

**YAKSHI UNPLUGGED:  
INTERROGATING MALAYALEE MASCULINITY IN THE  
POPULAR CULTURE OF KERALA**

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The *Yakshi* myth can be identified as a collective fantasy upon which the fears and anxieties of the patriarchal society is located. The deviant 'other' feminine form of *Yakshi* continues to be a powerful icon in the popular culture of Kerala. The evolution of *Yakshi* myth may be traced back to Buddhism and Jainism to Hinduism and, later, to the popular culture of Kerala, through texts such as *Aithihyamala*. It is significant to note that the construction of the aberrant woman *Yakshi* can be read along with the project of Kerala modernity. In recent times, the *Yakshi* myth was re-imagined in the popular culture of Kerala through a viral rap song 'Pani paliyo' by the actor, Neeraj Madhav. The mythology of *Yakshi* has transgressed the boundaries of oral tales to literature, and finally to the contemporary visual spaces of Kerala.

The *Yakshi* has always been associated with the idea of fear and sexuality. Corrine Dempsey, in his article, "Nailing Heads and Splitting Hairs", describes *Yakshi* as "a young shape-shifting woman who is truly ravishing in both senses of the word-she is, in actuality, a fanged, voracious, vampiric ogress" (112). The *Yakshi* tales of Kerala depict her as a white-saree clad woman with long hair and seductive attire, who roams freely at night to lure young men. She enchants them to have a tryst with her, after which she kills them by drinking their blood.

Michael Kaufman, in his essay, "Men, Feminism, and

Contradictory Experiences of Men's Power,” observes that “Patriarchy exists as a system not simply of men's power over women but also of hierarchies of power among different groups of men and between different masculinities” (145). It is significant to note that it is always the alpha-male of a community that tames the *Yakshi*.

In the *Yakshi* myths of Kerala, it is always the chaste male priest and the upper caste Brahmins who have the power to tame the *Yakshi* over other men because it is believed that the excessive sexuality of a *Yakshi* can only be regulated by a man wielding enormous power in the society. This throws light upon the connection between 'power' and 'masculinity'. In his book, *Theorizing Masculinities*, Michael Kaufman notes that “the equation of masculinity with power is one that developed over centuries. It conformed to, and in turn justified, the real-life domination of men over women and the valuation of males over females” (146). The myth of the *Yakshi* has its roots in the 'castration' fears of the patriarchal psyche, where men internalise these fears, and direct it towards an agency such as *Yakshi*, who is depicted as a voluptuous and blood-sucking vampire.

The popular culture of Kerala is rich with folklore, literature, and films representing the *Yakshi* myth. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his book, *Monster Theory*, proposes that a society's “anxieties” and “fears” manifest itself symptomatically as a “cultural fascination” with monsters (Preface viii). The *Yakshi* as a deviant 'other' occurring outside the realm of patriarchy appears in the legends such as *Aithiyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni and *Aithihya Kadhakal* by K.S. Neelakandanunni. Similarly, texts like *Marthandavarma* (1891) by C. V. Raman Pillai, *Neelavelicham* (1952) by Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer, *Cheriyā Cheriyā Bhookampangal* (1933) by M. T. Vaudevan Nair, *Yakshi* (1967) by Malayattoor Ramakrishnan,

etc. are highly imaginative and fictional accounts of the *Yakshi* myth in Kerala. The legendary sculptor Kanayi Kunhiraman's statue of Yakshi (1969) in Malampuzha, Palakkad is pivotal in the cultural space of Kerala.

Due to the paradigm shift in the Malayalam literary scenario and to meet the expectations of the entertainment industry, these myths were transferred to the visual spaces of Malayalam cinema. In her article, "Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema", Janaky Sreedharan locates *Yakshi* among the movies of the 1960s that expressed a fear of transgressive feminine sexuality, in the aftermath of the collapse of matrilineal property and family relationships (*Women in Malayalam Cinema* 69). Films such as *Bhargavi Nilayam* (Dir. A. Vincent, 1964) *Lisa* (Dir. A. G. Baby, 1978), *Veendum Lisa* (Dir. A. G. Baby, 1987), *Manichithrathazchu* (Dir. Fasil, 1993), *Ente Swantham Janakikutty* (Dir. Hariharan, 1998), *Akasha Ganga* (Dir. Vinayan, 1999), *Indriyam* (Dir. George Kithu, 2000), *Akam* (Dir. Shalini Usha Nair, 2011), dealing with the *Yakshi* myth, have given rise to the horror genre in Malayalam. In all these movies, the *Yakshi* becomes an avenger, strives to seek vengeance against her murderers in the past life. Once the political justice is done she will either be exorcised by the alpha-male of the religion, or will be transformed into an asexual mother-figure.

Kerala's fascination with *Yakshis* can be traced back to her European counterparts like vampires, zombies, *femme-fatales*, and witches. The trope of *Yakshi* allows her to be outside the realm of patriarchal ideals of 'docile' and 'obedient.' Any kind of deviation from the established norms of the society led to the process of 'othering.' According to Judith Butler in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, defines gender identity is an "on-going discursive practice" that is "performative" at its core (33). In previous centuries, in

countries such as Europe, women of the powerful disposition were condemned by the religious institution and the patriarchal society as 'witches' and they were burnt alive. Similarly, homophobia practiced by religious institutions such as the Catholic church and Puritanism led to the social ostracization of homosexuals. The *Yakshi* is treated as an outcast and aberrant woman who flouts the norms of patriarchy and hence the collective male consciousness believes that she is an agency that needs to be feared.

The myth of the *Yakshi* as a fertile goddess has also been popular in Kerala. Raghava Varier's essay, "Yakshikal, Amma-Daivangal," in *Mythum Samoohavum (Myth and Society)* edited by Raghava Varier and Rajan Gurukkal, reads the *Yakshi* myth as it is conceived in the cultural imagination of Kerala. He traces the myth of the monstrous feminine back to their association with the pre-Vedic culture, right after mapping out the transformations the *Yakshi* had undergone in various religious phases, such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Varier in his book, *Mythum Samoohavum*, suggests: "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" (91).

Hence, in Jainism, the *Yakshis* were treated as the protecting goddesses of Jain Tirthankaras. The *Yakshis* represented fertility, femininity, and benign motherhood in Buddhism.

The *Yakshi* narratives of Kerala have been constructed around the patriarchy's fear over the sexuality of the women. Texts such as *Aithihyamala* depict the *Yakshis* as the celestial-beings. They show a behavioural pattern of monstrosity. In all the tales, the *Yakshi* lures

the Brahmin priests, by disguising as a young seductive female asking for lime. She invites him to her abode, which is usually a *pala* or palm tree, which will look like a seven-storeyed mansion. The *Yakshi* myth of *Aithiyamala* includes tales such as, “Venmani Nampoorippaadanmaar” (125), “Vayaskkara Chathurvedi Bhattathiriyum Yakshiyum” (259), “Thevalasseri Nambi” (320) and “Panachikkattu Saraswathi” (689), etc. In the legend of Kaladi Bhattathiri (114), the hero avenges the death of his father by severely punishing the *Yakshi* who has murdered him. In the story of Venmani Nampoorippaadanmar (125), the *Yakshi* who dwelled in a painting at Thrissur Vadakkumnatha Temple 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 opposition with the image of the mother figure. The *Yakshi*, tamed by love, becomes the mother of a girl child in the legend of “Vayaskara Chathurvedi Bhattathiriyum Yakshiyum” (279) in *Aithiyamala*. In “Kadamattathu Kathanar” (462), Kathanar fetters the *Yakshi* and idolizes her in Panayannarkkaavu as a 'mother' goddess, who protects and nourishes the community. In this myth, Kathanar is a symbol of the alpha-male, who threatens the *Yakshi* with violent exorcism. He chases the *Yakshi*, called Kalliyankattu Neeli to the premises of a *pala* tree and threatens her: “I won't allow you to harass anyone. If you are to defy my command, I will give you in sacrifice to fire or else I will allow you to stay here in the temple. The choice is yours!” (Sankunni 528). Thus, he transforms her from the voluptuous woman to the mother goddess. Dempsey notes in the “Nailing Heads”: “Their victory comes from the holy men's superior strength within a shared framework of magical might rather than from the requirement that the

Yakshi converts to a new way of viewing herself and the world” (119). In the legend of “Panachikkattu Saraswathi” (727) in *Aithihyamala*, 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 *femme-fatale* is suppressed into a passive and asexual mother goddess by the patriarchal society.

The *Yakshi* is subjugated by the dominant patriarchal ideology by driving an iron nail, (a phallic symbol), into her head or through violent exorcism, where her 'otherness' is being harnessed by brutal acts performed on the female body. The *Yakshi* can only be kept away by holding a holy book or by the possession of iron. V. V. Haridas, in his work, *Yakshisankalpam*, observes that the plausible conclusion for the *Yakshi*'s fear of iron might be that she might have been a goddess of the Stone Age, who was marginalised by the arrival and worship of new gods and goddesses in the iron age (94). The taming of the *Yakshis* are usually done by the celibate priests of the religion, who wield enormous power in the society. Sindhu Jose, in her thesis, *Representation as Translation*, observes: “Exorcism violently violates the cultural body of the women in question. Her body is outside the margins of the established customs, for they violate the dominant cultural codes. Her body manifests resistance and the attribution of monstrosity upon her is an attempt to contain her resistance” (109). The victory over the female body was seen as a way to “prove their mettle” (“Nailing Heads” 111) for these religious authorities.

The *Yakshi* trope in Kerala has to be read along with the ongoing project of Kerala modernity. The colonial government played an instrumental role in creating the ideal of the 'new women,' with their reformation laws in marriage, education, and land. There

was a transformation of marriage laws of kinship structures from matrilineal to patrilineal form. They were seen as “the cultural production of a new morality than legal infringements” as observed by G. Arunima, in her article, “Matriliney and its Discontents” (159). The sexuality of women got re-imagined within this social and cultural milieu of Kerala. The family, as well as religion, was reinvented under the head of a patriarchal figure, and the women became domesticated within the realm of the household. As noted by Devika in *En-gendering Individuals*, “modernity” did not abolish “female domesticity” (11). Rather, it only further enslaved women under the fetters of patriarchy.

It is under these pre-modern excesses that *Yakshi* became the symbol of the libertine 'other' women. The Malayalee masculinity imagined women as an obedient, fragile, and subjugated 'other,' whereas man was seen as the dominant patriarch who was intellectually and morally superior. The excessive feminine energy of the *Yakshi* was treated as an antithetical force to the domesticated 'ideal' woman. Gail Hinich Sutherland, in his book, *The Disguises of the Demon*, observes that “The devouring of offspring is the formal and ethical opposite of the usual maternal function of discharging rather than physically withholding infants” (147). Thus, the *Yakshi* was seen as the monstrous female figure and probably the only female monster in the popular culture of Kerala.

The mythology of *Yakshi* in the popular culture of Kerala imagines her as a liberated female entity or a cultural fantasy upon which her excessive sexual energy is directed at creating fear and anxieties in the collective psyche of the Malayalee man. Nevertheless, when the alpha-male figure of the community tames her libidinal energy, by performing violent acts such as exorcism, they are trying to regain the superior position of the males in the

society. Hence, it is possible to see the trope of the *Yakshi* as something reinvented; it may be looked upon as a feminist project of Kerala modernity or as a challenge to masculinity resulting from a shift in the power structures within the society.

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