



PARADIGM OF PERSEVERANCE: TRAUMA THEORY AND FEMINISM IN K.R. MEERA'S 'ARACHAAR' IN COMPARISON WITH THE MALAYALAM MOVIE 'KANNEZHUTHI POTTUM THOTTU'

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ABSTRACT:

Trauma studies which is linked to Feminism based on the physical and sexual abuse, sex slavery and honour killing dwells into how the trauma impacts Literature and society by taking into account the cultural, psychological and rhetorical significance. This paper entitled **Paradigm of Perseverance: Trauma Theory and Feminism in K.R.Meera's 'Arachaar' in Comparison with the Malayalam Movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu'** illustrates how the binary oppositions and the patriarchal clutches are broken by the protagonists Chetna and Bhadra to gratify their revenge and to prove themselves by emerging as a phoenix out of the traumatic experiences that they had to endure. There is prominent resemblance in the portrayal of these protagonists as well as the way they persevere and carry out their vengeance.

This paper entitled **Paradigm of Perseverance: Trauma Theory and Feminism in K.R.Meera's 'Arachaar' in Comparison with the Malayalam Movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu'** illustrates how the protagonists Chetna and Bhadra breaks the binary oppositions and patriarchal clutches to seek revenge and prove themselves soaring out of the trauma they underwent. There is significant resemblance in the portrayal of both the protagonists and though their phase of trauma is diverse, they both carry out their revenge in a similar manner.

The winner of Sahitya Academi Award, K.R. Meera in 'Arachaar' tells the story of a family of executioners with a long heredity dating back to the beginning of the 4th century B.C. Set in Bengal, the novel is based on the life of India's first hangwoman, Chetna Grddha Mullick who came into limelight with the execution of Dhananjay Chatterjee, convicted for rape and murder.

The 199 movie, 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu', directed by T.K.rajeev Kumar presents the life of the protagonist Bhadra, a woman who seeks revenge for the death of her parents caused by the lust of the landlord,

Natesan. The trauma theory in the movie depicts the childhood scar in her mind and brain which enkindles her after fifteen years to seek revenge. The lustful nature of Natesan and his son Uthaman towards the workers lightens up her quest for revenge.

The binary opposition found in both the works is quite thought provoking. In 'Arachaar' there is a constant opinion that being a hangman is no a woman's cup of tea. When Chetna is to be assigned as a hangwoman even the minister opined that it is not a job that a woman could do and according to him it requires a lot of strength of mind and body. Everyone who came to know especially the womenfolk in Chetna's family remark that the job of a hangman is not like any other job. Even her father says that she just needs to accompany him and be his assistant. Her mother asks her whether she is not afraid that she has to go to the jail and hang the culprits and she thinks Chetna is not capable enough. Even the media questions her as to whether her hands would not shiver, being a woman!

When her father was given a thousand rupees by Sanjiv Mishra, the journalist for her interview, Chetna was given just one rupee. This hints to the patriarchal mentality of offering women lesser amount than men. But here the irony is that it is Chetna who is appointed as hangwoman and it is her interview that is taken and she is just given a one rupee note! Chetna reverts back to such binary oppositions and states that there is nothing that is impossible for women. After she hanged the culprit, the officials asked if she was alright. The lever which symbolized power had driven a sort of strength in her whereas the officials were tensed if anything would go wrong. When she was interviewed after hanging Jateendra Nath Banerjee, she was told by Sanjiv Mishra that it was for the first time in Independent India that a woman by herself pressed the lever which was only held by men. He also added that it is a great achievement for the women all over the world. Chetna reverted back that women never achieve anything alone and that every women are attached to one another like a chain. What one left undone, the other completes it. Through the words of Chetna, she reverts back the binary opposition that is prevalent in her society.

In the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' women are objectified whereas Natesan the landlord is cool about his sexual inclination towards women. Even his wife has no voice against his pervert behavior and she silently bears it all. When men who behave with lust towards women are hailed for their so called heroic act, women who shares bed with them are treated as mere sluts whom they can beat upon, who is insulted for the same. The way how Uthaman, the landlord's son treats Rosakutty who was made his keep after murdering her husband, illustrates this point. Women who stare with firm eyes in a bold manner is considered arrogant. The expression in Uthaman's face when he first sees Bhadra's stare explains this. Women are supposed to be coy and seducing, who should flirt with the upper class. When women neglect them instead, it hurts their ego. But Bhadra thrashed this binary opposition by not being an easy thigh woman.

Objectification can be found in K.R.Meera's 'Arachaar' in the way how Sanjiv Mishra approaches Chetna with a lustful approach. Throughout the novel he repeatedly says that he wants to feel and possess her at least once. When he gave her father the thousand rupee note and gave her the one rupee note he touched her fingers, not out of compassion, but out of mere lust. She felt as though a worm was creeping into her very self at her left breast which he touched with scorn. Throughout the novel Sanjiv Mishra took advantage of her silence and helplessness. Once she completes the execution she gets the confidence and she vigorously started stating her views.

In the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' there are many instances which points out this sort of objectification done on women. When the announcement is done about the womenfolk reaching the place for cultivation works, every man present in the harbor looks at them with lust, which included mostly the old men. The way how they look for young girls and how desperately comments that most of them are "old pieces"

shows his objectification. The comments they make on the body of these women and how these women enjoy such sexual comments shows the objectification. When the women are working in the farm they were asked to remove the towel that covers their breast for the young landlord to enjoy their cleavages. When Bhadra puts on the towel it hurts the ego of the young landlord and he tries to remove it himself. She held his hand and stared at him, upon which he left. Uthaman, the young landlord is fond of shooting the Murrel fish and they refer to Bhadra as a Murrel fish which would surely be caught one day by Uthaman. She is referred to as “a tasty Murrel fish”.

Indian society is still patriarchal and has overt rules which prohibit women from certain activities. Mostly the patriarchy is seen in Indian society as how men are owners of women and their body. Throughout the novel Sanjiv Mishra tries to dominate her for the money that he gave her father for her interview. As the novel comes to an end, he treats her as though he owned her. When finally the government decided that she would be the hangman, her father demands more money and she opposed. As the day neared for the execution, Sanjiv Mishra demanded that she should not be allowed to go anywhere or meet anyone as he wants all her thoughts and emotions to be expressed in his interview itself. She opposed it and told her father that it was against the contract they had signed upon which her father slapped her and shouted at her not to utter a word.

In the movie ‘Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu’ the society is presented as a patriarchal society. Every woman in the boat rises up seeing Uthaman the young landlord, except Bhadra. They call him “Kochumuthalali”, which refers to him as a zamindar. When Bhadra stares at him and gives him a firm look it hurts his ego. The landlord Natesan and his walking stick symbolize patriarchy. The way in which Natesan’s wife serves him with much fear and humility is to be noted. She does not have a name even and is referred to just as “Natesan’s wife”. The different dress codes also show class distinction. The women who work wear lungi, blouse and a towel to cover up their breast which should be removed whenever the landlords demand. The members of patriarchy wear white cotton attire which represents them as the upper class. The women workers are asked to go to the back side of the house and are not expected to come to the frontage until they are asked by the landlords. Natesan is seen beating the buttocks of the female workers. The very fact that such women are happy about such pervert gestures shows how women surrender their bodies to such landlords. The eyes of the people are blinded by the superstitious stories which are used to cover up the murder of Bhadra’s father. At the end of the movie when Bhadra reveals that she is the daughter of Gauri who suicided because of Natesan, he laughed at it saying that then he could not have her mother and now God has brought her daughter before him to satisfy his lust. Bhadra’s revenge at the end is also symbolic of the need of ending such patriarchy. No woman should be treated as an object of pleasure.

This puts light to the elements of feminism in both the works. Feminism is not only the equality of men and women, it also acclaims the right that women have on their own body. In the novel ‘Arachaar’, when the news spread that Chetna would be the hangman, media and feminist groups often asked her many questions on her ability. They also told her that she should definitely accept the job as she would set an example for the women all over the world. Chetna only replied that it is her free will and that she does not want to be forced upon. The feminist groups told her that they intend only to make sure that women get equal opportunity as men. They told her that it is a question of self-respect of women all over the world as she got a chance to hang a rapist and that it is a great opportunity to declare to the world that there is no job which cannot be done by women. In chapter 11 when Sanjiv Mishra asks her in an interview whether she thinks she is able to do such a job which even men feels frightened to do, she replies that there is nothing that women are not able to do. In chapter 52, during the interview after the successful execution of the rapist, Sanjiv Mishra tells her that for the first time in Independent India a woman has pressed a lever which had been touched by men till the date. He also added that it is a great achievement for the women all over the world. Her reply was that women never attain success

all alone. They often tend to complete what other women had started. At the end when Chetna chose Sanjiv Mishra over Karthik Banerjee, the brother of the rapist to demonstrate the execution, it not only becomes a situational irony, but it also speaks loud the feminist action of a woman who was so much emotionally tormented.

In the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' Bhadra faces all the instances of objectification with a stare and firm looks. When Uthaman tries to remove her towel as she was working, she dares to hold his hand and look firmly upon him, straight into his eyes which stopped him. The attitude that she had while taking the final revenge proves that every women like Bhadra has another facet, the one that of Goddess Bhadra Kali. The binary opposition is demolished when she hits the bund which was thought to be possible only by men. The expressions she had while breaking the bund and carrying out the revenge shows the inner courage in every woman that needs to be woken up.

Trauma theory emerged in the 1960s inaugurated by Sigmund Freud and emerged from several areas of social concern which includes the acknowledgement of repetition of violence against women. Feminism is linked to Trauma studies based on physical or sexual abuse, sexual slavery, genital mutilation, practices of Sati and honour killing. Trauma studies dwells into how trauma impacts Literature and society by taking into account the cultural, psychological and rhetorical significance.

The trauma theory in the novel depicts how the sexual assault of Sanjiv Mishra, a journalist engenders trauma in her very self and how she reacts to it. The trauma theory in the film depicts how the childhood traumas of Bhadra empower her to seek the revenge after fifteen years.

According to the neuro-subjective awareness patriarchy is an arbitrary assumption of power. Cognitive neuro science explains how the brain enables the mind. In the novel 'Arachaar' we see this aspect in how Chetna focuses her mind on her revenge against Sanjiv Mishra even when she doubts whether it is love that he expressing towards her. In the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' when Moosakutty expresses his love, when he brings his mother to meet her and even when his mother puts the bangle on her hand according to the ritual she realizes th wonderful life that is ahead of her. Many a times she is taken up by the expressions of Moosakutty's love but she makes up her mind and rows the boat and moves away. The expressions on her face at that instance shows how her brain enables her mind to stay focused on her aim to take revenge on Natesan and Uthaman.

Micheal Rothberg's concept of Traumatic realism demonstrates the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities. This is clearly presented in the movie' Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' as the traumatic childhood memories of the murder of Bhadra's dear ones shown repeatedly as Bhadra's nightmare which instigates the spirit of revenge in her. Rothberg also demonstrates the representation of psychological trauma in language which is evident in the novel 'Arachaar', through the stream of consciousness technique used in the narration to express the psychological trauma of Chetna. The trauma studies is analyzed in the psychological significance it has in the minds of women like Chetna and Bhadra who is obliged to live in the confines of the patriarchal society. The analysis of the rhetorical significance is seen in how Chetna and Bhadra are tried to be silenced using abusive words. The analysis of the cultural significance is seen in how the communities of Chetna and Bhadra are often subjected to casteism and sexual assaults and also portrays how they are constantly insulted.

According to Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), trauma is imagined as both an external agent that shocks the unprepared system and an internal action of defense against overstimulation. In the case of Chetna, the external agent of trauma is the sexual oppression done by Sanjiv Mishra and the internal action is the

grudge that builds in her mind each time she sees him or hears about him. In the case of Bhadra, the external agent of trauma is her witnessing the death of her parents and the internal action is her willpower to take a revenge which gets triggered when she sees her mother's sickle which her mother gave her before burning herself to death.

In Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), Traumatic neurosis is marked by the "compulsion to repeat" the memory of the painful event with the hopes of mastering such unpleasant feelings caused by such memories (Freud 1920:19). In the novel 'Arachaar', Chetna repeatedly memorizes the moments of verbal and sexual assaults she experienced from Sanjiv Mishra. Each time she makes a knot on her shawl is Chetna's way of mastering such unpleasant feelings. Whereas, in the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' Bhadra repeatedly recollects the memories of her childhood trauma caused by witnessing the death of her dear parents. Each time she sees her mother's sickle she gets a hope of mastering her unpleasant feelings by determining to kill the antagonists.

According to Caruth's 'Unclaimed Experience Trauma, Narrative History' (1996) trauma produces double paradox in consciousness and language- the contradictory wish to know the meaning of the past but the inability to comprehend it, as well as the contradictory crises in the traumatic narrative between the threat of death and survival (Caruth 1996:7). The double paradox serves to show that we have come to a contradiction. In the case of Chetna in the novel 'Arachaar', she is not able to understand why people wonders she cannot do the execution, and she undergoes a mental crisis out of the pressure she has in doing the execution successfully. In the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' she is not able to comprehend people justifying her father's death as a superstitious tales. Her pressure to venture into the revenge which is a do or die situation for her is well expressed in her expression of emotions.

Caruth also explains the notion of trauma's unspeakability which indicates a casual view of trauma and dissociation, as well as a view of memory as a storehouse of experience wherein traumatic memory is stored differently and unavailable for normal narrative recall since it remains dissociated from consciousness (Caruth 1996:160,163). Dissociation is a mental process of disconnecting from one's thoughts, feelings, memories or sense of identity. In the novel 'Arachaar' Chetna avoids her thoughts on her doubts about her feelings for Sanjiv Mishra. She keeps it aside and decides to revert his sexual oppression by her decision to prove herself and her ability. Bhadra in the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' she dissociates her thoughts from the memories of the murder of her parents and seduces the antagonists to fulfill her revenge.

Caruth also explains that trauma is "a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (Caruth 1996:61) Each time Sanjiv Mishra sexually assaults her verbally, the trauma that she undergoes as a bodily threat but builds up her mind to mould herself into a bold persona. Each and every time Natesan and Uthaman speaks to her in a double meaning and breaks into her proximity it instead of breaking her, adds up to the willpower she has to avenge the antagonists.

In the novel 'Arachaar' many a times Sanjiv Mishra breaks into her proximity. He even told her that he wants to devour her body. Chetna broods over how Sanjiv Mishra hurt her verbally, without even touching her body. She is confused whether it is his word that he wants to devour her body or the manner in which he said it. The novel also points out that everyone wishes for someone's death to symbolize their power. In the beginning she could not even comprehend that it was lust that Sanjiv Mishra had for her. When she was forced to do interviews she longed for a rope to hang him.

In the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' the memories of the murder of all her dear ones tormented her psychologically. Her father was buried alive and to hide the murder was hailed as a legend who saved the village by sacrificing his life to build the bond. When Bhadra was asked to remove the towel that covered her breasts, her self-respect was hurt. The fellow men of Uthaman instigate him to do so saying she should also know that the women who work in his fields should expose their cleavages. He even tries to remove it by himself which Bhadra stops by holding his hand. Rosakutty who is a keep of Uthaman was actually Bhadra's family friend's wife who was killed by Uthaman. Bhadra even tries to kill her for cheating her husband but when she learns about the bitter past she cries bitterly. When she found Rosakutty, who pledged to kill Uthaman, in the field as dead it torments her but only made her more alert to be very sure of her means of vengeance.

Many number of times Chetna's expertise in making the knot in a perfect manner is praised. She silently bears upon all the torments only to come back with full vigour, once she successfully completed the execution. The perseverance of Bhadra is equally a silent one as she evades away the expressions of anger and purposefully seduces Uthaman and Natesan. In the beginning if she was giving firm and bold looks, later as a means of revenge she gives lust filled looks which drives the antagonists crazy to win her body.

Revenge is the culmination of the traumatic experiences. The subjects master the unpleasant feelings and face the do or die situation to take the revenge. Every mental torture in fact breaks in, moulding them with a new spirit of vengeance. Chetna in the novel 'Arachaar' soliloquizes that Sanjiv Mishra was supposed to be dead by her hands and that was the reason why she felt attracted to him. She defines love as a knot that was made on the throat of a person who was to be hanged. Either it tightens and kills the person or the rope breaks and saves the person. But even the one who breaks the rope could never remove the knot from their throats. The night she was terribly traumatized by Sanjiv Mishra's deeds she visualized hanging him in seven hundred and twenty seven ways.

Towards the end of the novel Sanjiv Mishra somehow wanted to prolong the interview. To sensationalize the interview, he asked Chetna to recreate and demonstrate how the execution was done. The worst thing was that the person whom Sanjiv Mishra chose was the brother of the executed. This took her patience to the brim and she tightens the knot on Sanjiv Mishra saying the rope matches him better. As she walked away leaving Sanjiv Mishra gasping for breath, she fulfills her revenge and redefined femininity.

In the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' apart from the psychological trauma, Bhadra had by the repeated nightmares about the death of her parents in her childhood, the lustful glance of Uthaman was her first traumatic experience which she faces by staring back at him with stern looks. When he tried to remove her towel from her chest she held his hand with a firm look upon which he took his hand back. Every time she made a step towards getting near the antagonists, she takes her mother's sickle and adores it. She first adores it when she reaches Natesan's home for the first time. She does it again when she was asked to continue working there. To meet her revenge she tries to grab everyone's attention by improving the house and by doing all works perfectly. She is mostly clad in red attires and red bangles which symbolizes her desire to kill the antagonists. She even gets into Natesan's room with the sickle and strikes the bed only in vain to realize that he was not there. She seduces Natesan with her song, looks, lustful approach and massages. She even writes on his back which is smeared with the medicine oil. She seduces Uthaman with expressions of love which actually changes his persona.

At the end she is clad in red saree with a red big bindi where she waits for Natesan and Uthaman, both of whom she invited to the same place near the bund where her father was killed and buried. Natesan who comes first is sarcastically told that she was the daughter of Gauri who suicided because of him. When he captures her

she sees Uthaman and screams to get his attention. Uthaman who scorns his father gets into a brawl with his father and falls into the pit. In the heavy downpour she breaks the bund calling out her parents' names and manages to let out all the water. Out of the pressure of the overpowering water the electric post falls into the water electrocuting both Uthaman and Natesan. As the movie comes to an end the palm of Uthaman is seen raised just like how Bhadra's father's palm was raised as he breathed last.

Both the novel 'Arachaar' and the movie 'Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu' are drastically intertwined in the way how the tormenting memories of the past actually breaks into giving a revelation of the power of the mind, by dissociating the thoughts from the consciousness and thereby gaining a willpower and determination to execute the vengeance.

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