



AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF SELECTED BHAGAVATHI THEYYAMS IN NORTH MALABAR

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The paper covers the ecofeminist study of selected Bagavathi Theyyams in North Malabar. The application of the theory called ecofeminism itself conveys that the study involves nature and woman. Defining this concept from the context of the traditional ritual in North Malabar area, it is clear that nature here refers to the old concept of kavu and its premises. Woman referring to Bagavathi theyyams can be located in these kavu. Beginning from the tradition of kavu concept it directly refers to the act of 'tree worship' which is going to be the beginning of this study. Nature worship has its root in what is called 'vriksharadhana' from which we can trace the evolution of kavu and kshethram. Then the focus moves on to the concept of 'mother nature' associating women to nature by its ability to produce and sustain. The study further analyses the factual background of this concept and its credibility among people proven by the experience of the devotees. Then upon the concept of idol worship called 'pratheekaradhana' to 'theyyakkolam' much importance is given to the question how it became an accepted custom of worshipping 'theyyakkolam' performed by human beings. For that the analysis of the story behind the formation of 'deivakkaru' will help to feel the strength of the performer while performing.

Key words: Ecofeminism, Idol worship, Vriksharadhana, deivakkaru

INTRODUCTION

Cultural ecofeminism is a response to the perception of women associated to nature which is devalued in western culture. Cultural ecofeminists embrace goddess oriented ecofeminism, beginning from nature based religions, paganism and worship of goddess worship. “Cultural feminists have chosen to reclaim the long association of woman with earth, with nature, with the intuitive and spiritual, and to redefine that association as vital to sanity and survival, celebrating it through ritual and action” (Gaard 125). The proponents of this theory are looking forward to a state when women and nature are liberated through political action. “Cultural ecofeminism celebrates the relationship between women and nature through the revival of ancient rituals centered on goddess worship, the moon, animals and the female reproductive system. A vision in which nature is held in esteem as mother and goddess is a source of inspiration and empowerment for many ecofeminists. Spirituality is seen as a source of both personal and social change” (Merchant 191).

Many cultural feminists celebrate an era in prehistory when nature was symbolized by pregnant female figures, trees, butterflies and snakes in which women were held in high esteem as bringers forth of life. An emerging patriarchal culture however dethroned the mother goddesses and replaced them with male gods to whom the female deities became subservient. The scientific revolution of the seventeenth century degraded nature by replacing Renaissance organism and repaired from the outside. The ontology and epistemology of mechanism are viewed by cultural feminists as deeply masculinist and exploitative of a nature historically depicted in the female gender. The earth is dominated by male-developed and male-controlled technology, science and industry. (191)

Cultural ecofeminists equate women and nature as an effective manner to prove the power of women. Thus they celebrate the relation between nature and women through the revival of rituals including the worship of goddess by considering nature as mother and goddess.

Goddess worship and rituals centered around the lunar and female menstrual cycles, concerts, art exhibitions etc are all examples of the re-visioning of nature and women as powerful forces. The perceived connection between women and biological reproduction turned upside down becomes the source of women's empowerment and ecological activism. Women's biology and nature are celebrated as sources of female power. This form of ecofeminism has largely focused on the sphere of consciousness in relation to nature- spirituality, goddess worship, witchcraft and the celebration of women's bodies. (192)

According to Sherry B Ortner, "the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contribution vary enormously from culture to culture and over different periods in the history of particular cultural traditions" (25). The root cause of nature worship is believed to be the act of tree worshipping (*vrikshaaraadhana*) which later turned to idol worshipping. Our ancestors worshipped tree as the reflection of gods or goddesses which is part of forest (in Malayalam *kaadu* became *kavu*). Men started their life from trees where they spent days and nights constructing a shelter like structure. Trees had a significant role during the early days of human life primarily as the provider of food. Thus the practice of worshipping tree is continued in the premises of temple in relation to the deities.

BHAGAVATHI THEYYAM: AN ECOFEMINIST READING

Indian culture has assumed the presence of goddess in trees which is continued as part of Kerala's cultural practices. The presence of goddess, imagined to have significant role in *theyyam* worship is treated in two different ways. They are 'permanent presence' (ശേഷിപ്പെടൽ) and 'temporary presence' (ഒളിവളരൽ). The places of permanent presence are maintained as centers of worship like *kavu*, *kottam* etc. At the same time temporary presence is assumed mostly on trees and other natural objects (Santhosh 31).

The shift to idol worship made drastic changes in the practice of adoration providing specific form to the deities. In the traditional notion of *kavu* the practice of worshipping tree by worshipping symbols continued. Usually symbols like sword, stone, lamp are worshipped in *kavu* which stand for the deity represented through

theyyakkolams. *Theyyam* is only a kind of dance for an ordinary spectator, but the spectacle is a direct interaction with God for the worshippers. In *The Cult of Theyyam: Hero Worship in Kerala* the author gives the meaning of the word *attam* as dance which refers to the movement in performance. *Theyyam* is a corrupted version of *deivam* (Malayalam word for God). Thus *theyyattam* means 'the god's dance' (15). *Theyyam* is known by different labels across Kerala such as *kaliyattam*, *thira*, *theyyamkett*, *kolamkettal* etc with slight difference in rites and rituals. These terms refer to the action of the performer called *kanaladi*, appropriating the presence of God in him through *thottam* songs and the movement. The representation of the deity is called *kolam*, meaning figure or shape. *Theyyattam* is performed by men of different castes like *vannan*, *malayan*, *panikkar*, *velan*, *mavilan* etc.

Theyyakkolam is considered basically as a ritual celebrated for the prosperity of the *tharavadu* where these deities perform as *kula deivam*. *Theyyams* are performed on specific occasions for specific purposes. Similar to Hindu tradition of different gods for different purposes, *theyyakkolams* also have different phases in performance. People approach these gods or goddesses to fulfill their wishes. There are *theyyams* like *Vasoorimala*, *Kandakarnan*, *Puthiya Bhagavathi*, performed to prevent small pox; *Muchilot Bhagavathi* and *Kannangat Bhagavathi* visit patients as they are believed to have power to initiate speedy recovery from health problems. *Makkam Bhagavathi*, *Naga Bhagavathi*, *Nagakkanni* are performed for the sake of progeny. *Muthappan*, *Kathivannoor Veeran*, *Pottan Theyyam* are performed for the fulfillment of particular wishes. The ritual of *theyyattam* maintains the pride of *tharavadu* where female goddesses are worshipped as *kula devatha*.

Theyyattams have different stages of performance beginning with *thottam* songs continued by *vellattam* and finally the play of *theyyakkolam*. Usually male gods have *vellattam* while female goddesses have only *thottam* (song sung by the performer narrating the story). *Thottam* songs require hours to narrate the whole story of their formation into *deivakkaru* (another word for *theyyakkolam*). *Thottam* is the ritual song recited to invoke the spirit of the deity. It consists of three parts such as *varavili* (invocation), *sthuthi* (song extolling the deity) and *sancharam* (narrating the route by which the deity arrives at the particular shrine).

First part of the performance is known as *thottam*. It is performed without proper make up or decorative costume. Only a small red head-dress is worn on this occasion. The dancer along with drummers recites the particular ritual song which describes the myths and legends of the particular deity of the shrine or the folk deity to be propitiated. This is accompanied by the playing of folk musical instruments. After finishing this primary ritualistic part of the invocation the dancer returns to the green room. Again after a short interval he appears with makeup and costume. (Kusuman 129)

Vellattam is another significant part of performance in which the performer wears a light make up and costume. The face painting of *vellattam* is known by the name *vellatukuri*.

Every *theyyakkolam* has specific characteristics. Some are widely known by its lengthy *thottam* songs, while some others with the peculiarity in makeup and head-dress. The performer transforms himself into the deity when he wears the head-dress. The actual moment of 'becoming' the deity is beautifully described by Shrihari Nair in his book *Theyyam; Charisma* "... as he (the performer) stares into a small hand-held mirror, the moment of crossing the line, he slips into another state of being, his eyes widening as the focus is not on his own reflection, but on the transformed image of a divine being. This is the moment of synthesis, the moment known as 'mukhadarshanam' - 'seeing of the face'" (25).

Theyyakkolams are also called human gods as they are the transformed images of god. *Theyyakkolams* vary with their difference in formation; some are like real reflection of god apart from human beings transformed into *deivakkaru*. The second type of *theyyakkolam* unveils the condition of the then society through their stories of which female goddesses appear to be more significant as they have stories full of troubles and pains. The present analysis covers the story of some female goddesses and their *theyyakkolams*. "*Theyyam* performance provides a powerful social role to the downtrodden and tribal castes. They were empowered to speak of the injustices suffered by them because of the arrogance of higher castes. There are endless stories of the perils suffered by ignoring the dictates of the *theyyam*. Even today when the caste system has much less

relevance, devotees, regardless of their caste or social standing, display tremendous respect in the presence of *theyyam*" (Shrihari Nair, 46). The performance of *theyyam* recalls the practice of discrimination by way of caste and gender. *Theyyams* other than those which are performed as representation of god and the mythical characters, revealed the social status of men belonging to lower caste and women. The focus is on the female goddesses who were the transformed images of women who died of cruelty based on caste and gender.

Female goddesses are worshipped generally as *Bhagavathi theyyams* with difference in makeup and costumes. *Bhagavathi theyyams* are noted for their excellence in performance wearing long head-dress called *thirumudi* (sacred head-dress), made of bamboo and coconut leaves. *Kaali*, *Chamundi*, and *Bhagavathi* are the three forms of mother goddesses worshipped in Kerala. A forty two long bamboo stick for the head gear, *vithanathara* (corset like costume made with bamboo and cloth) and the different kinds of *oalakaathu* (large, decorated ear panels to cover the ears and *pakkapaambu* (five carved snakes worn on the either sides of the hip) are the usual costumes used for mother goddesses.

Female goddesses have narratives of miserable events behind the formation of *theyyakkolam*. The analysis of the four *kolams* of female goddesses transformed under such condition is referred to substantiate the point of 'gender trouble'. The four female goddesses are *Muchilot Bhagavathi*, *Neeliyar Bhagavathi*, *Makkam Bhagavathi* and *Thottumkara Bhagavathi*. These four *bhagavathi theyyams* narrate the life of four women who died of the cruelty faced in the society. The case of each woman is different in these female goddesses but gets united by the same thread which is the issue regarding gender discrimination. These female goddesses have events of their miserable life narrated through *thottam* songs.

"The legend of *Muchilot Bhagavathi* reads in lower myth that she is a woman with human frailties that is prone to distress. Once in anguish she meditated upon Lord Shiva and finally kills herself entering the bonfire. Then by the blessing of Shiva and Sakthi, she rises into divinity" (Srikanth 90). The myth of *Muchilot Bhagavathi* tells the story of a sixteen year old Brahmin girl who lived in a village called Perinjellure in Taliparamba. She was well versed in Vedas and Sastras. Her marriage was fixed with a Brahmin boy. In the meantime, pundits from outside called the Taliparamba Raja to take up a challenge in Veda- Sastras. He was not

able to accept the challenge, but accepting defeat would bring shame to the village of Taliparamba and its people. So they approached the Brahmin house in-charge to make available the Brahmin girl to go and argue with the Pandits outside Taliparamba who were invited for the challenge. Since the marriage was fixed, as per the customs of the Brahmin family, the girl was not supposed to go outside the house. But there was no other way to face the challenge of the Pandits. Finally, to protect the prestige of the Taliparamba village people, the Brahmin girl decided to go and meet the Pandits.

The challenge started and the Pandits asked their questions. She answered all their questions with great enthusiasm. The Pandits found no way of defeating her. They decided on wrong path, namely to involve her in some questions which were mischievous. They asked her about the happiest thing in life. She replied that it is sexual intimacy. Immediately they blamed her saying that she being an unmarried lady could not have known sexual enjoyment. Her knowledge about these things would prove that she is not pure. Again they asked her another question about the most painful natural occurrence in women's life. She immediately replied that it was delivering a child. They again blamed her saying that her knowledge is false. Based on the directions of the pandits, the young lady was excommunicated from her house. So she left Taliparamba and moved to north. She reached Payyannur and again traveled north and reached Karivellur village. She made a pyre near the place called Rayaramangalam to end her life by jumping into fire. At that time a person belongs to *thiyya* caste was on his way with toddy to which the lady requested to pour toddy into fire. But he refused and moved away. After some time, another man carrying coconut oil passed by the same way who was from the community of *vaniya*. She requested him to pour the oil into the fire. He poured oil into it and left the place. The girl jumped into the fire and was totally burnt. The girl had become Shakthi with the blessings of Lord Shiva. The Sakthi was staying on top of palm tree. Once a lady who was taking water from well had seen an illumination and heard a sound. She was afraid and ran away from the place. The next day villagers also experienced the same and they approached the astrologer, who gave them the complete history of the happenings.

Accordingly, they constructed a temple in Karivellur known as 'Muchilot'. Since then the Sakthi is called *Muchilot Bhagavathi*. The temple belonged to the *vaniya* community because of the significance of the oil monger. Since then they have been conducting *theyyam* festival offering feast for all communities irrespective of caste. During the performance of this *bhagavathi theyyam*, there is a system of *thalikettu* when the *thantri* in charge of the muchilot temple will announce the marriage ceremony of the *Muchilot Bhagavathi*. All arrangements for the function would be arranged. In the meantime somebody would come and say that somebody has been murdered and this *thalikettu* ceremony cannot take place. The marriage ceremony would be cancelled and she remains virgin, thus the name *Muchilot Kanyaka*(Marar 32-35).

Similar to the issue of Salem Witch trial, the girl called *Muchilot Kanya* is subjected to the trial as a result of her power in knowledge. In both the cases men were afraid of losing their dominance if women are allowed to enter into the mainstream challenging the abilities of men. They always wanted women to be under the hearth serving the household works. The namboodiry girl was excommunicated for accusing her of losing virginity when she accepted the challenge to win over the Pandits. This story of *Muchilot* is a clear instance of gender violence, but more than that the issue reminds the cruelty of the dominant class in order to prove their victory. The real power of the girl is shown through the formation of the *theyyakkolam* and in continuing the practice of worshipping the goddess by the people of every class.

Muchilot Bhagavathi theyyakkolam has peculiarities in appearance wearing *poykkann* (false eye). *Theyyakkolam* uses *arachamayam* known as *vithanathara* and wears head-dress (*thirumudi*) semicircle in shape ornamented with ixora flowers (*chekkippoov*) and *kuttishankum prakkum* as face painting which makes it differ from other *kolams*. During the performance, the *theyyakkolam* looks into a well which is called *manikkinar* built inside the *kavu* symbolizes the incident in which *muchilot kanyaka* had drunk water from the house of the *muchilot padanair* to quench her thirst and later her divine form had seen by the wife of *padanair*.

Muchilot Bhagavathi is referred to as *aishwarya devatha* (Goddess of prosperity) as the people of the locality believe her to be virgin because the myth says that her marriage was interrupted. Thus she remained a virgin mother to her devotees curing all their sufferings. Karivellur *muchilot kavu* is known as Aadimuchilode, the first *muchilot kavu* significant in the legend of *muchilot theyyam*. Karivellur *muchilot kavu* is known for

kaliyatta mahotsavam where people of different castes unite together for the blessings of *Muchilot Bhagavathi*. Aadi Muchilot Kavu is situated at Onakunnu, Karivellur. *Muchilot kavu* usually celebrate *kaliyattam* yearly, But in Karivellur *perumkaliyattam* (after 12 years) is celebrated.

The story of *Muchilot Bhagavathi theyyam* reflects the treatment of woman in a patriarchal society where women are denied the right to learn and the live a life of her own. Here we see the life of a woman who tried to be independent by means of education, happened to die of the cruelty of male dominance. The *theyyakkolam* of *muchilot* is considered a strong revival of the power of women.

Neeliyar Bhagavathi theyyam as the mother goddess is performed in *devasthanams* considering it as the significant *theyyakkolam* among others. The myth of *Neeliyar Bhagavathi* narrates the story of a girl called Neeli who belonged to the lower class of *harijan*. She was a black woman who lived during the age of class and race struggle. The landlord hesitated to touch men of lower caste but the case is different for women. Those who clean their body if they touch a black man accidentally have no such practices when they touch a woman. The upper caste men had power and control over the bodies of lower caste women. The story of Neeli has connection to this practice of high class men. Neeli was a girl born to her parents after long prayers and offerings that they cared her so much. When grown up, Neeli also joined her parents in field work during when she attracted the vision of young landlord who was mesmerized by the beauty of the young black woman. Her parents were afraid of this landlord who disturbed Neeli by staring at her and showing some gestures. Neeli's parents decided not to bring her to the field so that she could escape from the landlord. But one day when Neeli was alone in her hut, this landlord came to see her. The lord forced Neeli to surrender to his desires, but she rejected his offer. This made him angry and he returned to the field when Neeli brought out a knife claiming either to kill him or to suicide. The cruel landlord spread the false news regarding her illicit relationship and argued to punish her. The words of a man belonged to high class was the final decision without having an enquiry about the truth, Neeli was punished and she got killed. After the execution the lord and the family were bedridden due to severe diseases which created an insecure atmosphere in the locality. Thus, the people of the locality began to worship the girl Neeli as *theyyakkolam*.. This brought back peace and prosperity and continued to worship the girl Neeli as *Neeliyar Bhagavathi theyyakkolam* by the people of every class. This is the story

behind the formation of *Neeliyar Bhagavathi theyyakkolam*. *Neeliyar Bhagavathi thottam* is more significant in performance which narrates the story of the girl Neeli. The appearance of this *bhagavathi kolam* is different from other *kolams* with peculiarity of head-dress which is very long, made of bamboo and coconut leaves covered by cloth. *Neeliyar Bhagavathi theyyam* wears the long headdress in front of the shrine in the presence of the people gathered. The performer will come out of *aniyara* with face painting and light costume will wear the headdress chanting the *varavili thottam*. The deity is invited to the performance space through *varavili thottam*. One or two drummers, pipers and co singers would also join him.

The *aroodam* of *Neeliyar Bhagavathi* recalls the presence of nature in the ritual dance of *theyyam*. *Neeliyar Bhagavathi kottam* situated near Darmasala resembles the structure of a real *kavu* surrounded by plants and trees. The entry of the *Neeliyar Bhagavathi theyyam* in this place seems exactly like the goddess coming from nature. *Neeliyar Bhagavathi kottams* have peculiarities in real *kavu* like structure, an isolated place full of trees.

The story of the girl Neeli is an instance of both gender and caste violence. During the punishment of Neeli, her parents who belonged to lower caste remained helpless as they are not allowed to intervene in an issue involving the feudal lord. So the girl was executed in front of her parents in charging wrong accusation where she denied even the right to prove her innocence in the presence of the whole villagers. But then the girl Neeli becoming *Neeliyar Bhagavathi* began to be worshipped as the mother goddess by the *tharavadu* which decided her execution.

Kadangot Makkam is another *theyyakkolam* which has to tell the story of miserable life faced by a woman. Makkam was the daughter of Unicheriya of the Kadangot *tharavadu*. Everyone loved her as she was the only sister to twelve brothers. When young Makkam expressed her desire to observe abstinence during *pooram* (festival held to please *kama*, the god of love and lust), her brothers granted permission. Her brothers planned a contest to find an alliance for her sister during this festival of *pooram*. *Ada* (made of rice and coconut) was a common delicacy prepared during the festival. Makkam's brothers arranged seven *adas* to be hung on the *pandal* (thatched shed) and the man who was to successfully shoot down all the seven *adas* was to

be given Makkam's hand in marriage. In the context, Kuttinumber, a suitor for whom Makkam was fond of won the context and thus Makkam was married off to him. Eventually two children named Chathu and Cheeru were born out of this marriage. Out of dislike and envy Makkam's sisters in law decided to trap Makkam. The story of their envy is described as follows. When a *vaniyan* brought oil to Makkam's house, her in-laws did not pay heed to him. Makkam was in menstruation and kept herself in putrid chamber and asked the *vaniyan* to place the container of oil inside. When he was coming out, the in-laws arrived and then accused her of having illicit relationship with the man. The brothers who had returned victorious from a war were received by their wives with scandalous stories about Makkam and they believed all the stories. So they decided to kill Makkam, even if it was to be done by treachery. They convinced Makkam to accompany them to Kottayam, under the pretext of going to see the *kottam velavilakku* there. Makkam sensed that there was something deceitful behind this move. After taking bath she opened the doors of the *Padinhatta* (the room of worship in traditional homes), lighted the lamp, prayed fervently to the Gods that if anything happened to her, to let the world know the truth behind it and left home with her two children and brothers.

On the way her children became thirsty and with her brothers' permission she entered the Puthiya Veed in Chala. There Makkam and her children were given milk in a *kindi* (a kind of jug) to drink. Makkam gave one *koyapponnu* (a gold ornament) to the housewife who had given her milk and continued her journey with brothers. Before long, her children get thirsty again and her brothers promised them that they could quench their thirst once they reached Ayyangara palli. On arriving there they drew water from the well and gave it to the kids. Then when they suddenly exclaimed, "see Makkam, how stars shining in the noon sky!" Makkam craned her neck to look up at the sky; her brothers quickly slit her raised throat. Then they slaughtered her children as well.

Her brothers also killed a *mavilan* who happened to witness this incident of killing Makkam. Very soon her brothers started turning against each other quarrelling and ended up killing each other. As Makkam has predicted at the beginning of her journey, her ancestral home at Kunjimangalam burned down, except for the shrine of *Veerachamundi*. Her in-laws turned into lunatics and died. The family itself destroyed as a result of

the cruelty done to a young woman. The belief that chaste woman become goddess after death came to be true with the case of Makkam.

The *theyyakkolam* of Makkam is performing as *Makkavum Makkalum* at Chala and at the ancestor house of Kadangot in Kunjimangalam, Kannur. *Mavilan's kolam* is also performed along with Makkam and her children. In the case of performance of Makkam, the part of *thottam* is more important. It last for long hours singing whole life history of Makkam. The *theyyakkolam* of Makkam has *vattamudi* with six torches around waist. *Cheeru* has four torches and *Chathu* has *pookkatti mudi* and *chirakudupp* (winged dress).

This story of Makkam shows the sufferings faced by women within the household where she struggles to continue life because of her cruel in-laws. The sister in laws who had no children felt jealous of Makkam who is loved and cared by twelve brothers planned the end of their only sister. For that they accused her of committing adultery and the twelve brothers believed this false story resulted in the murder of Makkam. But her innocence proved with the formation of the *theyyakkolam*, as the people of the locality believed that chaste woman are formed deities after death. So that the girl Makkam is began to be worshipped as *Makkam Bhagavathi*, proving her innocence in those accusations. "Being chaste these deities are commonly called *Satiratnangal* (*sati* means women loyal to her husband and *ratnangal* means gems or precious stones). The patriarchal discourse deified these legendary characters because they valued their chastity and saved it at the cost of their lives" (Dasan 132).

It is generally believed that the death of a woman near Pappinisseri in Kannur is the root cause for the formation of *theyyakkolam*. Similar to the story of *Muchilot*, there is another *theyyakkolam* called *Thottumkara Bhagavathi*, a woman transformed into *theyyakkolam* after her death. The myth of *Thottumkara Bhagavathi* tells the story of a woman who died as a result of the power of dominant society. The woman belonged to Nair community who lived in a *tharavadu* near Pappinisherri. She was brilliant in co-education having intense interest in learning art. She was married at her young age but she continuously lost her baby during delivery. Eventually she gave birth to ten dead babies. She tried to forget this bad fate by indulging in reading. One day the manager of Kolath Raja happened to see her reading Ramayana sitting in the verandah. He got angry by this sight that a

woman enjoying reading even after losing babies instead of crying. This man told *Thampuran* about the incident and he called the woman to question her regarding this. He was afraid of women having strong mind that possess power that could threaten the dominance of men.

In order to prove the pain of a mother having lost child, she demanded a pot full of flour. She kept the pot on her chest and it began to be hot due to her broken heart leaving broken flour. This made *Thampuran* angry and he claimed that the woman is hard hearted. So that to put the hot pot on her head, thus fire spread to her cloth and she ran away. The woman reached a place called Kakkathod after Valapattanam river. She jumped into the river and fire has gone. Then she moved to a *tharavadu* near the place to drink some water. The lady at home gave her cloth and water, but she died after drinking water. She was buried in a public place. Thus the *tharavadu* witnessed good omens meanwhile Kolath palace had some bad omen as a result of this woman's death. The *theyyakkolam* of *Thottumkara Bhagavathi* got the name as the woman jumped into a lake and got out of fire. The *kolam* has a painful rendering of a mother to narrate through the performance. The presence of a strong woman who raised her voice against the supremacy of the landlord gives power to the *theyyakkolam*. *Thottumkara Bhagavathi* is worshipped for the prosperity of the *tharavadu* after the death of the woman.

The legend of *Thottumkara Bhagavathi* tells the life history of a woman who was brutally punished for not conforming to the male constructed image of woman. The punishment given to women for violation of patriarchal norms was severe which is reflected in the trial called *smarthavicharam*. The women had to dwell in a separate space till the end of the trial. Her social isolation and torture which she suffered during the period ruined her will power and ended up by the process of excommunication. The trial called *smarthavicharam* is a warning to all women compelling them to confine to the norms and conditions of the dominant class.

The analysis on the story of these four *bhagavathi theyyams* brings out instances of gender and caste violence where the power of the dominant class plays a crucial role in determining the status of women. This is to unveil the real strength of women which was surrendered under the foot of the social system designed by the patriarchy. The arguments of ecofeminism helped to redraw the image of a woman different from the usual patriarchal norms. Cultural ecofeminism provided a diversion to the study on women through the association

between woman and nature by linking the concepts like 'mother nature', 'mother goddess' etc. *Theyyams* are a version of God from the magic of nature. These *bhagavathi theyyams* have an existence in relation to the *sthanams*. The structure of this *sthanam* called *kavu* relates the performance of *theyyattam* to nature. The actual place of *kavu* which is a derivative of *kaadu* (forest) is the real settlement of *theyyam*.

The discussion on these *bhagavathi theyyams* will bring out a question regarding the performer. The role and status of women by associating her with nature has been discussed. The whole analysis is carried out on the power of women in *theyyam* as a performing art. The importance of these *bhagavathi theyyams* and the way they are being respected by the village people without any boundaries have been examined. In fact the people belong to high caste worship the representation of god performed by the men of lower caste. In the case of these *theyyams*, women play her powerful role only in character. The presence of women is evident only in the myth according to which the performance is held. In order to bring her out of the performance, it is necessary to have a discussion on *theyyam* performed by women which is called *Devakoothu*. It is performed at Thekkumpad Kulom, Thazhekkavu temple in Kannur. The performance of *Devakoothu* is not known widely among the devotees as it is performed only in one place. The pattern of performance has slight difference from the usual form of *theyyam*. The difference in headgear, costume, makeup and movements make it a unique performance. The sight of this female *theyyam* itself makes a difference for those who are familiar only with the faces of men in *theyyakkolams*.

The performer of *devakoothu* has to undergo strict fasting during the period of abstinence and recite song of the deity sitting inside a temporary shed called *koochil*. It is a shed constructed temporarily by coconut leaves for the purpose of the festival. The performer resides there inside the *koochil* without any contact with outsiders. On the day of performance the performer groomed by costumes and face make up come to the shrine accompanied by the recitation of devotional song. The myth behind the performance of *devakoothu* narrates the incident occurred on the day when a group of angels (*devathas*) from heaven came to earth to collect flowers. They found a beautiful place in a small island full of flowers and trees. They went to collect flowers in different sides. Among the group of angels, one girl named Valliyamma lost her way and was caught inside the island. After long search for this girl, others departed to heaven in deep sorrow. She also lost cloth while plucking

flowers for which she cried to get help from heaven. She prayed to God to rescue her. Finally Naradan found her and gave her new cloth and took her back to heaven.

Devakoothu is performed to commemorate this day. The beautiful island where the girl lost her way is called the Thekkumbad island, a place near Mattool in Pazhayangadi. *Devakoothu* appears in *arangu* with *thalachamayam* as headdress and *velumban* around the waist with face painting called *olakuri*. A complete synchronization of the movements and drummers are maintained throughout the performance. *Devakoothu* is performed along with the *theyyakkolam* of Naradan which is performed by a young boy

CONCLUSION

When we speak of the image a society projects of its woman, we have in mind its ideals of womanhood, or its popular stereotypes or the vision implicit in its institutionalization of the role or position of women, or the vision of poets, artists and prophets relating to women. In estimating such images it is generally believed that they are the products of opinion and fancy need to be evaluated in the light of actual historical conditions. Thus ideals may be traced to social strategies springing from interests and prudence, stereotypes to psychological factors. The relevance of such images would then be as historical indices of social conditions. (Jain 40)

The proponents of the theory connect women to nature in order to provide a new dimension different from the usual images of women. “Ecofeminists claim that there are important connections between the unjustified dominations of women, people of color, children, and the poor and the unjustified domination of nature” (Warren 1). This connection is emphasized to have another direction to the study on women.

The present analysis is carried out to strengthen this association by the practice of worshipping nature through female goddesses. The study on the importance of women in a ritual art like *theyyam* gives a new portrait for women in which *bhagavathi theyyams* perform the role of a mother. Cultural ecofeminism stands for the nature based religions and goddess worship as a way of redeeming both the spirituality of nature and women’s instrumental role in spirituality. They consider female goddesses as mother goddesses by equating them with the concept of ‘mother nature’. The act of worshipping female goddesses is also considered as a

continuation of the old concept of matrilineal society where women have the power of dominance. The image of a powerful woman is seen in the *bhagavathi theyyams* formed after miserable life as a human being. The legend of these *bhagavathi theyyams* and their presence in the *sthaanam* called *kavu* provide the materials for the study based on the theory of ecofeminism.

The study on women and nature continues through the act of worshipping human gods as the reflection of the power of nature. Among those human gods, *bhagavathi theyyams* are more significant in the lives of people. The issue on the relation between woman and nature is discussed through orally transmitted narratives which retell the lives of women belonging to both lower and higher community. The problem of women remained the same having no change with the difference in class and caste. Gender is the only issue behind the atrocities faced by women which is also the cause for the formation of *bhagavathi kolams*. The main chapter of this study has considered in some depth such issues related to gender violence and the context in which women acquire strength over the society.

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