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‘Unquiet Souls’: Re-reading Ballads of North Malabar as ‘Murder Ballads’

Abstract: The study attempts to demonstrate the apparent female heroism depicted in the ballads of North Malabar as mere patriarchal constructions. For this, I will attempt to re-read these ballads as ‘murder ballads’, specifically focussing on the male obsession of aligning women with death. Furthermore, the paper will also attempt to analyze the models of women dying depicted in these ballads and how these female characters are shown themselves embracing these stereotypes. The frequent association of women with death in ‘Vadakkan Pattu’ culture needs to be critically explored in order to understand the ways in which gender interacts with cultural storytelling.

Keywords: Vadakkan Pattukal, murder ballads, stereotypes, gender, female heroism

1. Introduction

Reading Vadakkan Pattukal, or ballads of North Malabar, as ‘murder ballads’ unfolds layers of meaning concerning hegemonic masculinities prevalent in the social and literary culture of the time. The explicit brutality displayed against the female characters in these centuries-old women-centred ballads needs to be seriously explored, in order to challenge the

general misapprehension of them as a paragon of female empowerment. The texts of these narrative songs do not align with the popular understanding of them as female-empowering kind. This study primarily attempts to illuminate the hidden agendas of androcentrism by focusing on the representation of femicidal violence in some of the selected ballads of North Malabar. Femicide, the murdering of females because of their gender, constitute the most severe kind of violence and discrimination against women. There is a larger corpus of North Malabar ballads that have thematized femicides. Through a close textual analysis of the selected three ballads, namely “Karingallery Chiruthayude Pattukatha”, “Poomathai Ponnamma” and “Mathileri Kanni”, this paper supplements the scholarship concerning Vadakkan Pattukal.

2. Femicide as a Symbol of Cultural Embodiment

Diana Russell and Jane Caputi in their article, “‘Femicide’: Speaking the Unspeakable” use the term ‘femicide’ in order to reflect the politics underlying the woman killing. They explain that “. . . femicide best describes the murders of women by men motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women” (35). By focussing on this aspect in the ballads chosen, this study attempts to disclose the deeper politics of masculism that are masked on the surface by the expressive evocation of pity and tragedy. Within these ballads, male hegemony and victimization of women are efficaciously masked. The common tendency to read the ‘murders’ represented in these ballads as necessarily ensuing from a conflict is erroneous. Scholars like Clifford Geertz seem to examine such texts as cultural texts that “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (3) which when duly analyzed reveal the underlying attitudes toward the society. Thus, this paper attempts to read ‘femicide’ as a ‘symbol’ and tries to explore the diverse meanings attached to it.

3.The Facade of Female Heroism

Before we critically engage with the selected ballads, it would be pertinent to analyze how the dominant readership identifies these women-centred ballads as examples of female heroism. The dominant tendency of perceiving these ballads as brilliant sketches of female heroism has been unquestioned through ages. Readers are generally inclined to view it as a symbol of medieval female chivalry. The most popular strong female character in Vadakkan Pattukal, next to the legendary Unniarcha¹, is the title character of “Mathileri Kanni”. She is depicted as a valiant female warrior who cross-dressed as a man and went to the battle to save her husband. In his work Vadakkan Pattukalile Penkaruthu, M.K. Panikkotti speaks high of Mathileri Kanni. According to him, the character is praiseworthy mainly for becoming the prototype of ideal femininity. He categorizes Mathileri Kanni as an instance of ‘uttama’ character. The next significant character that is often hailed for her stoicism is Poomathai Ponnamma. Her bold struggle for a dignified life is generally identified as instances of bravery. Lastly, Chirutha in “Karingallery Chiruthayude Pattukatha” stands as an epitome of selfless being, a quality that is conventionally attributed to a ‘good’ wife and mother. So immense was her adoration for her husband that she knowingly consumed the poison given to her by him. So was her love for her children. When she died, Chirutha resurrected as a crow and guided her children back to their ancestral house where they were loved and cared. The dominant readership reads Chirutha’s deeds as an instance of selfless love and glorifies her as ‘heroic’ and virtuous.

¹ Attummanammel Unniarcha is a legendary female warrior who gets mentioned in the ballads of North Malabar. She is believed to have lived during the 16th century in the northern part of Malabar.

4. Debriefing the Representations of Femicide

However, representations of femicide in these ballads provide an unusually explicit possibility to peruse some of the ways in which meaning is created by patriarchal culture. It is pertinent here to look at how Kathryn James puts forward a different perspective in understanding the literary representations of death. According to her, “a culture’s representations of death may be read collectively as a text to give insights into its social systems, death ethos, conceptions of selfhood, temporal orientation, and religious and secular attitudes” (James 2). Thus, it is important to cross-examine the representations of femicide in these ballads as they clearly unfold male denominations which forbade women characters from expressing their true self and exercised the censoring of their feelings and emotions. In opposition to the general tendencies to view the title heroines of these ballads as ‘idyllic’ women, the paper explores the misogynistic representations of these women in order to illustrate them as anti-example of ‘idyllic’ women. These ballads are formulaic in their thematic constitution, a vital characteristic of their latent misogynistic and patriarchal views. The various representations of female murder portrayed in these ballads illustrate female characters as victims who embody the anti-ideal womankind. Reading these ballads along this line, definitely prove them as nothing but fierce cautionary narratives than epitomes of female empowerment. These ballads seem to warn women about the dangers of female sexuality and that it needs to be suppressed in order to gain moral ascendancy. I begin with an investigation of “Poomathai Ponnamma” and “Mathileri Kanni” as prototypical murder ballads, and then move on to analyze “Karingallery Chiruthayude Pattukatha”.

The title hero of “Poomathai Ponnamma” is a low caste woman who led an independent life and who lived all alone by herself in a small house. Her life was an incessant struggle to escape the lecherous feudal lord’s advances. When he realized that she would not

succumb to any temptations, he socially demeaned her by denouncing her as a whore and excommunicated her. Poomathai was subjected to extreme physical punishments. The lines below illustrate the intense pain and humiliation she suffered for no fault of hers.

It is her head and mammae that they set on fire

Her ample hair combed and set in circle flair

Set aflame and burning emits the stink in the air

They thrust the torch, the blazing trident

At her breasts jutting and thrusting out

And she, Poomathai leaps and wriggles

As the fiery flames lick and lap her bosom

The beating against the mango tree she is bound to

Makes her limbs in the chain bleed in abundance

.....

Like the outside of an earthen pot

Heated in a hearth using firewood

Her chest and cheeks burnt and charred

Like a sunburnt flower in a garland

Like a tender plantain burnt in a furnace

Poomathai seen scorched and withered (My translation).

It may be important here to step back and question what is being represented. From the above lines, it can be deduced that the half-naked Poomathai and her suffering is the central image. Her body then becomes the ground on which male desire and anxiety get acted upon. In this regard, it can be argued that the ballad is undoubtedly not a representation of female desire. Contrary to the general understanding of this ballad, it is not coded with any kind of implied female emancipatory message, or that it is in any way acclaiming female empowerment or strength. In the belief that her vengeful spirit, after death, would seek revenge for all the blatant injustices inflicted upon her, Poomathai commits suicide. Any personal victory, in this case, the hope for an afterlife vengeance, attained only through death is undoubtedly a hollow one. Her final act of suicide makes her weak and passive. For all her boldness and brave resilience she demonstrated in the face of adversities, the male narratorial voice condemned her to death. Failing to yield to a powerful man's sexual desire is a far worse crime for an orphan girl, who too, hailing from a lower caste, in a male-dominated society, for such dangerous female independence threatens patriarchal cultural stability. Death, therefore, in this ballad operates as a patriarchal device to contain the unruly feminine.

Moving on to the next ballad, "Mathileri Kanni" is the story of the warrior woman Mathileri. Disguised as a male warrior, named Ponnann, she went to the battle to save her husband, Venadu Prince. However, at the end of the ballad, the title character is murdered by her cousin sister Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni, as the latter found Mathileri as a hindrance to her resolve to win the love of Venadu Prince. Mathileri is thus penalized for her transgressive acts, and to make things worse, the narrator made her beg for her husband's forgiveness before she dies. She also makes it a point to inform him that the disguise was executed with the consent of her father. Mathileri Kanni, thus makes us reflect more on the question of freedom and how often it gets mutilated in a patriarchal literary tradition. The female

characters portrayed in this ballad are left with no option but to depend on men for their existence.

Oh! lord, my master

The esteemed Nair of Thulunadu

Is none other than the one before you

It is me, my lord, your wedded wife

Masqueraded as Thulunadan Nair

All with the consent of my father (My translation).

Against this background, the generally acclaimed female heroism that emanates from the cross-dressing trope completely loses its validity. Mathileri Kanni, at the end of the ballad, pays for all her freedom and leisure, with her life. Such a power matrix raises serious questions like; whose interest does the ballad really serves? Significantly, it is not the female inclinations that get manifested here. Moreover, the most crucial shift in the narration of the ballad is inevitably the transfer of the reader's sympathy from the title character to the male characters, namely, the Venadu Prince and Mathileri Kanni's father, the Chirakkara Lord. The successful manipulation of the male perspective evidently forges both the male characters' death as the locus of the sympathies of the readers. Accordingly, the reader's sympathies are operated by the Venadu Prince's heartbroken plight of losing his wife and father-in-law and ultimately his own sorrowful demise, all in a single day. Thus, the ballad's narrative strategies secure the Venadu Prince at the heart of the reader's emotional concern.

Finally, the ballad "Karingallery Chiruthayude Pattukatha" tells the story of the title character Karingallery Chirutha who was rescued from drowning by Attimamanimala

Deramman. After confirming her chastity through a trial by fire, Deramman married her. As time passed, his interest in his wife waned. He started to live with his mistress, Varikkaraungamma, in the same house. Before Deramman's mother died, she warned Chirutha, who was then pregnant with her third child, not to drink the medicine that Varikkaraungamma gives her as she intends to murder Chirutha. As told, when Chirutha was lying wearily after delivery, Varikkaraungamma tried to make her drink the poison in the guise of herbal medicine, which Chirutha refused. Vexed by Chirutha's stubbornness, Varikkaraungamma informed Deramman who berated her for not taking the medicine/poison and forced her to take it. Without showing any signs of protest, she drank the poison given by her husband and she dies. The story of Chirutha unfolds an extreme form of female victimization. The common appreciation of her character as an exemplum of feminine idealness is fallacious. The character is devoid of any voice. She is nothing but a passive, weak, helpless and abjectly dependent being. The male narrator forces Chirutha to assent to her own powerlessness in the face of atrocities such as femicide.

There is a dry herbal drug, thus said

Varikkarungamma, the midwife

Ground the herbal drug and to Chiruthai

She gave it but Chiruthai refused to take

Whereupon the midwife went up the

Seven-storied mansion to meet

Atimanimala Nayinar

'Karingaleri Chiruthai, Chiruthkkutty,

She apprised, refused to take
The herbal drug I ground and gave
And the womb that delivered
Began to ooze the secundines'
Upon hearing these words came down Nayinar
And savagely rebuked Chiruthai
Who did completely drink the drug then
And Chiruthai, she lied there thus (My translation).

While struggling with pain, on her deathbed, Chirutha requests not less than four times to her son to fetch her husband who was merrily spending his time with his mistress Varikkaraungamma, the midwife. Each time when the boy conveyed his mother's pleas to his father, the latter remained deaf to his entreaties.

Karingaleri Ramar, my darling son
I long to have just a look at your dad
Upon these words, Ramar went up
The seven-storied mansion and
Beside his father he stood and told
'My dad at Athimanimala, I address
My mother is in extremis and she

Longs to have just a look at my dad'

No response he got and

Downstairs he came

Karingaleri Chirutheyi, Chiruthakkutty

She passed away by then (My translation).

The above lines portray the pathetic plight of Chirutha wanting to see her husband one last time and her husband's abject indifference to her. Contrary to the conventional presumption of her character as an example of selfless love focussed on pursuing the well-being of her husband, Chirutha's character, as mentioned earlier, embodies an anti-idyllic female character. Her life reveals the encompassing and damaging effects of a patriarchal system that endorsed female subjection and dependence on male protection. Karingaleri Chirutha's "self-effacement, and unquestioning endurance of suffering with worship of her husband" (Sujatha and Gokilavani 104) devoid her of any sign of interest to develop her own identity. She is a silent and invisible victim, and her ethos and disposition remain unuttered. The negation of Chirutha's voice in this so labelled 'female empowering' ballad clearly speaks to a patriarchal ideology. 'Self-abnegation' (Glover and Kaplan 40), a phrase also used by Lynne Pearce in her essay "Sexual Politics", seems to be the marker of her femininity which further points to the power dynamics underplayed. It goes without saying that Chirutha's absolute humility through the entirety of the ballad seems deplorable. All her actions are carried out in the form of selfless acts, which ended in her fatal death. This is nothing but victimization.

All the three female characters, in one way or the other, are victimized. To wield authority, even over themselves, is a strenuous task for a female even in the ballad world. Those who readily confirms to it, such as Karingaleri Chirutha, are undoubtedly more

victimized, but so, too, are Poomathai and Mathileri, both express dissenters of male supremacy, in their ineptitude to free themselves from a violent need to control each other. Moreover, the character of Chirutha does not threaten male hegemony in the way that both Poomathai and Mathileri does, primarily because the former willingly assent to her role of victim. Poomathai and Mathileri seemed very promising characters as they were self-supporting, assertive, and highly articulate. The following lines, for instance, demonstrate Poomathi's boldness in refuting the lecherous feudal lord's violent threats for not submitting to his sexual needs.

Now you may leave on your own accord, my lord

No matter whether you torture me, my lord

Or you murder me, it doesn't matter, my lord

But do not touch me, do not touch my body!

This Puluva dame of Pulayanar Puthukkottai

Is not one among the sanctioned courtesans (My translation).

A striking point here is that both these characters, for all their importance in the ballad, is defined by the male characters around them and ultimately by the male narratorial voice. Both Poomathai and Mathileri were crucial characters that challenged dominant male ideologies, but they were identified as socially aberrant in a patriarchal culture. Female sexuality is seen by the male lot as a dangerous independent force which needs to be controlled and revolted against in order to make women gain moral ascendance. Both Poomathai and Mathileri articulated their sexuality to a large extent through certain transgressive acts, the former in defying and resisting the unwarranted sexual advances of the lecherous feudal lord, and latter, by cross-dressing as a male, and more particularly, in usurping the male-exclusive space, the

battle. To resolve their social aberrancy, the male narrator employed femicide as a means to revolt against and control their dangerous sexuality and thereby, endowing them with moral ascendancy. Moreover, femicide functions as a crucial patriarchal apparatus used by the male narratorial voice to control and discipline female sexuality. Death in the ballad world has rather dubiously immortalized women with an extreme form of passiveness.

5. Conclusion

Thus the murdered female victims embody passivity and helplessness as they accept death as a penalty for their culturally disruptive sexuality. They are frightfully silenced in death, as it ceased both their personal and sexual freedom. The murdering of these three female characters testifies to the extensive power exercised by a patriarchal culture that deviously plotted cautionary tales in the guise of female-empowering ballads. These 'murder' ballads do not represent any form of female desire but rather male desire and anxiety that gets primarily reflected in the different modes of women killing depicted. Denying these women a specific place in the social order and the final abduction of their freedom, both personal and sexual, through slaughtering them reflect the male agenda in projecting them as the 'other'.

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