

**An Eco-feministic Reading of the Rituals of *Poomalakkavu* and
Marakkalappattu, the folk culture of North Kerala**

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Abstract

The article intends to make a study on the eco feministic aspects of the rituals of *poomalakkavu* and the song of *Marakkalappattu*, the rich folk forms of North Kerala. *Poomalakkavu* is one of the centers of Dravidian worship which is indigenous to the locality. *Marakkalappattu* is one of the ritualistic songs sung during the *paattu* festival of the Dravidian cult which were not discussed in detail in the past folk studies. In the present scenario of the world, the nature and woman are facing serious threats. The Eco feminism branched out of Feminism in the last decades of the twentieth century take the binary of woman/man having close link with that of the nature/culture. The concept of nature as Mother Goddess and as fertility icon is an age old observance in India. It is not a new ideology for us, but a way of life. Hence an eco-feministic reading of the folk form is worth studying.

Key words: woman, nature, eco feminism, female goddess, fertility.

Eco-feminism is a literary as well as a socio-political movement which emerged and developed in the West during the last decades of the twentieth century. The term eco feminism was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in the book *Feminism or Death*. In the cultural and literary parameters, it negotiates mainly on the binary of nature/culture or object/subject and argues that there are deep connections between the exploitation and oppression faced by women and nature in a male dominated society. G. Madhsoodanan points out that the modern industrial culture is eating up the Mother Nature and hence an unreal dualism was formed in between nature and culture (15). The cultural feminists see the women-nature connections as liberating and empowering expressions of women's capabilities to care for nature. And they assert women's ways of knowing and moral reasoning better suited to solving environmental problems.

Ancient time onwards the concept of nature as mother was strongly rooted in Indian mind. Likewise woman is conceptualized as the incarnation of the qualities like patience, kindness, sacrifice, piety and modesty. At times she proves to be wrathful and indignant, as nature itself does, when the atrocities towards her reach high. In Indian philosophy and literature, nature is seen feminized and the woman naturalized. Moving further, woman is idealized as goddess of fertility and prosperity. She is life giving and at the same time, life taking. Hence Mother Goddess is there in plenty as the ruling spirit of each and every village in India, as the eminent environmental activist Madhav Gadgil tells: "...sacred ponds and sacred groves: ancient nature sanctuaries where all forms of living creatures are afforded protection through the grace of some deity" and "We are nature worshippers *par excellence*, and extent protection to more forms of living creatures than any other culture in the world" (61). From North to South a variety of folk forms and worshipping can be seen with a unifying cultural thread of mother goddess and nature at the centre, crossing the bars of diversity.

North Kerala has an indigenous tradition of worshipping with varying forms of folk arts. The eminent stream of Dravidian worship can be seen in the small shrine called *kavu* in the

village, keeping away from the *Arya* way of rituals and rites. The term *kavu* means the sacred grove or small forest, preserved by the local people, which are believed to be the abode of Serpent god, also called by the name *nagam*-the Sanskrit word for serpent. A *kavu* always has a pond nearby which is considered to be sacred. The sacred grove is evidently in the lineage of tree worshipping and the shrine, of course built up later, is dedicated to Mother Goddess (Namboothiri 49). Most often it is also known as *sthanam*, *ara*, *mundya*, *kottam* and *kazhakam*. Inside the shrine no idol of any particular *diety* can be seen but small swords on a platform which can be traced as the continuation of Neolithic tradition of weapon worship. "...the nature of religious cults associated with sacred groves suggests that these cults date from the hunting age, before man had settled down to raise livestock or till the land" (Gadgil).

The deities of the *kavu* are different incarnations of *Kali*, *Sasthavu* or *SerpentGods*. They are the heroes or heroines of any local folk tales or the victims of any grave injustice played upon. But the universal myth of fertility, motherhood and womanhood can be seen interwoven in the legends of these deities who are generally called as *Bhagavathi* meaning Mother Goddess. Though there are different goddesses in different names, they are all the incarnations of the eternal spirit of Mother Nature who is variably called as *Kottavi*, *Kali* or *Amma*. In North Kerala, there are different shrines for different deities and one among the sacred groves known as *Poomalakavu* is outstanding for its rites and rituals.

The Legend of Poomalakavu

The *Poomalakavu* is dedicated to *Poomala Bhagavathi* and is mainly worshipped by the people of *thiyya* community. The important *Poomalakavus* in the North Kerala are that of Kuruvanthatta, Kunnacheri, Koyonkara, Maniyara, Ramavilyam, Vayalapa, Kinanoor and Thayineri spreading in Kannur and Kasaragod districts. The legend tells: in a fine morning, Poomala, the daughter of *Arya* king, was gathering flowers to offer *Kamadeva*, the god of fertility when she fainted down for no reason. As per the custom, the king consulted the astrologer and he found out that the princess was possessed by the deity, who wished to see the

beautiful land of Malanadu, the Northern part of Kerala. Thus the king arranged for the journey for the deity possessed *Poomala* to visit Malanadu. Travelling in a wooden vessel, accompanied by *Poomaruthan*, a male god, and many *chekava* –armed men—and passing many harbors, *Poomala* landed at Kuruvanthata of Ezhimala. Being captured at the beauty of the countryside, *Poomala* never went back to her home land and Kuruvanthata is thus believed to be the first *Poomalakavu* near the Ezhimala port. From there the spirit of the deity reached to other shrines of *Poomala*.

By the arrival of *Poomala*, the locality became all the more prosperous and people believed it as the blessing of the deity. It is the members of *thiyya*, a back ward community of North Kerala who worship *Poomala* as their ruling deity. E.Unnikrishan points out that *thiyya* are the nomadic tribes who came from *Thulunadu*—the present Karnataka—and settled at Ezhimala (77).As *Poomala* also was one who came from the North, there is no wonder that she was worshipped by *thiyya* . There are people of *asari* community also who are worshipping *Poomala*, as that of Maniyara, the legendary origin of which is related with their occupation of carpentry.

Bhadra, *Gouri*, *Parameswari* are the names of mother goddess in higher myth of *Arya* tradition but the same spirit is called as *kaali*, *poomala* in the lower one of folk stream. The people who were counted as low by the *Arya* culture might be trying to overcome their inferiority feeling through the cults of universal spirit of prosperity and power. In addition, the deity, *Poomala* is pictured as the god of wrath as is shown against the injustice prevailing in the society. The main celebrations of a *PoomalaKavu* are *Kaliyattam*, *Pooram* and the *Paattu*.

Kaliyattam

It is the most attractive, colorful and ritualistic of all festivals of a *kavu* when the deities appear before the devotees in their visual form, the *Theyyam*. It is the corrupted form of the word, *Daivam* meaning God. People of all communities attend the occasion to receive the blessing. As a living cult with centuries of tradition, *Theyyam* remains the indigenous art form of

North Kerala which can claim a close resemblance with *kathakali* in its rituals, facial make up, costumes, dance and musical instruments. *Theyyam* maintains a unique style for each deity in costume, facial painting and in other aspects.

The form of the god, the *theyyakkolam*, is performed by the men of particular communities like Malayan, Vannan, Mavilan and some other lower caste communities. The supreme power, the *Poomala Bhagavathi* is not performed for she needs, it is believed, the human blood to be pleased. Usually, *Kaliyattam* spreads over a period of one night and a day to three or five days. Occasionally, after many years of interval, there is the great festival called *Perumkaliyattam* extending up to a week. Then it becomes the festival of all population of the locality. The performer of *theyyam* has to follow vegetarianism, fasting and other observances which can be traced back to, as K.K.N.Kuruppu observes, to Jainism and Buddhism.

There are two phases for *theyyam* presentation. At first the performer appears in an unfinished makeup and costume and is called *thottam* or *vellattam* and recites the ritual song of the myth and legend of the particular deity along with the drummers. After this primary presentation the *thottam* disappears. Then it is the time for the great performance of the *Theyyam*, the perfect incarnation of the deity in its fullness. The costume is made of red cotton with plenty of pleats and is fringed with tender coconut leaves. The grand ornaments and the head dress called *mudi* –crest—are all decorated with metal crescents, peacock quills and flowers give a supernatural appearance for the form. The performer prays before the shrine and gradually being invocated himself to the particular deity. Then with the sword and shield, he makes the ritualistic dance around the shrine which culminates in the *kalasam*. *Theyyam* gives rice grains, pepper and turmeric powder as the token of blessing to the devotees.

Pooram and Poorakkali

It is celebrated in the *Meenam* month of Malayalam calendar in the *kavu* and in Hindu homes. In this festival of spring, *Kamadeva* the god of love is being worshipped by girls who have not reached puberty. This festival of fertility lasts for 9 days during which the young girls,

after taking bath in the morning, collect flowers to offer the god with strict vows of discipline and vegetarianism. Observing *pooram* vows will bring prosperous and lasting married life for the girls, it is believed. As it commemorates the resurrection of *Kamadeva* who was burnt to ashes in the wrath of Lord Shiva, it is for the prosperity of the entire village the young girls take the vow (Namboothiri 22).

The closing day of *pooram* is with *pooramkuli*, the sacred bath, which is highly ritualistic. The function begins right from the morning for the great event. The girl devotees along with the *velichappadu*, the representative of the deity, after performing the rituals in the *kavu*, followed by others make a celebrated bath in the nearby river. It is a tremendous sight to watch, a collection of people with ritualistic garments and swords followed by the rigorous drumbeats moving towards the river and making the ceremonial bath. On the either side of the river, with great enthusiasm, people would be waiting to be blessed by the *velichappadu*. The day closes with *thulabharam*, offering the materials like coconut, rice, sugar and other vegetables equal to the body weight of the devotee as a reward for fulfilling the wishes.

Poorakkali is a fantastic form of art being performed before the shrine during the *pooram* days. It has much resemblance to the well established martial art called *kalaripayattu* which needs tiresome physical training and dedication. It is the original folk arts of north Kerala with the performers are all men wearing a dress that covers only the loin as is the case with *kalaripayattu*. Over the red piece of cloth a black towel with red boarder, folded through the corners, is tied. The ritualistic presentation has 18 different styles of footsteps called *niram* and the performers move rhythmically forming circles around a lighted lamp singing and praising the legendary heroes. The master of *poorakkali* is called *panikkar* and is one having deep knowledge in Sankrit literature and ancient sciences.

The intellectual side of *poorakkali* can be seen in *marathukali* in which two *panickers* of adjacent *kavu* engage the day in philosophical dispute on poetics and other scholastic issues. The rich tradition of philosophical knowledge like *kavya* and *sasthra* among the common folk of

North Kerala is revealed through this dispute which is monitored by an eminent scholar of the locality. At the event of *marathukali* the *kavu* would be crowded with people including women as listeners.

Paatu is a festive celebration extending up to six or seven days usually fall in the Malayalam month of *Vrishchikam* or *Dhanu*. As the name suggests it is the festival of songs on the myth of *poomaladevi*, praising her in a rhythmic style. The singers are the members of the *kaniyan* community and every night before the shrine the songs are being sung to invoke the deity for the rituals. The people of *kaniyan* community are mainly astrologers by profession and William Logan in his 'Malabar Manual' sees the name as one showing the position in the society (142). But Edgar Thurston points out that the word *kaniyan* is the corrupted form of the Sanskrit word *ganakan* (178). There are several songs called *kalampattu* and *nagappattu*. But the *marakkalappattu*, the song of the wooden vessel, is the most popular one which is being sung in the fourth and the sixth days of the festival. The song is performed to please the nature, the maternal power of the entire universe. Though there are references on *Poomalakkavu* and *Marakkalappattu* in the works of M.V.Vishnu Namboothiri and Chirackal .T.Balakrishnan, a study in an eco-feministic perspective is significant here.

Marakkalappattu–The Song of the Wooden Vessel

It is the most ritualistic song being sung during the nights of the *pattutsavam*, the celebration in which the Mother spirit of nature is being invoked through rituals of metaphysical plane. The song gives a pictorial description of *Poomala*, the lovely daughter of *Arya* king, who was possessed by the Mother Goddess. As per the instruction of the astrologer, the wooden vessel for the journey was well constructed by the *viswakarma*, the sculptor, in an auspicious time using sacred woods of sandal and saffron trees. Thus a well equipped vessel with forty nine rooms was built and it touched the water as *Poomala* was seated at the centre on a golden platform accompanied by thousands of her trains. Passing 108 harbors and travelling a long distance, at last it anchored at Ezimala.

The merit of *Marakkalappattu* is its figurative language and its sublime vision of thought. Beginning with the praise of God, the song proceeds to bowing before Guru (teacher), Brahma, Vishnu and Ganapathi. Then it gives an elaborate description *Poomala* who is the same spirit of *SreeParvathi*, the Mother Nature.

Dark bees buzzing in her Long curled hair,

Her royal forehead is marked of half-moon

Her nose teases the sesame flow'r

And her cheeks fail the golden mirror (Balakrishnan 441)

It develops through the prayer for the prosperity of the entire humanity including the ruling king. The universal love and the egalitarian feeling of the ancient society are revealed through the following lines.

May the folk be kept away, from all troubles

Oh my Mother God

May the king be blessed with strength and valor

Oh my Mother God. (Balakrishnan 442)

The literary and aesthetic aspect

In *Marakkalappattu* there are many words which are not used by the present speaking community of Malayalam. The loss of vocabulary is astonishing. Thus the song gets the linguistic merit to be preserved for further research as it reveals the ancient life of Kerala, with its cultural peculiarities.

The use of similar words beautifully as a chain in the song makes it all the more enjoyable and sometimes the aesthetic effect are achieved by the use of numerals. In the vessel,

Forty nine rooms were made,

In forty nine rooms-

Forty nine pedestals made,

On forty nine pedestal-

Forty nine saffrons covered,

On forty nine saffrons each

Forty nine flower vase placed. (Balakrishnan 445)

While describing the vessel passing through each harbor, the resonance of the words makes the song fantastic.

One thousand warriors along with,

Acclaimed on the divine port

Two thousand warriors along with,

Acclaimed on the divine board

Three thousand warriors along with,

Acclaimed at the divine hand

.....

.....

Seven thousand warriors along with,

Acclaimed at the seventh port. (Balakrishnan 446)

Though the aesthetic theories on forms and frames of later developed songs cannot be applied for the folk songs, in *Marakkalappattu* the plentiful use of simile and the poetic play of exaggeration can be seen. The rhyming words are the other attraction of the song.

Leaving the *Aryaland* faraway,

Moving the wooden divine vessel

Seeing the *Gangaland* faraway,

Moving the wooden divine vessel. (Balakrishnan 446)

Folk songs have different veins of meaning as that of mythical, legendary, historical and social. Considering these aspects, *Marakkalappattu* is a typical folk song which attracts special attention of the folklorists. The inconsistency of meter is typical for folk song as it depicts the unsystematic life of the ordinary people. But here we can see the old forms of modern Malayalam metrical forms. A line having eleven syllables followed by another with nine syllables and the latter is being elongated while singing. The last syllable of the first line also is elongated sometimes. Towards the end of the song there are short lines with crisp rhythm sung along with the rhythmic drumbeats when the *velichappadu* is moving to his ritualistic steps.

The song tells that the deity *Poomala* reached Malabar from the *Arya* land. But whether it is the land of *Arya* or a land by that name is a topic of dispute. Taking myth as the door to history, an enquiry in that direction is not insignificant. In the hierarchy of caste system *Arya* gets a top stand. In the *Marakkalappattu* anything associated with the *Arya* land are called with the prefix, `arya' like *arya king*, *aryapoomala*, *arya pond*, *arya garden* etc. In one occasion, the

song tells that the *Aryalanda* is Ayodhya, the legendary city of Sri Rama, the incarnation of the God, *MahaVishnu*. But is it the present Ayodhya is not at all certain. Dr.M.V.Vishnu Namboothiri tells that *Arya* land in *Marakkalappattu* is the one that is referred to in Dr.Herman Gundert's dictionary of Malayalam as *Arya land* and *Aryakkara* land(41).Dr.E.Unnikrishnan quoting the `The Encyclopedia of Ancient and Medieval India(Part 1,Varanasi.p.34) points out that *Aryanadu* is the place called Ihole of Badami taluk of Bijapur District of Karnataka state. As Ihole is the first place of *Arya* invasion in India, he finds a direct relation with Ezhimala which is the first land of *Arya* invasion in North Kerala (76).

In *vadakkanpattu*, one of the prominent folk songs of North Kerala, the people of *thiyya* community are seen mentioned as *chekavas* and here in the *Marakkalappattu* the people accompanying *Poomala* are also called *chekavas*. Dr.E.Unnikrishnan links these two and taking the fact that *thiyya* are people came from Thulunadu, justifies his argument that Ayodhya is Ihole of Karnataka (77).

The ports being seen in the voyage are having close similarity in their names with certain coastal towns of North Malabar like Kumble, kanhirakkad etc. There is reference about the Arabs who came for trade in the song and the present Ezhimala is called as Ezhi Munampu, meaning a port of importance. In addition to the *Marakkalappattu* of *Poomala* Devi, there are songs associated with other deities of North Malabar like *AayittyBhagavathi*, *CheermaBhagavathi*. Looking into these aspects of *Marakkalappattu* a multi sided reading of the song is seen significant.

An Eco-feministic Reading

Pooram of North Kerala is the festival of flowers and it has deep roots in the Dravidian myth of fertility. Flower is life giving and associating it with woman can trace back to the origin of human civilization itself. It is the tender most part of a plant but having the potential of creation as it bears the secret of birth and resurrection. We Indians use flowers for all cultural events like child birth, marriage, and even for funeral rites, may be showing the desire for

rebirth. A close study of the name *Poomala* gives an entry to the Eco feministic aesthetics of folk literature. The word means a garland made of harmoniously correlated flowers. Hence the deity with the name stands for the harmoniously inter connected Nature itself which is life giving. When *Poomala* is being raised to the level of Devi, the concept of fertility is getting a mythical perception.

The Mother Goddess came to see the Malanadu having possessed on the body of *Poomala*, the *Arya* girl. During the *Pooram* days the men of the community earnestly play *Poorakkali* before the shrine of the deity as an invocation. It continues for a day long, showing the masculine vigor, before the goddess and points towards the concept of man-woman union. *Poorakkali* has strong association with the agricultural life of the locality as some songs deal specifically on cultivation of paddy, from preparation of land to harvesting, in detail. The original variety of seeds being mentioned in the song is a pointing finger towards our irresponsibility in conserving hereditary knowledge and agricultural tradition. Thus *Poorakkali* can be seen as the revelation of the male spirit where *Pooram* becomes the festival of productivity linking woman and man. The custom of girls worshipping the deity without any mediation of a priest is typical only of *Poorotsavam* which can be taken as the relics of the gender equality that was prevalent sometime in the land.

The graceful figure of the deity is presented as one with feeding breasts and killing swords. Breasts are the source of nourishment to life and are the sign of motherhood. It is the proud source of the elixir for upbringing the humanity. The deity is kind to those who keep the harmony of this universe but She is wrathful to all who violate the law of nature: the true spirit of Nature as creating, protecting and killing. The ancient knowledge to balance the elements of life is revealed here through the myth of *Poomala*, the culmination of the power of womanhood and nature. The recently seen natural disasters can be seen as a warning for the deeds of man who exploit nature for his developmental atrocities. Now it is high time for woman to take arms against the seducers of her and nature's modesty.

The ideological concepts of eco feminism can be seen in *Marakkalappattu* in a diversified way. While at the occasion of cutting the trees for the wooden vessel, the sublime vision of ecological brotherhood can be seen in its explicit way. The *Viswakarma* requests the tree goddess of sandal wood to move on to the saffron nearby, and for cutting the saffron, he appeals the goddess to move on to a sacred grove nearby(445). The sublime thought of worshipping trees as divine can be envisaged here which in turn prevent the people from cutting trees indiscreetly. Further, the tree goddess can be the natural creatures which dwell upon it, making an interconnected life of ecology. The concern for all creatures and the value of every small life upon this earth is stressed as nowhere else in the world can be seen this ancient ecological awareness, but in India.

The Devi blesses the devotees giving rice, the powder of turmeric and pepper –the strong spices renowned for healing. People keep this *prasadam* in their home and it is used as a medicine for all known ailment. When the *theyyam*, at the time of blessing the devotees, sprinkles it at the crowd the entire surroundings becomes sterilized. The use of burning *pantham*, stick with oiled cotton winded at one end, around the costume of some of the theyyam are also act as a cause for purification of the air around. Thus going through the song of *Poomala*, it is evident that eco feministic sensitivity is not a new ideology for Indians, but it was a way of life itself.

The concept of 'the other' put forward by Simone de Beauvoir can be noted here that the woman being pictured as goddess makes her shift to a world of unreal and it would keep her away from any reality. But looking close, it can be seen that the deity of the sacred grove is not a super natural power of an external world, but the nature itself. Woman is not one 'as dreams are made of'. Keeping in tune with the rhythm of nature and winning the dignity of womanhood are the need of the time. It is worth recalling the words of Sarah Joseph for the need to creating a real space for woman with her own language to express her sensitivity. Thus the Eco feminists urges for a protest to release her from the constraints of patriarchal norms.

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