



AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF THE CONCEPT YAKSHI

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Abstract: A concept in a particular religious belief system seeping into the popular culture is an exciting phenomenon and the concept of *Yakshi* in Kerala is one such. The *Yakshi* cult was adopted by the Hindu belief from Jainism where they considered *Yakshi* as the Sansanadevatha or the goddess of fertility. The lower caste people in Kerala were the first to believe and worship in this concept as they saw *Yakshi* as part of the supernatural whereas the higher caste communities always dealt with mainstream goddesses, but later *Yakshi* as a deity was accepted by everyone. As a place filled with greenery, groves and forests people in Kerala started to associate *Yakshi* with nature. The force of time shaped this concept into a very different one which started to rule the popular conscious in Kerala. *Yakshi* started to be associated to the spirit of the wronged woman who faced an abnormal death. The films and popular literature helped to reinstate the legends and helped people to visualize their imaginations. Although *Yakshi* attained a different aura with the popular culture, the stories and legends always presented her in co-existence with the nature. This research tries to attempt an ecocritical reading of the narratives around *Yakshi*.

Keywords : Ecocriticism, Folktales, *Yakshi*, Sacred Groves.

Nature is an important element for the existence of human life. Nature was given utmost importance in ancient times. The primitive concepts of God and spirituality also evolved from the deep connection that existed between human beings and nature. Nature was always understood in binary terms of being a nurturer or a destroyer. Both of these roles were also understood in terms of feminine roles of motherhood and the femme-fatale who would seduce people with its beauty and then destroy them. Even though these were concepts that came up from a patriarchal world structure, the endgame was to earn respect and a sense of towards nature. This aim was always met with the constant glorification of the role of nature and the association of divine powers with the forces of nature. Industrialization and innovations in the field of science and technology urged human civilization to digress from the nature oriented lives that human beings followed. But there are still remainders of the eco-friendly life that human beings had in the ancient times which comes out through religions, rituals and belief. One such remainder comes from the concept of *Yakshi*.

Kerala is a place which is rooted in several rituals and beliefs, especially the belief in the supernatural. The sacred groves which are called as *Kavus* and *Tharas* are present in most places in Kerala associated with a small patch of greenery.

In the most well-known pieces by environmentalists, sacred groves have been typically presented as stands of primeval forest, left undisturbed for reasons of deep religious sentiment at their climax stage of floristic succession, preserved in the midst of surroundings otherwise transfigured by human agricultural activity and resource exploitation. (Freeman 263)

These sacred groves are smaller versions of temples and will have deities like Kali, *Chathan*, *Muthapan*, which are the local deities. The belief in supernatural also gave rise to nature worship which includes the worship of snakes and thus *Nagatharas*, dedicated to snakes are also very popular in Kerala. Sandhya. M. Unnikrishnan in her work “Visualizing *Yakshi* in the Religious History of Kerala” shows that unlike other beliefs related to the supernatural, the idea of *Yakshi* was implanted in the cultural ethos of Keralites through the Jains. Jainism which came to Kerala in third century BCE influenced the Hindu culture and traditions of Kerala and thus *Yakshi*, a deity which was very similar to the idea of *Gramadevatha* concept, acquired a place in the believers, especially the believers from the lower caste Hindus. The higher castes at that time always worshipped the mainstream gods and goddesses like Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi and Saraswathi. (762) Thus we could infer that the lower caste found solace in the deity of *Yakshi* which is part of the supernatural and was approachable in sacred groves unlike the temples of higher caste in which lower caste people were not allowed to enter.

This *Yakshi* cult started to grow out of the belief systems to the popular culture through folktales, literature and even through movies. *Yakshi* of the popular culture is commonly the spirit of a woman who faced an unnatural death, in most cases a lower caste woman who faced severe injustice from the Brahmanical patriarchal systems of the times. This spirit wanders around to seek revenge for the injustice that she faced. Folktales always described these *Yakshis* as damsels, smelling of devil tree flower who lured the travellers at night asking slaked lime for the betel leaves. They also talked about how they lived in the Palmyra groves and in the wilderness or forests.

These folklores always had different versions and differed from one community to the other. *Panchavamkattu Neeli* or *Kalliyamkattu Neeli* is a *Yakshi* who has several versions of stories associated with her. She was a woman who was cheated and killed by a Brahmin priest, but she came back after her death as a spirit and sought revenge on the Brahmin later. The blood thirsty spirit of Neeli wandered in search of human blood. She would play the role of a seductress and lure the pedestrians asking for slaked lime for chewing beetle leaves. One of the stories about her says that she and her brother who committed suicide after knowing that his sister got killed were exorcised by a Brahmin priest and was born again as the son and daughter of a king and was called as Neelan and Neeli. They began to exhibit their beastly characters when they grew up and they had to be exorcised again by a black magician. Another legend talks about a Jacobite priest, Kadamattathu Kathanar, who came to know about the mischief of *Kalliyamkattu Neeli* and decided to teach her a lesson. Thus he used his powers to nail her and made her obedient and asked her to serve an old lady. Later, Neeli escaped from the old lady's house as the nail that was used to hook her was removed, but Kathanar asked her to reside in a temple called Panayanar Kavu (Sacred Palmyra Grove) and she was installed in the temple as a deity. This Panayanar Kavu itself is an excellent example of how ecology is protected when it is in association with supernatural.

Its grove which was a preserve of medicinal herbs, rare trees, birds and fauna, is now much smaller than it used to be. Still there is a dense olive green shadow of its trees and serpent stones guarding the kavu against encroachment from the emerald green fields of the surrounding countryside. Nevertheless, it still is a beautiful, mysterious place, vibrant with a subtle energy filling its chalice green kavu. (Pillai 81)

Sacred Groves are not only associated with the concept of *Yakshi*, it is also associated with other deities like Kali, Nagaraja and so on. But this idea of *Yakshi* being associated with nature by a

small patch of forest land or even a small waterfall is a very interesting idea which was cultivated through myths, folklores and legends.

The story of *Kalliyamkattu Neeli*, which is noted down in the *Aithiyamala* written by Kottarathil Shankunni, is considered as one of the first written accounts of the concept of *Yakshi*. This *Aithiyam* or the legend presents the reader with a forest named Kalliyamkaadu which means a forest of Thorny bushes. The identity of the *Yakshi* itself is rooted from the forest and thus she is named as *Kalliyamkattu Neeli*, Neeli who resides in the forest of thorny bushes. The accounts of her luring the travellers at night states that she lives in the Palmyra grove. These Palmyra Groves are often called as Yakshipana (Yakshi's Palmyra) in Malayalam as it is always seen as the habitat of *Yakshis* who would wander around at night. The bunch of flowers which grows out of the Palmyra is often compared to the let open dark hair of the *Yakshi*. These images were recurrent in Malayalam literature for a long time and thus these images are fixed in the psyche of every Keralite.

The concept of *Yakshi* and its relationship with nature is not an outdated belief because when we examine the recent stories about *Yakshis* we could find the continuing association with the nature. The story behind the place *Sumathi Valavu* (Sumathi Turn) situated in Trivandrum district of Kerala is very intriguing. Mailanmoodu is a village near to the reserve forest in Trivandrum district. Many years ago a girl named Sumati was believed to be murdered near to the turn which is close to this reserve forest, by her lover. She was a servant girl who fell in love with her employer's son. Sumati became pregnant from him and thus he decided to kill her as he didn't want a child from the servant girl to be his descendant. The tribal people found her dead body from the forest near to the road after several days. People who live near the place believe that the spirit

of Sumati still wanders around to seek revenge. There are numerous accounts of travellers who had claimed that they have seen Sumati in a white saree or they feel a mysterious presence of the supernatural when they pass through that place at night. There are even accounts of vehicles breaking down at the same spot without any particular reason according to a feature of Asianet News media. (Prasannan) The most interesting part of these stories is that they could experience the presence of this *Yakshi* only inside the forest.

Another story from Palakka Thadam is shared by Adithyan A K, who shares this story in a blog. Palakka Thadam is a place in Malappuram district in Kerala. This place is believed to be haunted by the spirit of a lower caste girl who was murdered by a higher caste family as she was in love with one of the members in this family. Travellers who pass Palakka Thadam at night claim to see the figure of a woman clad in white Saree wandering around the place. The narratives of *Yakshi* from this place also revolve around a small forest land and people of the place believe that *Yakshi* lives in the nearby Paalamaram (*Alstonia Scholaris* also known as the devil tree). The smell of the Devil tree flower is also often associated with *Yakshi* from olden times.

Every belief serves a purpose for its believers especially for the marginalized. As *Yakshi* was considered as the supernatural spirit of a woman who faced an untimely death, especially a lower caste woman in the olden times, it became a strong hold that was possessed by the lower caste in the feudal systems of the olden times. This strong hold was very important for them in the olden times where the higher caste landlords had complete autonomy over the land, lives and bodies of lower caste women. The stories of blood thirsty spirit of the murdered women who would return in order to seek revenge and haunt them for generations could have become a nightmare for

the upper caste men in case they dared to sexually exploit their tenants for pleasure. As this is the one side of the narrative, an ecocritical reading of the narrative would expose the ecological aspect of the narrative which is very relevant in the contemporary scenario where nature is being threatened with destruction due to the rapid industrialization and natural exploitation.

When we probe deeper into these narratives, we could observe that the aim of all these myths, folklores and stories are reminding us that human beings are not the ultimate owners of the earth and there are some spaces and lives that we should preserve and take care of. Even though Sacred Groves are not only for the worship of the *Yakshis*, they are often considered as the protectors of these spaces and thus revered. This is the main reason that folklore tends to associate *Yakshi* with nature thus to ensure the protection of these places of ecological importance. The belief that if habitats of a *Yakshi* is destroyed then she will retaliate in some way has always held back people from destroying these sacred groves.

The legend of *Ottamulachi* is such a story of retaliation. *Ottamulachi* was a tribal girl who was born out of an illicit relationship between an upper caste Brahmin and a tribal woman believed to have lived in Vayanadu, a district in Kerala. She is known as *ottamulachi*, which means a woman with one breast. As the name suggests, she had only one breast. When she was in her teenage she lost her mother and her grandparents and started to live alone in the forest. There was no one for her help as she and her family was excommunicated from the tribe since she was born out of an illicit relationship. She didn't know what she had to do when she became alone in the forest near to a Bhadrakali temple. Gradually, she found her family and friends in the creatures of the forest and thus acquired lot of physical strength to survive among them. Once three young men from the

city came inside the forest to hunt and they found *Ottamulachi*, who was a beautiful woman by this time. They decided to rape her without knowing her physical strength. *Ottamulachi* killed them out of rage and drank their blood when she became thirsty. This incident attracted her to the blood of young men. She started to attack young men in the village near to the forest and drink their blood. Since she stayed near a Bhadrakali temple, goddess Kali also accompanied her during her nocturnal journeys to kill young men and blessed those households with abundance. This made the people call her a *Yakshi*, even though she was not a spirit. People feared her and wanted to get rid of her. A great tantric magician exorcised her at last and at the time of her death, she cursed the place Vayandu to be infertile and to be colonized by outsiders which happened first through the British colonialism and then through the Malabar migration which happened in the twentieth century. (“Ottamulachiyude Katha”)

When we closely read the story we could find out that *Ottamulachi* started attacking young men only when they came inside the forest. This trip to forest represents the human exploitation of nature and the natural habitat of several animals. *Ottamulachi* is described as a *Yakshi* even though she is ascribed with the super natural powers being a human being as she is living in close relation with nature and this relationship with nature raises her into a supernatural realm. *Ottamulachi* is also said to be very friendly with the wild animals and they often came to help her in dangerous situations. Thus ottamulachi becomes the protector of the wildlife through this folktale.

Today, the concept of *Yakshi*, is of very less reverence to most of the people as the representation of these folktales started seeping into films and started take a different turn. There is a major difference in the representation of *Yakshi* in films compared to the folklore. The *Yakshi* in folklore is ascribed with powers and she becomes the protector of nature and people whereas in

films, a *Yakshi* is labeled as a bad spirit and thus doomed to be destroyed for the peace of the mind of the other characters in the film. Thus *Yakshi* becomes the part of the commercial success that the film aims to achieve and nothing more than that. These changes in the narrative would seem very subtle yet the reception and the celebration of these movies reflect the social consciousness of the people who no longer respect this concept. As Walter Benjamin observes in his “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, film is a mass media which has the power to influence a large number of people which could be used to revolutionize or destroy different ideas. (225) Thus it is not wrong to assume that films have played a major role in the construction of the social conscious in which the concept of *Yakshi* becomes an element of marketing value of the film.

It is true that these beliefs are personal choices and sustaining these folklores and legends is not the only way of protecting nature but the idea of a cultural belongingness that rises from a past which was constructed through these stories and legends, and also the morals of these stories that helped people to lead an ecofriendly life in the past will be lost if we let go off these folktales and myths. Modern African literature is the best example which shows us the importance of preserving and retelling the stories of the past. Writings of Wole Soyinka or Chinua Achebe shows us their culture and beliefs in detail through their works. *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe shows us how the Igbo tribe lived in complete harmony with nature and their spiritual relationship with nature, where their Gods were mountains and the forest. This spiritual relationship helped them to live in harmony with nature. There are instances in the novel where the colonizers disrupt their way of life in several ways by disrespecting and disrupting this relationship. Wole Soyinka introduces the Yoruba tribe and the rituals through his various works like *The Road* and *The Dance of the Forest*. He also bases his works in the Yoruban cosmology in which they believe that there

is an invisible world within this world. Jeanne N. Dingome in his work “Soyinka’s The Road as Ritual Drama” analyses this cosmology and explains that this unseen realm consists of souls of people who died and the souls yet to live along with the Gods they believe. This cosmic understanding helped them to associate this unseen world with nature and thus it is their practice to worship nature.(32) Writers like Achebe and Soyinka show us the importance of understanding and cherishing one’s own culture of the past before dismissing it completely by blaming it as irrational.

The ecocriticism of myths, legends and folktales are very important to appreciate and understand the cultural as well as the ecological value it has in the larger narrative. They should be preserved and reviewed well enough to extract the hidden meanings that ancient societies would have engraved in them. Therefore the transition of these legends to the coming generation is also an important process were we should ensure the preservation of the meanings that we pass on. One way to ensure this is by taking care of the mediums that pass on these narratives. As mentioned earlier, the films portray *Yakshi* in a very different light when compared to the folklore and legends. This happens also because of the caste dynamics that comes into play as most of the time, *Yakshis* will be of lower caste. Thus it is very important to take care of such politics which distorts the original narratives.

The other way to take care of these indigenous narratives is to record them and analyze them without allowing them to diffuse into the mainstream narratives. *Yakshi* becomes a unique concept as it has a religious understanding and at the same time, a popular cultural understanding which is in association with nature and which surpasses the religious boundaries. Thus it is

important to notice this difference instead of categorizing it as a religious concept which requires proper analysis which is also a key to the ecocritical understanding of the concept *Yakshi*.

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