity. Corrine Dempsey, in his article “The Double Take: Through the Eyes of Yaksis, Yakshas and Yoginis” states:

With Jaina tradition, the prestige of the yakshis increased. In other instances, particularly within Indian folk traditions and in the Buddhist Jataka tales reflective of local traditions; untamed *yaksis* and *yaksas* were cast as cannibals and ogres associated with voracious sexuality and attachment. Some *Jataka* tales features *yakkhas* or *yaksis* who change their ways upon converting to Buddhism. (3)

The *Yakshi* worship that was seen in the later Buddhist-Jain cultures underwent transformative changes during Hindu revivalism. They were again transformed to the various forms taken up by the Hindu goddesses and deities. In many temples across Kerala, the voluptuous *Yakshis* exorcised by the shamans are transformed into the figure of the mother goddesses. The myth of *Yakshi* as a fertile goddess was popular in Kerala. In *Mythum Samoohavum*, Raghava Varier observes:

The once denounced fertility goddesses of the pre-Vedic tribes were adopted by the Vedic culture and later when Buddhism gained prominence, they also followed the same. Later, as Hinduism as an organized religion gained an upper hand, these goddesses were re-appropriated again into the established order, observes Varier. He notices the

resemblance the Yakshi idols in Kerala temples have with the Jain and Buddha Yakshees.

(91)

The *Yakshis* in *Aithiyamala* exhibits a behavioural pattern of monstrosity. They reveal this contesting spirit of celibacy and sexuality in them. Passages that praise the external beauty of the *yakshis* were common in these tales. The legend of Kaladi Bhattathiri in *Aithiyamala* is a tale of revenge. Once, Bhattathiri and his friend were travelling through a dense forest at night to see ‘Thrissur Pooram’. They were stopped by two women on their way, who enchanted them with their beauty and invited them to stay in their abode. The two women were the *yakshis* in disguise. Kaladi Bhattathiri was enchanted by the *yakshis* charms and was eaten by her. The other brahmin kept a holy text beneath his pillow. Even though the *yakshi* tried to lure him, he was protected by the powers of *Devi Mahatmya*, the holy text which he had with him. This text was a mainstream Sanskrit text that narrates the triumph of the goddess *Durga* against the evil *Mahishasura* who is half man and half buffalo. The Sanskrit text becomes a *kavacha* or armour for the Kerala brahmin devotee defending him from the destructively lustful advances of the *yakshi*. Later, the son of Kaladi Bhattathiri who was a great magician wanted to avenge his father’s murder. He didn’t know the particular *yakshi* who murdered his father, therefore he made the entire *yakshi* population surrender before him. While the other *yakshis* promised that they didn’t kill his father, he left them, only the *yakshi* that killed his father remained. She was severely punished by Suryakaladi Bhattathiri with his magic. Thus he avenged his father’s death.

Another legend in *Aithiyamala* is about the tale of a *Yakshi* who dwelled in her painting at Thrissur Vadakkumnatha Temple. She used to have clandestine visits with the brahmins who were enchanted by her beauty. Finally, she had a marital relationship with a brahmin called Venmani Namboothiripad and resided with him as his first wife till their old age. The inherent

monstrousness of the Yakshi was always in contestation with the image of the mother. The *Yakshi* tamed by love becomes the mother of a girl child in the legend of “Vayaskara Chathurvedi Bhattathiriyum Yakshiyum” in *Aithihyamala*. In “Kadamattathu Kathanar”, Kathanar tames the *Yakshi* and idolizes her in Panayannarkkaavu (The temple premises of Panayannarkavu) as a mother goddess who protects and nourishes the community. In “Panachikkattu Saraswathi”, the *Yakshi* is worshipped alongside the Goddess Saraswathi to avoid any obstacle that might occur during the rituals performed by the brahmins. In all these legends the ‘vociferous’ and ‘promiscuous’ *yakshi*s being tamed into a passive and asexual mother goddess.

The trope of Yakshi thus vied against the power structures of patriarchy. The myth of the *Yakshi* could be juxtaposed with the plight of the women in Kerala, who lost their identities and was tamed by the patriarchy to be nothing, but meek and fragile women. A process of ‘othering’ happens with the Yakshi; she is treated as the binary of the ideal women. Anything that was seen outside the norms of ‘normalcy’ was ostracized. The *Yakshi* can be seen as a prototype of a liberated female, who is treated as a perennial symbol of haunting and seduction. She was seen as a libertine and an enchantress who asks for ‘lime’ for her betel nut to the passengers at night. Throughout these myths, she is either beaten up or nailed down. She is tamed by the patriarchal ideology of driving an iron nail into her head or by capturing her soul and then nailing it into the Pala tree.

Thus the legends of Yakshi interpolate the hegemonic and patriarchal notions of femininity and female sexuality. The transition of the *Yakshi* from the female fertility gods in pre-Vedic times to celestial beings with enormous passion in *Aithihyamala* has been discussed in this section. She is the ‘other’, the binary of the ideal Malayalee women or ‘kulasthree’. This can be

read only with the social and cultural condition of women, especially of the Namboothiri women in the historic juncture of Kerala modernity.

Thus, this paper analyses the representation of women, which was further diversified into yakshis and goddesses in *Aithihyamala*, and how it corresponds to the development of the Kerala Modernity. The stories of the goddess, the yakshi and other women in *Aithihyamala* texts give glimpses of the society, customs, and modalities of temple administration. We also get certain clues about the social distribution of land, wealth, caste and gender roles in erstwhile Kerala. The concept of 'ideal' women had been constructed in Kerala, to meet the expectations of patriarchy. Anything that flouts the conformist tradition was branded as 'other', this might have resulted in the categorization of women into either a 'divine' or 'diabolic' status. Therefore, the lives of women in Kerala were re-imagined in terms of the evolution of the Kerala Modernity.

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