

Gender, Culture and Manifest Oppression: A Study of the Film,

Ozhimuri

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Abstract

The dialogue, the film, Ozhimuri initiates, is that of a class, the oppressed. As against the conventional patterns of duals oppressor and oppressed, powerful and powerless, man and woman and traditional and modern, Ozhimuri unravels a kind of unique pattern of human existence where the comparative stance are fluid terrains. It reveals the inherent ideology of oppression as projected through the patriarch Thanu Pilla, and the matriarch Kali Pilla. On a later stage it reveals the oppressed face of the oppressors. The Film, with a shocking cipher to the prejudiced, a divorce petition from a lady past sixty, in view of regaining her property and identity from a man past seventy, opens a new perspective on violence, power and revolt. The present paper aims at deciphering the mysterious and mixed threads, the clues to which are given in the voice and silence of the characters. The objectives include searching: the oppressed in the film, what makes the oppression, the key forms of oppression, the culture and the oppression and /oppressed, how the economic, ownership oriented thoughts added to the dilemma of the oppressed, the role of the institution of marriage to enhance oppression and the possibilities of divorce out of love versus marriage out of hatred. The paper also throws light of the way, how the history of a place and community turns to be the history of the oppressed. By comparing the characters that are oppressed, but holding power, the study throws light on understanding polyphonic nature of the knowledge and beliefs justified, related to existence in general and gender, culture and individual in specific.

Key words: gender, culture, ideology, Ozhimuri, power, oppressed

A film is a dynamic medium of expression, which seeks to unravel the equations of power and oppression vested underneath the blanket of the seemingly democratic society. *Ozhimuri*, the 2012 film by the director Madhupal is rooted in the partition of Kerala, for the linguistic uniformity. Nanjinadu, a province in Travancore, was the locality, once occupied the territory of Kerala, and transported, without physical displacement to the state, Tamil Nadu. Naturally, this political decision has created unfathomable tensions in the mind of the inhabitants of the land; most of them belonged to a particular community, Nair. The laws, existed inside and out Nanjinadu, propagated some ideological and economic messages along with the rules to be observed. The ideological stance the rules accidentally generated are not concurrent to the rules, but revolting and disturbing the execution. But the time and place constructed powerful fences to safeguard the system, where the individual is treated to be the subject irrespective of the role which he/she acts. Interestingly when systems produces new systems, as in the way matriarchy, give rise to patriarchy, the patterns of occupation in the powerful/less positions inverted automatically. Human beings, since cannot recreate their past legacy in the new system and survive, and cannot reborn to the new system and die in the old, retain their ideologies and hence the characters in *Ozimuri*- the objects of subjugation, at an earlier stage, or later.

This paper tries to answer the following queries leading to the ideology of the oppressed:

- How did history and oppression hold the invariable ties in the film?
- What is the role of the societal traditions in legitimizing oppression?
- How did individuals perceive and conceive oppression?
- Which are the means of power and how they are justified under the umbrella term care?
- Why the oppression and revolt?
- What is the form of the revolt that speaks the subaltern ideology/knowledge?

In the French Film, *Oppressed Majority*, the film maker, Eleonore Pourriant brings out the bitter experience of a man, subjected to the unabashed sexual molestation in a woman oriented society. The man was subjected to the adamant ways of women, holding the powerful social rubrics of the feminist state. The film is a torch holder to the truth that, only power matters in deciding the dominance, leading to despotic stance. The film *Ozhimuri*,

with the traditional Nair environment, is a saga of three generations, out of which the earlier one is the matriarchal. The atmosphere of the matrilineal village is closer to the exaggerated utopia of the French movie. Madhupal did not make use of the hyperbolic, or magic realistic tools in portraying the Desam, Nanjinadu, on the screen as he claimed in an interview with “The Hindu” Correspondent:

“It is a multi-layered narrative that has a wide canvas but instead of attempting to cram several issues into the film, I have let the characters’ lives narrate the story of the place and its people. It is about relationships – between father and son, mother and son, husband and wife, wife and mother-in-law, and so on. Each relationship has its own dynamics that takes the narrative forward.(Nagarajan 1)

The time was around nineteen forties or earlier, when, the matriarch, the powerful woman character, named Kali Pilla lived, in all her majesty. The legacy of Travencore, and the legacy of Nair matriarchal existence has been juxtaposed so as to project the privileged position of the matriarch in the social setup, similar to that projected in the French movie. While talking on the suppression, mostly the discussion will turn to the placement of women, the marginalized, searching for her subaltern voice to speak up. Contrary to this circumstance, the character Kali Pilla, the owner of Thengumpuraveed, a Nair, ancestral home, enjoyed the rights of selection, distribution and rejection of the man, without inhibitions. This is not the right she won after the revolt, but the legitimized powers, she utilized, by being the product of a society, where woman was at the centre.

Each society, by its structure holds certain hierarchies- here in too the hierarchy projected the dual- woman/man. This stratification positioned man at the periphery, where the property is no more vested in his hands. The only job he carries is the reproduction, in addition to be succumbed to woman’s needs. So though he was not oppressed physically, the marginal position made him psychologically. Being denied of the rights to inherit property, he born bankrupt, was forced to live and die in that state. This typical oppressed mental state was what Sivan Pilla, the traditional wrestling champion bears. Though he was strong at the physical level, he was weak in the realm of economically safe stable marital zone. He always felt on the fence when he saw his son growing in a house where the mother will quit her

marital status, at the least surge of boredom. It was a dystopia for men, especially belonged to Nair community.

In *Survival: A thematic guide to Canadian literature* Margaret Atwood, demarcates the four victim positions that can be applicable in this context also: Those deny the state of being oppressed, those admitted the oppression beyond their control or power to fight against; those accepted oppression and refused the inevitable nature of the typical existence and those who creatively leaped to a non-victim position. (Atwood, 36, 37, 38) Sivan Pilla, the husband of Kali Pilla was the character belonged to the second position. He admitted the oppression, but normalized it as his fate, being a part of such a system. Steve Trivett in his article titled, “Ontology of the Human Observer” remarked thus:

How we carry ourselves in the world, focus on commitments and concerns rather than feelings, how we use language, our mood and body state, can directly affect how life turns up for us and what we attract into our lives. An ontological change offers us the chance to see things differently in a way that empowers us to act effectively and authentically. (Sieler 1)

But Sivan Pillai failed to carry out the ideas of Ontological change in his life as he was too much immersed in the system. All his pain was due to the system, which produced the typical mindset of his wife who discarded him simply by placing Chellam i.e. the betel box on the sit out. The rejection or divorce was simply used as a tool of oppression, in a woman oriented society, with a less complex practice for it. This sense of being oppressed he internalized, paved the way for his becoming trapped in the treachery of the opponent in the competition and the final painful life and death.

In this episode, Kali Pilla did not swim against the stream of society to be the oppressor. Her practice was strictly according to the societal legitimacies. The offspring of the act of divorce and the painful death of Sivan Pilla was the oppressed mindset of Thanu Pilla, Son of Kali Pilla and Sivan Pilla. Thanu Pilla acknowledged the oppression and started hating the mother who has degenerated, according to him, as a medium of the matriarchy. Probably he might have spent his life of an orphan, after becoming fatherless. The bold mother, instead of creating fear, produced a kind of hateful detachment in Thanu, that he tried to overcome through marriage.

Thanu Pilla's marriage was not a ritual out of love, but of hatred to a class, a matriarchal clan. It was an act of revenge on women, who denied their husbands. He was portrayed at the beginning of the film as an oppressor, and later the spectator's are enlightened of the fact that he was the offspring of oppression. Surprisingly, the movie, with the unfamiliarity the titular term provokes in the Malayali viewer due to the etymology of the legal terminology of ozhimuri- divorce, or returning the property enjoyed earlier, drives the audience to an alien situation, when a lady past fifty seeks divorce legally from her husband past seventy. The court being standing for the normal existence, with the aim to safeguard the prominent institution, the sacrosanct marital sphere dissuaded meenakshi Amma, the petitioner. Thanu Pilla, wearing the garb of the oppressor seemed to be shocked at the sudden revelation of the move of his object. He denied all her charges raised and consequently the call for a ceasefire. He vehemently stated that the property he held was the one he entitled, rather than possessed from Meenakshi amma. Undoubtedly he demonstrated the ideological point of the oppressor, by projecting the rigidity, despotism and all the similar values. This links the audience to the seemingly easy conclusion to make his wife at the oppressed position.

Interestingly, earlier, as the son Thanu Pilla identified himself with the oppressed father and started hating the oppressor mother, here the son, Sarad chandran seemed to have taken the side of his mother, the oppressed. This positioning mingled with his inability to beat the oppressor made him embrace the third oppressed state that the oppression is inevitable. So he was reluctant even to listen to, or react to the girl who sought the answer to the cause of the petition. Sarad's stand was no different from the stand of his father, who earlier felt in the same pattern, and in quest for the escape from the less-inevitable oppression he married a lady from a patriarchal family, owns only a part of the property.

The journey of Thanu from the oppressed to the oppressor was a parallel to Meenakshi's from a normal, less oppressed to the really oppressed. When the history turns the wheels from the undivided travencore to the divided, but the inside exile of Nanjinadu, and from the matriarchal system to patriarchy, the oppressed wear the masks of the oppressor, and vice versa. Thus Meenaki being a product of patriarchy was indoctrinated with the values, pertaining to the discipline of a loyal wife. This ideology was the unfaithful companion that leads her to entrust the property with the husband, for his rags of care. The result was the

ultimate subjugation of the person bereft of the capital. Thus the new society was built on the theory of capitalism based on materialistic gains. This new equation of the oppressed and oppressor in terms of capital is what Meenakshi Amma tries to transgress through her petition for ozimuri.

The reasons for the revolt against the oppression and that for the nonviolence policy Meenakshi Amma maintained are clearly stated through her dialogues. When she made a remark about her love comparing herself with Thanu Pilla's mother's behavior, he insulted her by saying 'slave's discipline is like a dog's wagging the tail'. He emphasized that though unappreciable to him, his mother's actions were heroic and these words imply that mother is a woman while wife is a slave. He substantiated his arguments by citing her ingratitude to her brother who struggled to safeguard her dignity, and her decision not to leave Thanu Pilla's home to see her father in his death bed, without Thanu's permission. These are eye openers for Meenakshi, who internalized the victim position as her fate and justified the state as her love. By calling her as a slave and his mother as a woman, he demarcates the real woman and the oppressed. This leads to Meenakshi's revolt, gave voice through her divorce petition that she didn't proceed in her youth even under pressure.

The surprising factor lies in her declaration to Sarad, about the better part of the oppressor i.e. as a good father in the time of the son's disease. By revealing the reason's for the father's cruelty to him, and making him recognize the kindness disguised as cruelty to safeguard the life of his son, the equation, that oppression can be due to love is established. Succinctly, this reality opened her eyes, and leads her to love this man who recognized her love as a sort of slavery. Here comes the new face of looking at oppression as love disguised. The deliberations thus lead to the son's transposed placement of his identity, with the oppressor, due to admiration. Again on the one hand the knowledge about father's love was a relief to the Son, and on the other it was a cause for concern to him in the context of divorce. This pushed him to dissuade his mother from the petition, which she stubbornly resisted and finally won. The dialogues delivered in the movie takes alternate position in an attempt to explore the epistemological complexity of the human knowledge and its nature. Though the narration at times moves with the masculine ideologies of objectivity, which are "the creations of masculine subjectivity" (Rich, 207), it followed Adrienne Rich's view that "feminism implies that...the inadequacy...the distortions of the male centered ideologies"

that society began to recognize.(Rich 207). This could be why Meenakshi Amma, who has travelled through the different victim stages of Atwood, in the movie finally became a victor by attaining the Ozhimuri-retention of property and liberation from family bondage. By becoming a victor, without her knowledge, she opens up the oppressor in her, which Thanu Pilla, the oppressed disguised as the oppressor feared. In this way thanu Pilla, the generation of the oppressor left the throne of the oppressor, and Meenakshi Amma refused to grab it for her. Thus the dual- oppressor/ oppressed was nullified in their relationship, built on equality. But the story, not only conveyed the notions of the continuing oppression in the family of the advocate, and affixes the theory that Sarad cannot escape from the Thanu in him. Even if reluctant the ghosts of the past will haunt him till he becomes his father. The spreading of the manifest to the generations is stated through the wish of Sarad to name his son after Thanu.

The movie creates so many complex equations through the oppressed/ oppressor duals' subversion:

- Society and the system, popular during a particular period of history play a decisive role in defining, normalizing and celebrating oppression.
- Power structures with reference to historical situation are in key positions of defining and legitimizing oppression.
- Oppressed people did not have a homogenous perception of oppression, as with the oppressor.
- At times it is difficult to demarcate love and oppression and the love, a state of being oppressed.
- Oppressed can hold ideologies of revolt through cruelty, no revolt, and revolt through love.
- Monetary possessions were always at the back ground of any oppression and the gain of capital with the awareness of possession will bring forth democracy to some extend.

The film Ozhimuri, originated from Jayamohan's Uraavidangal with its open door nature, permits the readers to enjoy and reflect on feminism/ antifeminism, subjugation/ relief alike. Also it obliterates the equations of oppression in terms of gender, by making the system as the culprit for the gender politics carrying the seeds of oppression. At the same time a sense of identification, in terms of gender can be seen developing, on a close watch of Thanu, Sivan

Pillai and Sarad Chandran. The similar kind of assimilation is observable when Kali Pillai warns Meenakshi Amma of the problems of servitude. This thread is missing when Balamani enters the scene. The film anticipates stability and socialism, through the old generation, that new generation is reluctant to capture. Even in making the equating of revolt superficially, the underlying pattern produces the ideology of peaceful coexistence for sexes.

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Bionote:

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