



The Madness of the Method: Unlocking the Ornate Lock

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Abstract: *This paper attempts a reading of one of the most popular Malayalam films “Manichithrathazhu” (The Ornate Lock) in the context of women and madness. The film is analysed in the context of cures and treatment recommended by the medical sciences as well as rituals. In the film, the cure for madness or possession is sought by a comfortable combination of modern medical sciences and the traditional ritual. Although the film beguiles the spectators with an antinomian conflict between the modern medicine and the ritualistic traditional cure, the means and modalities and ends of these two streams are not different. This becomes increasingly clear when these two streams conjoin and reproduce the language and reason of the phallogocentric world. The paper draws insight from the critical perspectives of Phyllis Chesler, Shoshana Felman, Luce Irigaray and Michel Foucault.*

Keywords: *Women and madness, phallogocentrism, women and mental health, representations of madness*

The basic idea of this paper is result of the discussions I attempted to initiate in the classroom while teaching the feminist classic *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman for my women’s writing elective. The lonely married woman whose husband is busy, who has plenty of leisure at hand moving to a new place on account of her husband, and her search for a room that she likes in a big mansion – all these reminded me of a familiar character. I asked my students (most of them girls) if they are also reminded of any character they are familiar with. Many could find a striking similarity between Gilman’s character and Ganga, the

female protagonist of the Malayalam film *Manichithrathazhu* (1993). As years passed and new batches came in, while discussing women and madness, *Manichithrathazhu* became my favourite text as most students including the non-Malayalees were familiar with the film or its regional remakes. The character was more popular than any other women characters in connection with madness I tried to bring to the class. Yet, in so many ways Gilman's character stayed true to herself compared to Ganga from a feminist point of view. Even as we are cautious about the impasses and inequalities of comparison, the characters seem to have a lot in common yet responding to their situations differently. *The Yellow Wallpaper* being written towards the end of 19th century was an American short story while *Manichithrathazhu* a film that came out a century later in Malayalam. Yet both Gilman's character and the mythological Nagavalli in the movie dwarfed Ganga the modern woman in a feminist analysis. The paper in that sense is an explication of how we use a film as a text in the class and therefore focuses more on the textual and thematic aspects of the film rather than on its visual aspects.

This paper attempts a critical textual analysis of *Manichithrathazhu* (The Ornate Lock), focusing on its portrayal of madness/ mental illness in women and the modality of treatment and cure proposed. The analysis is based on the arguments put forward by Phyllis Chesler, attested by Shoshana Felman which demonstrate that the ethic of mental health is masculine. The arguments of Luce Irigaray are also taken into consideration which questions the logocentric foundations of the Western metaphysics, on which modern medicine and reason are built on. The paper also uses relevant insights from Michel Foucault which critique modern constructs of madness and its cure.

Manichithrathazhu which was released in Malayalam in 1993 was remade into many Indian languages— Kannada

(*Aptamitra*), Tamil and Telugu (dubbed) (*Chandramukhi*), Hindi (*Bhool Bhulaya*), and Bengali (*Rajmohol*) a decade or so later with some changes but more or less with the same story line. The film was a huge success in Malayalam and the remakes too fared well in the box-office. The analysis is also in light of the ever-increasing popularity of the movie even after nearly three decades of its release. In 2018, the crew celebrated 25 years of the movie where many of the trivia shared by the director and others made to news. The film reportedly tops many polls and holds high target rating point.¹ The film still is a favourite material of comedy shows, mimicry programmes and memes. Reviews and academic discussions on the film have deliberated the issues concerning the portrayal of women characters in the movie and the way femininities are constructed. Taking cues from these relevant discussions, this paper attempts to establish that the treatment and cure proposed through the movie are based on the masculine logic while the untamed fiery woman takes the position of unreason signifying the disease itself.

The paper is concerned more with the basic story line and stays within the frames of the Malayalam original although most of the points raised here will be applicable to the remakes as well. The movie plays a gripping mind game with a lot of cues thrown around to make the audience feel that they have arrived at the conclusion/solution on their own. However, some remakes have strayed away from the tightness of the original plotline owing to the focus the big stars demanded. The Tamil and Telugu remake, *Chandramukhi*, which stars Rajanikanth and Kannada version *Aptamitra* which stars Vishnuvardhan are examples of this (Nikhila, 11). The film facilitates the modern audience to comfortably position their own hypocrisy in this science-meets-superstition thriller which has narratives of parapsychology and exorcism running parallel.

A young couple, Nakulan and Ganga, moves into Nakulan's ancestral village in Kerala from Calcutta. This again is an interesting detail considering how Calcutta functioned as a space of colonial modernity in real as well as fictional narratives in Malayalam.² The couple decide to stay in a haunted mansion which is their ancestral property despite many objections from their local relatives. A lot of comedy is generated in the first half of the movie banking on the slushy grounds on which our reason and rationality are built. However, what becomes paradoxical is that the movie does not critique this any further but is built on this very reason. Although the film beguiles the spectators with an antinomian conflict between the modern medicine and the ritualistic traditional cure, the means, modalities and the ends of these two streams are proved to be not different. This becomes increasingly clear when these two streams conjoin and reproduce the language and reason of the phallogocentric world. As the story progresses, we see role reversals like the exorcist being rational and the psychiatrist becoming spiritual, one way representing the predicament of modern world, yet holding on tight to it and advertising it.

Problems begin when Ganga opens *thekkini*, the southern part of the mansion where the spirits of Nagavalli (a dancer from Tamil Nadu) and the *karanavar* (feudal lord) Sankaran Thampi are locked up and sealed. The story of Nagavalli is recollected by many characters in the movie in bits and pieces. It tells us the story of a dancer courtesan named Nagavalli who was brought to stay at his palace by Sankaran Thampi, the feudal lord. When the feudal lord learns that Nagavalli is in love with another male dancer Ramanathan, the jealous Sankaran Thampi murders both Nagavalli and her dancer-lover. Nagavalli's vengeful spirit returns to kill Thampi on a *Durgashtami* night. Thampi, chanting some mantras, escapes the attempt and with the help of exorcists lock Nagavalli in the southern section of the mansion. However, Thampi later commits suicide. His spirit too is locked adjacent to the same room

where Nagavalli's spirit is locked up. The spirits are locked up using an ornate lock and it is this lock that Ganga breaks to get into *thekkini*.

A series of supernatural events take place for which the rational Nakulan blames his own cousin cum ex-lover Sridevi, now a divorcee. The first instance of identifying a mad woman comes so naturally here. The one who identifies the "culprit" is a powerful man and he does so as an explanation for the supernatural events which his so-called reason could not deal with. Following this, everyone believes her to be mad. She acts mad and talks mad in their eyes.

While the local relatives and family move in with the couple to protect them and to facilitate the re-sealing rituals of *thekkini*, a modern and rational cure appears in the form of the psychiatrist, Dr. Sunny Joseph. Dr. Sunny, a friend of Nakulan, is disliked by the relatives of the couple for his eccentric ways although one could suspect that it could also be due to his identity as a Christian and his easy moving about in a conservative Hindu upper caste family. This aspect is not explicitly mentioned anywhere though and is inferred just the way caste works in a society like Kerala. Dr. Sunny's eccentricity is also in line with the popular musings of the stereotypical representation of a psychiatrist himself as eccentric and mad. However, Nakulan thinks that Dr. Sunny who is a practising psychiatrist abroad can solve the issue. Nevertheless, Dr. Sunny seems evasive to Nakulan in his discussion to finalise who the patient is. The activities of Nagavalli's spirit go on in the meantime. *Thekkini* is alive with songs and sounds of anklets at night and Dr. Sunny even manages to speak to the spirit once by pretending he is the dead *karanavar* Sankaran Thampi, Nagavalli's arch enemy. He manages to do so by locking the door from outside. It is curious as to why the ghost/spirit is unable to open a locked door while Dr. Sunny later explains to others how Ganga who is

possessed by Nagavalli's spirit has many supernatural abilities, including the ability to measure the depth and duration of her husband's sleep.

The method that Dr. Sunny employs to bring Nagavalli out for his cure is to give her more space by identifying a fake culprit. Sridevi becomes a scape-goat once again but this time with her willingness to ally with the masculine logic of mental illness. She becomes a saviour and plays sacrificial. Identifying Ganga as the mentally-ill too happens with a natural flare as the causes of her illness is found in her childhood. While Sridevi's madness finds its causes in her recent past of a failed love affair, failed marriage and supposedly lonely spinster life, Ganga's illness, as per Dr. Sunny's conclusions, has nothing much to do with her immediate past. The movie portrays Nakulan and Ganga as an ideal couple. The idealisation is contradictory as there are undertones of her loneliness romantically represented in the songs where she is waiting for someone. We see her husband Nakulan immersed in his work while she spends her time reading and day dreaming. There are no complaints raised by both the parties in the relationship. However, both the "culprits" – real and fake, are not "normal" as per the common sensical definitions as both are childless and not having much of womanly duties. The chores that are supposed to keep a woman busy without being able to think about the meaning/lessness of her life is absent in both the cases. Both the characters have an insider/outsider dilemma. Sridevi, who technically belongs to the family, is by effect an outsider as she is a divorcee with an ominous horoscope. People also try to sympathise and guess her emotions as her past lover has come home with his wife. Ganga is technically an outsider, a girl who is married into the family from another family, contrary to the old matrilineal system where one marries one's cousins. She is new to the stories and conventions of this old household. She is fascinated by those stories but not limited by them. She is identified and

abusively called as *parishkari* (modern) who flouted the customs of the family.

Dr. Sunny's research on and detours to Ganga's past take us to her village. Her childhood shows strong resemblances to the childhood described by another writer from Kerala, Kamala Das. Just as Das describes her childhood in most of her autobiographical writings, Ganga too was raised by her loving grandmother when her parents were away and was forced to move to Calcutta as a teenager. Dr. Sunny finds the roots of Ganga's mental illness in her childhood experiences. However, Dr. Sunny's version does not have any explanation for why Ganga-turned-Nagavalli imagines her husband as her arch enemy Shankaran Thampi. Ganga identifies Mahadevan, a college lecturer who stays in their guest house as the dancer-lover Ramanathan. Dr. Sunny's explanation is that Ganga, owing to the influence of her grandmother, is fascinated by myths and stories and she was once again fascinated by the story of Nagavalli and started identifying with her.

In his plan to smoke the real culprit out, Dr. Sunny alienates his suspect from all her acquaintances. She is not treated like a patient but a culprit. This is similar to the way in which mental illness in the society is considered a crime. Only her superficial relationship with her husband is kept alive with Dr. Sunny keeping a close watch of it. Her relationship with Alli, Nakulan's cousin is destroyed as Ganga-turned-Nagavalli finds her lover Ramanathan in Alli's fiancé Mahadevan. It should also be noted that it is with Alli's help that Ganga gets to open *thekkini*. The two shared a warm relation until Dr. Sunny saves Alli from Ganga-turned-Nagavalli's attempt to kill her. These two instances can be the reason for straining Ganga's relationship with Alli's mother with whom too she shared a close relation. Sridevi is the other possible woman acquaintance for Ganga but the connection was closed already by Sridevi being Nakulan's ex-lover and Ganga being his wife. Dr.

Sunny also attempts to provoke and inflict jealousy in Ganga as part of his plan by asking Nakulan to go to temple with his past love Sridevi and act romantic. All women characters are cut off from each other this way in the method employed by Dr. Sunny.

The movie melodramatises Nakulan's (a rational man-cum-liberal husband) frustration and outpourings on knowing that the real patient/culprit is his modern wife and her state is fatal. Meanwhile, Thampy, the present *Karanavar* of the family, who never believed in the psychiatrist, seeks the help of a famous tantric expert and exorcist *Pullattuparambil Brahmaddattan Namboothiripad* (a Brahmin). It so happens that the *Namboothiripad* and Dr. Sunny had met earlier in a conference abroad and admire each other for their expertise in their corresponding areas. *Namboothiripad* tells the *karanavar* and those present that Dr. Sunny is an extremely talented psychiatrist and the student of the world renowned psychiatry expert Bradley. Here, *Karanavar* is convinced finally of the talents of Dr. Sunny as he is foreign educated and a *Namboothiripad* has attested his credentials. Here the audience too is convinced about Dr. Sunny's status as socially and culturally privileged.

This scene where the exorcist meeting the psychiatrist is a crucial moment in this movie as the cure for madness or possession is sought by a comfortable combination of modern medical sciences and the traditional ritual. Ganga-turned-Nagavalli in her alter ego self is led to a setting that emanates the severity of exorcism and the trickery of modern medicine. Ganga-turned-Nagavalli takes the offer of the exorcist that he would help her kill her enemy and mutilates the effigy thinking it is Nakulan/Sankaran Thampi. The scene explicates the following words of Felman: "With respect to the woman's madness, man's reason reacts by trying to appropriate it: in the first place, by claiming to "understand" it, but with an external understanding which reduces the madwoman to a spectacle, to an object which can be known and possessed" (Felman 7).

Ganga is later seen as waking up from a hypnotic sleep. Dr. Sunny asks her what her name is as she wakes up. She says: “Ganga”. He asks her for her full name and she replies: “Ganga Nakulan.” The answer satisfies the doctor as she identified herself as married to Nakulan. His treatment seems to have restored the “original” Ganga as he promised his friend Nakulan. In the whole act of cure and treatment, only male members have active roles. Female members are mere spectators in this act of re-establishing the logocentric reason. They only exhibit fear and weakness and stay away from any attempt to connect to the patient/culprit/victim.

Often feminist reading of madness in women portrays it as an expression of forbidden creative impulse in women who live an oppressed and subjugated life in a patriarchal society. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their landmark work *The Madwoman in the Attic* talk about how patriarchy methodically classifies creative impulses among women as madness. It is possible to see Ganga’s identification with Nagavalli and her mental illness that follows her fascination as Ganga’s repressed creative impulses. However, to romanticise women’s madness as their dormant creative impulses never addresses the problem of madness which appears as a symptom against the existing structures of hierarchy. Freudian psychoanalysis finds repressed sexuality as one of the major reasons for madness. Ganga’s yearning for her parents in her childhood, later for her grandmother in teenage – all these have significance in the Freudian framework of analysis. It should also be noted that only in her alter ego, Ganga finds an expression of her sexuality. Only Nagavalli makes an advance to Mahadevan, not Ganga.

In the end, Dr. Sunny says to Ganga that she is very happy now and she is free of her illness completely. But actually Ganga is informed that she has/had an illness only at this point of time. Sunny says that she had an interesting illness and the details of

which her husband will share with her in moments of their intimacy. She replies that she is thankful to everyone but she can never thank her husband enough. Dr. Sunny also says that they are the luckiest of all couples in the world as none have known the depths of each other's minds like Ganga and Nakulan. The female protagonist of the film ultimately returns to structures of heteronormativity and the practitioners of these two different streams of cure are relieved when she is no more subversively schizophrenic and threatening to the phallogocentric reason. As Phyllis Chesler states, "It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must 'adjust' to and accept the behavioural norms for her sex even though these kinds of behaviour are generally regarded as less socially desirable . . . The ethic of mental health is masculine in our culture." (qtd in Felman 1) Therefore, restoring her femininity becomes the cure in medical sciences. The cure is to enable her accept her devalued female role and to make her recognise man. Contrary to the easy and popular categorization of women's madness as political and cultural contestations and expressions of repressed sexuality and creativity, Chesler puts forward a different take on women's madness. She contends:

Depressed and terrified women are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction: quite the opposite of rebellion, madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation, "mental illness" is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration. This socially defined help-needing and help-seeking behaviour is itself part of female conditioning, ideologically inherent in the behavioural pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman as such (2)

In the case of *Manichithrathazhu* too, it is easier to view the female protagonist's madness as an expression of repressed sexuality and creativity. The possessed spirit being that of a dancer made it all the more easy to arrive at that conclusion. The cure is never about addressing the problems of the mentally disturbed character. The treatment is basically aimed at bringing the old self of the person back, without solving or changing anything around. Treatment and cure subsequently help recover the phallogocentric reason.

It is worth an attempt to see certain parallels that the story shares with one of the most acclaimed feminist texts, Charlette Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The most striking similarities between these texts include the respective female protagonists as bourgeois women, the large mansion, the search for these women characters for a room suitable for their activity etc. Both can be categorised as educated tag-along wives with lot of leisure at hand. However, Gilman's work stays as a feminist text in the end as it doesn't portray the madwoman as cured as nothing has changed for her. The treatment is shown as only aggravating the condition of the woman as its logic never appeals to her self. The true cure is change in social relations that are hierarchical and valorised using the phallogocentric logic. As Foucault contends, mental illness should rather be seen as the result of social contradictions in which humans are historically alienated (Foucault 252-253). The doctor here becomes a crucial figure, sometimes taking the role of the tantric exorcist, staging a drama, creating an illusion. Both the Brahmin exorcist and the psychiatric doctor become two sides of the logocentric reason, showing sympathies to unreason and paranormal, while staying outside it. As Foucault contends,

The doctor, as an alienating figure, remains the key to psychoanalysis. It is perhaps because it did not suppress this

ultimate structure, and because it referred all the others to it, that psychoanalysis has not been able, will not be able, to hear the voices of unreason, nor to decipher in themselves the signs of the madman. Psychoanalysis can unravel some of the forms of madness; it remains a stranger to the sovereign enterprise of unreason. It can neither liberate nor transcribe, nor most certainly explain, what is essential in this enterprise. (278)

It is again interesting that the film appeals to hypocrisy of the modern world as it acts extremely slippery when it comes to issues of reason and unreason, tradition and modernity, science and rituals. Madness and mental illness are used concurrently without making any distinctions. However, this ambivalence is not visible when it comes to the constructions of femininities and masculinities. A comic view of the madness can be seen in Unnithan (Nakulan's uncle.) The comic aspect is brought out in his relationship with his wife as he is not a commanding and dominating husband like the other powerful male characters like Thampy, the present *karanavar* of the household. Unnithan is worried that the spirit of the old *karanavar* who committed suicide is roaming around searching for a living soul to possess. This adds to the comic effect but it is true that the spirit of the powerful *karanavar* seems not as powerful and threatening as the spirit of the dancer Nagavalli. The least powerful *pujari* or priest of the local temple generates evokes laughter through his fear and forgetfulness. The less powerful men like Sridevi's brother and some others too take the side of the comic, scared and part of the unreason while all the powerful men including the brahmin priest/exorcist represent reason.

As Nikhila Harista points out rightly, the film lodges a powerful Freudian symbol of lock and key. (Chandramukhi 16) The less masculine men like Unnithan forget and lose their keys

while the powerful ones guard their key and keep the necessary stuff locked in. Lock and key again symbolizes power, possession, confinement among many others, the cure and treatment has only disabled the patient's sensibilities so that she can continue to play the role of the devalued woman. Michel Foucault in his *Madness and Civilization* (1967) critiques the modern approach to madness, medicalization of mental illness, the subsequent treatment and cure recommended by modern medicine. He talks about how madness is constructed by the modern society and the failure of the treatment and cure procedures to view the subject as an effect of discourses and power relations. Dr. Sunny, towards the end, claims that he has managed to uproot an interesting disease that Ganga had, but what he has ultimately manage to do is to restore her older self without altering anything around her.

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