

## **EMPOWERING THROUGH INSANITY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE LIBERATION OF LILLIKUTTY IN NAGENDRAN'S HONEYMOONS**

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### **Abstract**

Studies done on femininity and madness have identified a constructed link between the both and attempts have been made to identify what enabled such 'constructs'. This connection almost always worked in favour of men to dominate mad women and assert their power over women in detection, treatment and in controlling their social lives. The paper acknowledges various theories on madness in women to provide perspective. Madness, however, offers a scope to object this subjugation and extract resistance. This article attempts to analyze a character Lillikutty from the Disney Hotstar series *Nagendran's Honeymoons* and how her madness provides her the capacity to assert and raise her desires and dreams in life.

**Keywords** : Femininity, madness/lunacy, liberation, assertion, humour

Femininity is often associated with various notions, some whimsical, some logical and some that conveniently subverts female identity. 'Hysteria' as used in the early 19<sup>th</sup> C texts falls in the last category. Hysteria was earlier understood as a female malady and everything associated with hysteria was feminine. It was used as a label to other and objectivize women and until 19<sup>th</sup> C century. The male domination in the field of psychiatry further cemented the bias and continued the detection, treatment and representation of insane females (Showalter 19). Showalter's study was an attempt to distance the connection made between women and madness that was propagated by a largely male centric school of study.

The connection between hysteria and femininity can be traced back to its etymology which has been studied and recorded by various theorists. The etymology of 'Hysteria' takes us to 'uterus' and hence forms a seemingly unbreakable bond between madness and female. Hippocrates was the first to use the word hysteria and he believed that restless uterus is the cause of the condition (Tasca et al). It is by benefiting from activities like sex and procreation that women can avoid this condition.

Uterus without performing its function of bearing children is in an unsettled and unstable state which affects the sanity of the woman. This idea was proposed by Plato as:

The womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it remains barren too long after puberty it is distressed and sorely disturbed and straying about in the body and cutting off the passages of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into the extremist anguish, and provokes all manner of diseases besides. [The disturbance continues until the womb is appeased by passion and love.] Such is the nature of women and all that is female (Plato qtd in Chodoff 546).

The connection between the etymologies of lunacy and fury also brings it closer to woman with madness (Haralu, 13). Lunacy derived from the Latin word Luna means moon. Lunatic means being affected by the moon's cycle. A woman's monthly menstrual cycle is also considered to be regulated by the position of moon. This proximity lends a hand to view lunacy and menstruation as a phase in women's life especially if they deviate from the socially accepted or expected behavior. Fury which means mad rage and its Greek mythical origin in three goddesses who pronounce curses link it to mad women.

The earlier physicians and philosophers propagated the idea that women who don't follow the social conventions of life regulated by men are prone to get sick and that sickness is called hysteria which we now understand as madness. It is important to note that treatment to such conditions also involved fumigation of face and genitals to put uterus back in its place (Tasca et al). Psychiatry, accordingly, function as any sexist institution to control women and her place in the society.

In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> C, theorists like Shoshana Felman has equated mental illness to cry for help. Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation (Felman 2).

There has been different studies done to ascertain why there exists an apparent connection between madness and women. A study on the diagnosis of insanity of women claims that disorder in women was majorly due to circumstances relating to child birth (Melling et al 149).

In the Disney Hotstar Series Nagendran's Honeymoons, the second episode, Lillikutty features a 38 year old maiden lady who is portrayed as a lunatic. She isn't married after 6 failed attempts of arranged marriage. Since the patriarch in the family, her father, won't allow the partition of the family property unless she is married off to somebody, the narrative of the film reaches a point where her brother gets her married to a total stranger. The eponymous character Nagendran's background and intentions as made clear till that point leads to his marriage with Lillikutty is purely for financial gains. The cultural milieu of 1970s Kerala provide an apt setting to declare a loud woman possess all potential to deem lunatic.

As the pressures of getting married increase with age and expectation from people around, the woman develops an unstable mind and results in a caricature like identity. Most of the diagnosis of hysteria in women is the result of cultural pressures coupled with male domination (Chodoff 550). Lillikutty, who is portrayed as a lunatic is from a financially well off family and with people expressing their affection towards her in various ways ranging her father to the maid in the house. Her eccentric behavior and sudden movements are what marks her lunacy more than her dialogues. The cause of her apparent mental illness though explicitly not justified by the director is left to the audience to gather (Cris). The scene which opens with her dissatisfaction over the failure of the latest marriage shows her stuffing herself with banana when the household believes that she has been starving herself for the past two days. The talented actor Grace Antony with her unique expressions and fine eye brow movements make it the best first

scene of the character. The sudden mood change of Lillikutty from dissatisfaction to excitement when her brother announces the arrival of another groom the next day and the mood change to anger when she sees a traditional breakfast dish being brought to her room instead of bread and jam all happens sequentially in a matter of minutes. This transition and the final shift to fury resulting in the throwing down of the plates on the ground convinces the audience that she is in fact not being reasonable. There is also a reference made to a previous incident where in she threw their maid into the well for some unspecified reason to add to claim that being unmarried for long has made her emotional, unreasonable and even dangerous.

The often made association between fury and madness and its closeness to women as discussed in the beginning of this article finds depiction in the character of Lillikutty. Fearing her mad fury other characters often try to not provoke her or ignore her bouts of anger to avoid severe repercussions of her anger. Emotional outbursts are often the most nearest and probable reaction to problems beyond our control. In a seminal work on madness and women, a theorist recalls her mother's angered responses to her life situations as a single mother's struggles to maintain sanity and keep the family up and running by saying "emotions are often an understandable response to her situation"( Ussher 1).

Patriarchy expecting women and men to get married and settle as the other family members in the series is normalized. However, women expressing her need and asserting her desires after a 'desirable age' becomes an object of ridicule and finds a label close to lunacy in the narrative of Lillikutty. "Women's madness is both a myth and a culturally constructed label for distress and a real experience for many women, a reflection of deep discontent in response to the context of their lives"( Ussher 17). There are two aspects to Lillikutty's apparent madness. The first one is that of her loud and often demonstrative and unreserved action and behavior. Compared to other woman characters in the series that act as representative of that era, her bearing is unrestrained which is seen as eccentric and crazy. The second aspect deals with her position in the society as a maiden lady which itself calls forth her flaws which restrict her from being a stable and 'fully functional' woman from a rural village in Kerala. Her father dotes on her but is obsessed with her function as a wife to somebody.

A strategy used to portray Lillikutty as lunatic is by exaggerating her movements and sudden leaps. In reality, not just crazy people have exaggerated movements. However, using peculiar leaps with the accompaniment of background score, she is presented as a crazy maiden lady who wishes to marry somebody whom she finds attractive. Horse metaphor used in the scene where Lillikutty and Nagendran meet for the first time. Her movements and gestures stand in contradiction to the conventional attitude expected from a lady. She opens clarifies if there is way forward for them together probably to avoid future disappointment. She openly conveys what she expects from her husband and even talk about how many children she would like to have in the future. There is a certain power that she inherently possesses as being portrayed as a lunatic that rural women, from the 1970's Kerala as depicted in the series, lack.

Horse metaphor is used again to illustrate her virile behavior when she finds her husband in their bed chamber. She blatantly takes control of the scene and leads the state of affairs. Her brazen conversation about what she expects from her partner is used as an indicator of her lunacy because it is also not an expected behavior from a newly wedded woman in the cultural milieu set in the series. Her gulping of liquor when her husband refused it and how she orders him to drink it symbolizes her lunacy. Lillikutty taking control of the sexual affairs is also portrayed as a lunatic act.

In all these acts of her domination, it can be seen that madness endows her with a certain privilege and power that is unconventional. Mad people are almost always objects of actions and consequences. Though the financial privilege that she is capable to exercise owing to her father's wealth is also a reason for others' subservience, Lillikutty's madness gave voice to her repressed desires and thoughts. Lillikutty's aberrant, impulsive and often eccentric reactions to situations is always tolerated by others and she assumes the subject position in her daily interactions with people around her. A completely different study done on old classical comedy refers to a related idea where a mad or manic person in a comedy be the maker of laughter rather than at whom the laughter is directed (Singer 317). Through Lillikutty's actions, it is made evident that she is not just the maker of the laughter among the audience, but also regulates the behavior of others and is in power position.

This transformation was earlier identified in the following lines

The hysterical woman virtually ceased to function within the family...through her hysteria she could and in fact she did force others to assume those functions. Consciously or unconsciously she had thus opted out of her traditional role. (Carroll Smith Rosenberg as quoted in Santangelo 124-125)

This power position shift is also created for the general comic mood maintained all through the episode of the series. Mad females are often at the receiving end of instructions from men about what to do with their lives. A critical analysis of the madness of Antoinette and Yeong Hye in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Vegetarian* respectively have considered a similar conclusion wherein madness has empowered their protagonists by making them refuse to live by the norms set by the society (Shameem 231).

Madness which often negates one's agency in life and choices in life is reclaimed by Lillikutty by embracing her apparent madness. Her ultimate desire to be wedded and be someone's wife might stand in a questionable position, now. However given the cultural and social conditioning of the setting in the series, the way she asserted her fancy in a largely patriarchal sphere owes a large extent to her presumed madness. The paper doesn't claim that the character act as a representative to the representation of mad women in Malayalam films. Of the many mad women in Malayalam films, Lillikutty is different and uses her madness as a weapon to get access to what she desires.

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