

**MATCH MADE IN HELL: ARABI KALYANAM AND MYSORE KALYANAM IN
KERALA WITH REFERENCE TO THE MOVIES *SURUMAYITTA KANNUKAL* AND
*PADAM ONNU ORU VILAAPAM***

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Abstract

From 1950s, movies with Muslim background became a part of main stream Malayalam cinema industry. Almost all of them dealt with themes like polygamy, Talaq, superstition, patriarchy etc. ‘Surumayitta Kannukal’ and ‘Padam Onnu Oru Vilaapam’ also strip off the society to expose the vile practices patriarchy and orthodoxy observed to keep woman always under their sway. Arabi Kalyanams were extensive in 1960s and 1970s and Kozhikkode became hostess to visiting bridegrooms who trapped the young beautiful girls from poor Muslim families often with the backing and connivance of the family itself. There were negotiators in the coastal area who fixed the rate for the dreams of these poor girls and who lived on the tears of these shehazadis (princess) of a few days. The prospect of high mehar and the matrilineal system in some parts of Kozhikkode pushed this practice forward. Though there is a large decline in the number of Arab marriages, the apparition of Arab marriages visits the Kerala shore even now, though not frequently. The Arabs has transferred their centre of action to Hyderabad now, which does not give a sigh of relief for these poor fairies as they are engulfed by other monsters called Mysore Kalyanams and Male Kalyanams.

Key words

Arabi Kalyanam, Mysore Kalyanam, Male Kalyanam, Mehar

Introduction

When on earth, a discussion crops up on the substandard standing shared by the women all over the world, as it is the prime concern of women studies in this day and age, a propensity to homogenize their experiences will become discernible. Gayatri Spivak identifies a tendency in some French feminist thought to describe the experiences of ‘Third World Women’ in the terms of western female subject constitution. Such an approach clearly ignores some very important differences in culture, history, language and social class. Women may be the wounded section in every society, but their experiences vary according to the backdrop they live in. When a study is made on the lives of women folk in Kerala, the tendency to even out will be clearer. There might be resemblance in the lives of women belonging to all castes, especially taken in to

account the lives of Namboothiri women and Muslim women of aristocratic family, decades ago. Both sections were cramped in the shackles of patriarchy, the difference being in the hesitancy now shown to acclimatize the change. Though women belonging to other religious communities have smashed the barriers, Muslim women cannot blow their own horn about the freedom they had attained so far. There are many an issue like polygyny, early marriages, *Arabi kalyanam*, *Mysore kalyanam*, and the rules of *Talaaq* and remarriage, dowry system *etc* which still hang around in this community. The influence of gulf money on their lives and the subsequent adaption of new dress code cannot be overlooked. Gulf boom hasn't brought much change to any other community than to the Muslim community. So it should be studied independently of the lives of Dalit women or Namboothiri women. The commercialization of religion and imposed dress code have led many to the doubt that they are making retrogression instead of progression, in spite of all the improvement made in the field of education and the strivings of religious and social reformers. No one can rebuff the fact that change has laid its hand on this community also; lots of women could attain education and job, many of them learnt to raise their voice against the orthodox clergy who insisted on keeping women within the confines of four walls, several of them could prove themselves superior once the yoke of enforced marriage is taken away from their shoulders. But compared to the number of those who still allow themselves to be subjected to the misogynist outlook of the clergy (misogynist only when the cause of freedom of women is upheld) and that of overpowering approach of the male, the figures will tell that number of those who have tried to come out of the mire is appallingly the few. Judged against the past, most of the Muslim women are literate, yet they are illiterate in the sense that they are ignorant of their right for gender equality. Copious number of films like *Kuttikuppaayam*, *Umma*, *Subaida Maniyara*, *Perumazhakkaalam*, *Ghazal*, *Ghoshayaatra*, *Gadhaama*, *Paradesi*, *Paadam onnu oru vilaapam*, *Usthaad hotel* *etc* has come out handling one issue or other faced by this demoted and relegated faction. Though the experiences of women all over the world cannot be normalized due to cultural differences, in the case of Muslim women, sacred principles held by them enchain themselves in the web of patriarchy, more or less in similar manner. Jean Sasson's the most celebrated novel, *The Princess*, exposes the machinations of religion and patriarchy to consign women into the shroud thus coercing them to lead the life of caged animals. While *The Princess* spotlights the women life in Saudi Arabia, Qaisra Shaharaz' noted novels, *The Holy Woman* and *The Typhoon* focus on the priestly interference in the lives of educated women in Pakistan. The lives of women in Kerala is not much different from their counterparts in the world, they also lead a humiliated and debased lives crushed under the wheels of male dominated society, of course, there are cultural differences, for e.g. the bitter episodes related to female circumcision will not be detected in the writings from Kerala as it is described in *The Princess* and *Shahzadi Ibadat*, the brutal custom of devoting a woman to the life of worship and religious preaching, by giving her in marriage to the Quran, as described in *The Holy Woman* is not observable in the literary documents in Kerala. Yet these women's lives are connected in the way they let the spiritual leaders to manipulate with their men to hurl them to the eternal hell.

Three new jargons *Arabi kalyanam*, *Mysore kalyanam* and *Male kalyanam* were added to the local vernacular of Kerala to call attention to the exposure of Muslim women to the menace which came to them in the form of wedlock. Kozhikode had lent ears to the sigh of young Muslim women who had been tied in nuptial knot with nomadic Arabs only to be discarded for the rest of their lives. Often, the Arabs abscond when their wives are expectant and hardly ever return. Only leftovers and rubbles of these nine days wonder are the destitute women and the urchins. Without any regard of their age, the Arabs married young girls by giving them

undreamed of amounts as *mehar* and lived with them till the building of their ship was over or their business was over. Then they left the shore promising to revisit. Some of them came back but in most cases the brides were relegated to forgetfulness. They were left penniless often with a child to be taken care of. Some of them received two or other bridegrooms from the land of oils, not considering whether they got talaq from each relation, though it was a prerequisite for remarriage.

Such marriages and castaways had been widely prevalent in other places also like Malappuram, Kannur, and Kasaragod and even in state capital Thiruvananthapuram. Despite the educational advancements the community has made so far and the constant vigilance from the side of media these fleeting marriages go on, nourished by the poverty and lack of education among the Muslim population on coastal area. The crumbling of the timber and spice business has, in a way, obstructed the flow of Arabs to Kozhikode port. Yet there are still many women and children, getting suffocated in the grimy shacks of coastal Kozhikode finding it hard to eke out a living. Many of them resort to housemaids' works in Kerala and sometimes in the Gulf countries while some of them become daily wage laborers. A small number of them take up prostitution as a means of livelihood.

The underprivileged and abject condition of both Arab men and Muslim family in coastal area caused the Arabi kalyanams. In Arabia, men have to give a large sum as mehar to women. In Kerala rules are violated in favor of patriarchy. Here mehar is nominal and the system of dowry is rampant. Arabs do not need dowry instead they will pay mehar. This is the sole reason for poor families getting lured by the prospects of Arab marriages.

Polygamy is encouraged in Arabi Kalyanam, the Arab might have many wives and children beyond the sea. Some may have wives at Kozhikkode itself. Child marriage is encouraged, as young girls are more valuable in market. With early marriage education, social life and individual advancement everything is sacrificed once and forever. Often they are compelled to marry a man of their fathers' age, which leave women bereft of emotional contentment. The lack of communication between the couple is another issue. The bridegroom knows only Arabi while girls know only Malayalam which degrades the relation to nothing other than mere copulation. In fact it becomes another word for flesh trade.

The unearthing of oil made Arabian countries prosperous, so they became rich, and their interest shifted to European women. Malabar also made affluent by the gulf resources which resulted in the decrease in the number of Arab marriages. Gulf money and changed living conditions opened new roads in Muslim girls' education, which made them bold in their protests against Arab Marriages.

'Surumayitta Kannukal' depicts the tragic plight that awaits the victims of Arab marriages. Ayisheyi, the beautiful heroine of the movie, is the wounded prey of this malicious practice. She was in love with her cousin, Abu from her childhood. Her father finds a panacea for his economic difficulties in a magic formula put forward by a broker. The Kuwait citizen Azeez will provide enough money to be back on his feet. He can also do some penny pinching as the bridegroom does not demand dowry, they do not need to decorate the bridal chamber as it is the custom among Kozhikode Muslims, and they do not need to find marriage expenses. There is a sickening scene in the movie, where the Arab shouts at her in Arabi and Ayisheyi fails to make out his talk. She is forcefully taken to his rented home, only to find his two other wives, who go on fighting tooth and nail. The twist in the movie comes by the sudden appearance of another Arab who comes in search of his daughter after twenty years' gap. He comes to Ayisheyi's house also where the shocking truth that Beekutty, another wife of Ayisheyi's husband, is, if truth be

told, his sister. His father had married from the same shore and Beekutty was born in such affair. Aghast at what he did, though unknowingly, the Arab divorces all his wives and he goes back to his native land. Ayisheyi falls into a wretched state. Abu is good hearted and he extends his hand to Ayisheyi. But her happiness is short lived. She realizes that she is carrying. But a miscarriage occurs which is followed by her death.

Arabi Kalyanams cannot be overlooked as some lonely incidents from Kerala of 1960s and 70s and the movie is engaging even today for the contemporary significance. A case was reported in June 2013 when Jasem Mohammad Abdul Karim Abdullah Al-Mohammad, a UAE national, married a 17-year-old Muslim girl from a poor family in Manjeri, giving her 48 gm of gold and some money as mehar. She was an inmate of an orphanage and it is alleged that the marriage was done with the knowledge of the orphanage management. The bridegroom flew back to his native country after a few days of honeymooning and without much delay he informed her of talaq. She gave complaints against him and his mother who was also a victim of Arab marriage years ago. In another case, a Saudi citizen vanished four days after marrying a girl in Nilambur in Malappuram district. There are numerous similar incidents. Unofficial reports say more than 10 Arabi Kalaynams were held in the past couple of years in Malappuram and Kozhikode districts.

Arab Kalyanams, in turn paved the way for Mysore marriages, in which bridegrooms arrive to marry girls for an insignificant dowry. There will not be a flamboyant function. In TV Chandran's *Padam Onnu Oru Vilaapam* (2003) there is a scene in which Shahina's (heroine) friend Raziya comes with an infant. She was sent home to claim the balance of dowry. Most of them come never to return. In most of the marriages, these young girls, who are often under 18, are lowered to servile positions and sometimes they were handed over to some trafficking team, sometimes they have to adjust with new wives of their husband. Most of the victims of Mysore marriages are from Wayanad and Malappuram districts, the daughters of poor agricultural labourers. According to a ballpark figure, more than 10,000 poor girls from Malabar, especially the Nilambur area of Malappuram district, have so far been married off to the slums of Mysore and other cities in Karnataka, and they are destined to wallow in misery with people, with whom they have nothing, including language in common. Their families or even the mosque committees that conduct these marriages do not even make enquiries about the surroundings and antecedents of these bridegrooms, majority of them having another wife and children to protect. Social activists or social welfare organizations keep blamable silence regarding the appalling and abysmal lives these girls spend in the ditches of an unknown land. Many of them are sold in brothels, while some of them are forced to run open brothels inside their own home or in rented hovels.

Mysore Kalyanams are an offshoot of the gulf money, which played magic with the lives of Keralites overnight as in the story 'Aladdin's and his magic lamp'. The newly found riches caused the size of dowry to soar to unimagined heights which plunged into misery those families with no Gulf background. Mysore grooms came without any demands on the wealth of the girls, which gave a sigh of relief to the parents and unending tears to the girls. Parents who had to marry off three or four girls, never tried to enquire the groom's backgrounds and many of them later found to be thieves, pimps and pickpockets.

Conclusion

The significance of study lies in the verity that Muslim women are doubly oppressed, first through their gender, then through their religion. The gravity of the reading aggravates when

taken in to account the recent inroads made by the clergy into the realm of women's rights. Religious authorities were supporting the Arabi kalyanams thus protecting the interests of patriarchy. Even those religious leaders responsible to direct their men in virtuous path are becoming blind to the mind-set of the women and making offensive and rude comments regarding polygamy. They go to the extent of saying that polygamy should be supported, considering the enforced sexual deprivation man has to suffer when his wife is menstruating. The men are aghast and infuriated at the possibility of the abolition of polygamy, while women are stranded between a sigh and a gasp... the sigh of relief and the gasp at the almost certain resistance to this measure. The religious luminaries are also crawling backward when considered their views on marriageable age of Muslim women. They encourage early marriages on the false grounds that it will shield the Muslim girls from moral depravity and wantonness. In reality, the sway of the religious leaders, who maneuver religious principles to protract their selfish interest, fan the flames of intolerance and narrow mindedness of the patriarchs. So unlike others, Muslim women are ensnared in the web of patriarchy and religious customs alike and they should learn to tear off the veil, not on their body but on the putrefied body of the male dominated society, so as to discover an alcove of their own. Even if they succumb to their kismet, they should learn not to surrender unquestioningly, and for this they should be fortified with the consciousness that what the time and society had done to them so far. While education activists like Malala Yousafzai are pawning their lives for the cause of education, our girls are coaxed to forfeit their educational lives according to the whims and fancies of the religious heads.

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