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The Construction of the Feminine Beauty Ideal through Folk Songs: A Study of the Knanaya Wedding Songs of Kerala

Anupriya P.B
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In several contexts, beauty myths propagated through literature are used against women. Folklore is a medium where we commonly find the description of a woman's beauty in terms of her physical features. The study is an attempt to analyse the Knanaya Wedding songs in relation to the construction of the female beauty ideal. It initially places the Knanaya wedding songs in line with a few other traditions like the ancient Greek, Jewish as well as Kerala folk tradition and examines the commonalities. The study then advances an understanding of how a normative feminine beauty ideal is constructed and maintained through these cultural products. Attempts are also made to examine the Knanaya wedding songs through the lens of Judith Butler's Gender Performativity and Foucault's concept of 'docile' body.

Keywords: Culture, Knanaya Folklore, Tradition of Praise, Feminine Beauty Ideal

Introduction

Gender socialization is an important issue in today's society. It imposes expectations and assigns stereotypic roles for different genders. It creates gender roles and sets strict boundaries, breaking of which results in severe consequences. For the most part, this leads to violence against women. Peter Barry, in his *Beginning Theory*,

while discussing the distinction between the terms ‘feminist’, ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ describes how women being represented in literature becomes one of the most important forms of ‘socialisation’ (122). Such representations “provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the ‘feminine’ and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations” (122). These representations reinforce the cultural imposition of the physical standard of femininity which includes aspects like facial beauty, body shape, skin tones, dressing style, ornamentation etc. Simone De Beauvoir establishes this idea of femininity being a socio-cultural construct through her classical statement “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (293).

Folklore plays a dynamic role in constructing a value system among its folk. It gives folk definitions regarding socially accepted behaviours. Folklore comes in various forms including folk tales, fairy tales, folk songs, the way of life of the folk, their customs, traditions etc. and discloses the cultural values of a community. The observations of these traditions and usage of these folk songs and folk tales can be seen on various occasions including marriage ceremonies of different communities. Certain folk communities have their own wedding songs to their credit. Such songs that come as accompaniment to marriage rituals can be seen in the ancient Greek, Jewish and Indian traditions. A set of such songs collectively referred to as wedding songs can be seen in the Knanaya tradition too.

The Knanaya Christians are an endogamous community among the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala who are believed to have migrated from western Asia in 345 AD. The historical texts about the community claim that the migrant group consisted of about 400 people from 72 families belonging to 7 clans. This community which is believed to have Jewish origin observes their endogamous identity, customs, traditions and rituals even in the present day. *Chanthamcharthu*, *Mylanchi*, *Ichappadukodukkal*, *Vazhupidikkal* and *Kacha thazhukal* are some among them. The Knanaya community, though evolving with the society, holds fast to its set of beliefs and heritage. A common history to cherish, special way of dressing, special foods, wedding customs, artistic productions like Margamkali and

Purathanappattukal etc. bring them under the category of a folk community.

While studying the folk songs of different cultures, especially the wedding songs which are part of the folk songs, we come to know about the tradition of praise associated with it. The bride and the groom, most prominently the bride is praised for her exceptional beauty, thus setting a standard for the concept of beauty. Naomi Wolf describes the concept of beauty myth as thus:

The beauty myth tells a story: The quality called “beauty” objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it. This embodiment is an imperative for women and not men, which situation is necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual and evolutionary. (12)

In several contexts, such kinds of beauty myths are used against women. This paper attempts to analyse the wedding songs of the Knanaya community in the light of the discourse of beauty. The study traces the similarity of Knanaya wedding songs with the wedding songs of a few other traditions like that of the ancient Greek and the Jewish. Along with examining the tradition of praise evident in these songs, the work also problematizes the construction of the female beauty ideal. Judith Butler’s Gender Performativity theory and Foucault’s concept of ‘docile’ body are used to investigate the Knanaya folk songs while studying the construction of gender identity.

The resemblance of Jewish and Knanaya wedding customs has been traced out by scholars like Shalwa Weil and Jacob Vellian in their works. Weil in her article “Symmetry between Christians and Jews in India: the Cnanite Christians and the Cochin Jews of Kerala” quotes from Vellian while describing the marriage ceremony:

The Cnanite marriage ceremony, moreover, contains many distinctive elements including the bridal canopy, which Vellian suggests may be the equivalent of the Jewish *huppah*, and the ceremonial bathing on the eve of the marriage which may parallel the Jewish *mikvah* or ritual bath. Old Testament songs are sung on the eve and the day of the wedding (Weil 184).

Certain similarities can be traced within the ancient Greek and Knanaya wedding songs too. The ancient Greek weddings lasted for three days. There were several rites that the bride and groom had to perform as part of the marriage ceremony. In order to accompany these various rites, there were different wedding songs which were remarkably similar. The Knanaya weddings too consist of rites for two to three days. All the rites have respective songs accompanying them.

Offering prayer and blessings by the elders to the bride and the groom is a shared characteristic of the wedding songs of various cultures. They are offered blessings for a harmonious and prosperous existence with their future children. From the Hellenic tradition, one example is found in an epithalamium from a papyrus in the John Rylands Library (no. 17), which concludes: “Now may the Gods give you harmony, and may you soon have children, and children of those children, and reach a ripe old age” (qtd. in Hague 138). In Knanaya wedding, there is a similar custom known as *Vazhupidikkal* which is a rite of offering blessings to the bride and the groom. This rite is performed by the bride’s mother by placing her right palm on the groom’s head and left hand on the bride’s head. The song which accompanies this ritual is the blessing given by the mother to her daughter as she leaves her parent’s house for her new home. The lines go like these:

Vazhvenna vazhu ninakkake thannen
Neeyum nin bharthavum makkalum koode
Kalam peruthayi vaanittirikkenam
Vazhvanabhoomiphalamakethannen (Lukas 12)
(I am giving my blessings to you
Along with your husband and children
You should live long in happiness
Let the earth give its fruits for you to sustain...)

In both the cases we come across similar kind of blessings where it seems like child bearing and rearing is the ultimate purpose of a marriage. This is considered as the primary requirement for a ‘happily ever after’ kind of future life like in fairy tales. While on the one hand this is a literary representation of a cultural essence, on the

other hand it offers a space for criticism with respect to contemporary feminist theories. While debating on the contemporary representation of the female body, Venera Dimulescu quotes Angela King saying that “Until the second part of the 19th century, the cultural representations of the female corporeality have been reduced to women’s role within the domestic contract and the social institution of the family, role that was filled with the duties of reproduction and motherhood” (506). These kinds of representations play a pivotal role in shaping a woman’s identity. It augments the self-perception of a woman with regard to these cultural notions.

The most important feature of wedding songs of all cultures is the tradition of praise associated with it. The bride and groom are often compared to the best things ever in existence. In the Greek tradition we can see the bride and groom being compared to Gods or heroes. They also have the tendency to describe the bride and groom as part of the natural landscape. For instance, we can see in Greek wedding songs the bride being compared to sweet apple which is red and is on a high bough. “Like the sweet-apple which reddens on a high bough, high on the very highest, and the apple-pickers have overlooked it. No, they haven’t really overlooked it; they could not reach it.” (qtd. in Hague 135).

The tendency to think of leaves and flowers in relation to feminine nature can be seen in many folk oral traditions. The significance of red colour and the attribution of youth and beauty to this colour are also visible in Malayalam folk tradition. Praising women’s beauty by connecting it with nature is a characteristic of Malayalam folklore too. Soman Kadaloor, a famous Malayalam folklorist explains this aspect in his work *Folklorinte Saundharya Sasthram*. He examines how in Malayalam folk songs, riddles and proverbs women’s beauty is described in terms of nature.

Many of the riddles that point to natural objects are indicative of women. *Kattiloramma ponnanninju nilkunnu* (A mother stands in the forest wearing gold). The answer to this riddle is Golden shower tree (kanikkonna). This indicates that the rich blossom of the golden shower tree resembles a woman adorned with all kinds

of ornaments. Similar attribution of praise to women can be seen in *Vadakkan pattukal*. The lines “Kunnath konnayum poothapole” is an example (55)

An examination of these folk songs would unfold the reason for the obsession with an ideal body and reveal the cause behind the excessive use of exercises and diets for maintaining body weight, so as to gratify the norms set by cultural standards. Though women are being glorified here, this can be regarded as a form of disciplining the body as mentioned by Foucault. The concept of ‘docile body’ where the body becomes subject to discipline and control is reminded here (138).

Similar characteristics are visible in the Knanaya wedding songs too. These songs were believed to be sung in the olden days by the women of the family, hence were called ‘penpattukal’ (songs of women). An analysis of these songs reveals how a feminine ideal of beauty is constructed more intensely than a male beauty ideal through these songs.

The historical background of Indian society indicates that girls were seen as a burden by most parents. It is the dowry system associated with marriage that generates this kind of attitude within the psyche of Indian parents.

...Fair skin and beauty are inseparable as defining elements of feminine gender descriptions. This association is made almost at the birth of a female child, and in India, where the dowry has reached frightful proportions as a compulsory requirement in most arranged marriages, it is not uncommon for relatives to make remarks about the female child’s complexion along with subtle reminders to the newborn’s parents of the dowry they must put for her future marriage: the darker the complexion the higher the dowry. (Philips 1).

This would have been a reason why brides were praised much about their skin complexion in the folk wedding songs of South Asia.

Marthoman song is the prayer song of Knanites. This is sung at the beginning of all occasions including the wedding. The bride’s mother is the speaker in this song where she describes her

daughter physically. We see that the daughter is compared to a Champak flower. “*Chempaka poovin niram chollam pennin*” (Lukas 2) (She has the colour of a Champak flower). Champak flowers are white in colour with a golden yellow shade inside it. The golden yellow colour reminds us of the golden shower flower to which women are compared in the above mentioned Malayalam riddles and folk songs. White colour of the flower symbolizes the fair skin complexion that the bride possesses. Here we can see how fairness becomes a defining feature of female beauty. The problematic aspect here is that while giving more emphasis to exterior or external beauty on the one hand, the worth of internal beauty of an individual is ignored on the other. In such a situation, the plight of one who fails to meet the external standards of beauty becomes a question for thought.

“The valuing of a marriageable woman according to her beauty dates back for centuries, and was also tied to her social class, economic fortune, virginity and virtue, and accomplishments” (Hallum 1). Here in this song the woman is depicted so exemplarily beautiful that it is difficult to find a correct match as mate for her.

Pennine kandavarellarum chollunnu

Ulakil ivalkothorilla (Lukas 2)

(All those who have seen her says

There is no one like her in the world).

This actually points towards the “unrealistically high standards of beauty that female protagonists must achieve to be judged worthy of a mate” (Jorgensen 37). Here the protagonist being the bride gets herself disciplined, controlled and thus strives for reaching these beauty standards.

Another aspect visible in this song is the description of the bride’s physical features and glorification of her virginity. The traditional Indian minds associate virginity with purity. Chastity of women is of primary concern when it comes to marriage. Virginity is “something that has been institutionalised in the patriarchal male psyche and social living as an accepted norm.... The woman’s body which is not virgin is always considered polluted and stigmatized by the patriarchy” (Mishra 265). The literary productions undoubtedly play a crucial role

in proliferating this notion among people. “In particular, fairytales and folklore propagate ideals about the ways in which female characters should best behave, and the ways in which others interact with them” (McKay 15). It asks women to be obedient, beautiful and be “virgins, get married and become mothers” (16). The following lines from the Purathanappattukal serve as an example.

Tholum thudayum mughavum mani marum
Yogathale parishundu (Lukas 1)
(Shoulder, thigh, face and breast
Are pure by luck).

The speaker in this song is proud that she was successful in raising her daughter ‘pure’ and she is grateful for the beauty and virginity that her daughter possesses. The speaker here serves as an example of performing the feminine gender role of rearing the child and the daughter (bride) performs the ‘duty’ of being a virgin before marriage which are the expected behaviours in a conventional society. This throws light on the “gender- based dichotomy in parenting roles and obligations” (Kakar 23) fostered in the patriarchal society. Furthermore, she advocates for her daughter to carry on this ‘performance’ in her life too. Thus, the performance of gender to meet social expectations continues. Butler’s concept of performativity is “not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (Butler 15). It is against the naturalization of gender identities and gender roles. She says that the sort of “identities imposed on genders must be reconsidered through the concept of deconstruction and subversion of gender roles” (Cinar 59).

The significance of red colour can be seen in the wedding song *Ponnanintheedum thandukareri* which is sung while the bride and the groom are on the wedding dais. This song compares the bride’s complexion to that of ripened ivy gourd (scarlet gourd). Her lips are compared to that of a parrot’s beak.

Kovalpazhukka niram chollumival meni
Va kandal nalla thatha chundu niram thonnum (Lukas 14)

(Her body resembles the colour of ripe ivy gourd
Her lips are like the beaks of parrot)

In another song, woman's beauty is compared to that of a lotus; *Thamara bangi kalarnnoru makalum...* (39) (The daughter, beautiful as a Lotus...). The desirability for fair and rosy complexion is perceptible here. Sudhir Kakar, in his work *Indians: Portrait of a People* discusses the various aspects of Indian culture. He says that across the nation, among Indians, there is a preference for fair skin and a scorn for dark skin. Record profits are earned by producers of skin whitening creams.

Television commercials for 'Fair and Lovely' cream for women and, more recently 'Fair and Handsome' for men; the natural equation of light skin with nobility, beauty and high birth in proverbs, tales and legends; matrimonials in newspapers and on Internet websites specifying 'fair' brides- all these are accepted as being in the natural order of things. (36)

When this becomes the natural course of things, fair skin becomes desirable and dark skin undesirable, making it a marker of ideal femininity.

Along with this we can see that "adorning and transforming the body with clothes, cosmetics and jewellery is associated with femininity" (King 5). In the article, "The Concept of Beauty in Different Cultures", the author says that apart from "the immaculate non-pigmented white skin" (Monasterio 15), skin ornamentation and body ornamentation are part of the concept of beauty in all cultures. This can be analysed with respect to Butler's concept of gender performance. The Knanaya wedding songs too describe the bride as beautiful with her diamonds and jewellery.

Manavatti thannude thozhiyumayit
Ponnum mudiyum mudikkeezhabharanavum
Mattukaimothiram okkeyaninthapol
Perpetta manka kazhutheloroatham
Panippon kondokkeyalankaramayitt (Lukas 19).

These lines depict how the ears, hands, neck, hair and forehead of the bride are decorated with gold and jewels which add

to the ideal beauty concept. This can be connected with the concept of “sexual stereotyping in dress” (King 6). This is the act of maintaining “a visible distinction between the sexes by exaggerating existing physical differences or constructing artificial ones” (6). It is commonly seen that men and women present their bodies outwardly in a different manner. The dressing style they choose, the arrangement of hair, the accessories they wear, etc. cause this difference in appearance. Such kinds of gender codes are normalized to satiate the cultural expectations of the society. These gender specific dressings and ornamentations can be regarded as an example of ‘performing gender’.

Apart from the concept of complexion and ornamentation, the description of the physicality of the bride is also a feature of these songs.

Women’s body is an example of social body and is constructed historically by patriarchy. Genealogy of women’s body has deep rooted structural linkages. Patriarchy constructs women’s body in its socio-cultural settings to fulfill the agenda of control over it. Control over women’s body is required by patriarchy to strengthen its patriarchal hold and hegemonic power (Mishra 264)

A close analysis of the *Kulippattu* (Bathing song) of *Purathanappattukal* showcases how description of female physicality “constructs woman’s body in its socio-cultural settings to fulfill the agenda of control over it” (264).

Poovittu koonthalam poovum nananjithe
Pushpangal choodum thalayum nananjeethe
Sanghu kadanja kazhuthum nananjeethe
Chandhanam thekkunna marvum nananjeethe
Bhoomiyodotha puravum nananjeethe
Aalilaykotha vayarum nananjeethe
Aadayuddukumarayum nananjeethe
Kondadum kalpuravadivum nananjeethe (Lukas 15).

Here the head and hair of the bride is being described as decorated with flowers. The neck is compared to a conch shell which was considered as a sign of great fortune in the Puranas. The torso is depicted as beautified by sandalwood. The dorsum is compared to

earth. The belly is compared to a pipal leaf. The hip and feet of the bride are also depicted in the song. Here we see how the body becomes a site of construction. Dr. Aravind Kumar Mishra states that “the body as a social reality can be categorized under canonised bodies, grotesque bodies (Mikhail Bakhtin), filthy bodies, servile and docile (Foucault) bodies” (266). The cultural construction of women’s bodies in the folk songs that we analyse can be categorized under canonised bodies too which refers to universally accepted bodies.

Canonized body is such a body which attracts others and which is desirable. This desirability of a particular type of body is a social construct. As it is a desirable body and standard norm, women are expected to have canonised body. This construction creates cultural desire to have it and for those who do not have canonised bodies, it becomes a source of humiliation. (Mishra 266)

Such kinds of humiliations processed out of the ideal notions of gender problematize the very concept of beauty. The feminine beauty ideal thus constructed through these cultural artefacts frames the mindset of people. It plays a vital role in the formation of self-concept or self-identity of a woman. She is tempted to perceive herself as belonging to a ‘category’ which is expected to be fair, meek and angelic rather than strong, clever and brave. Such kind of unrealistic representation of women’s bodies, especially in advertisements, which very much influence society’s perception, makes women an object of desire. This in a way leads to commercialization of the institution of marriage.

Conclusion

Cultural products play a significant role in reinforcing social constructs. The heteronormative concept of gender is such a social construct. It creates ideals of femininity as well as masculinity and expects men and women to fit into these ideals. “A women’s self-image vis-à-vis beauty is informed by the definitions, values, norms and standards set by the society. These standards are wildly pervasive, internalized, unquestioned and taken for granted by its members” (Abid

412).

The paper initially traces certain similarities between the Greek, Jewish and Knanaya traditions. Then it shows that feminine beauty becomes a central concept in the Knanaya wedding songs. It is evident from the analysis that these songs show a tendency to depict women in terms of their complexion, ornamentation and physicality. Through this kind of depiction of the bride, an ideal feminine beauty concept is constructed where the women are beautiful only when they are fair skinned, their face is extremely beautiful that it is rosy, they are decorated with jewels and their body meets the standard of the “perfect” body shape. Purity and virginity are added to this. A theoretical reading in the light of Butler’s ‘gender performativity’ and Foucault’s ‘docile’ body shows how women are being conditioned or disciplined to meet the standards of femininity constructed by the society. The feminine gender stereotypes impact the self-esteem of women when they are being defined not by their individual self alone but by the perception of ‘others’. The increase in the number of YouTube channels offering diet plans and weight reducing exercises are evidence for the obsession for an ideal body. Deconstruction and subversion of this concept of gender roles are required for the establishment of independent identity of human beings.

The paper offers further scopes for research. The construction of masculine beauty ideal through Knanaya wedding songs is yet to be analyzed. A qualitative study including focus group interviews can be made among the female Knanites to understand the impact of these beauty ideals on the members of the community. A close analysis of the description of the physicality of the bride makes one realize that the objects to which comparisons are made are things of medicinal or Ayurvedic value. Further explorations can be made in all these aspects.

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