



Self Acceptance and Identity: A Journey through the Generations of the film *Ozhimuri*

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ABSTRACT

Kerala is the land of multifaceted communities, castes and religious affiliations with equally diverse forms of marriage and kinship relations with its rich diversity in culture, traditions, customs and practices. The political and the economic scenario of Kerala with its highly acclaimed model of development have given rise to the advancement and growth in all sectors. Approaching the realm of women in the state, it's generally assumed that in earlier times they enjoyed high status and reputable position in the society. The matrilineal system which was based on kinship with the mother or female line supports the evidence of their position in society as highly revered and undisputable. But the changes in the social structure of family and the patrilineal lineage (through the father's line) have questioned the existence of women with them encountering different kinds of exploitation and oppression. The Malayalam film *Ozhimuri* (2012) directed by Madhupal gained critical appreciation for portraying the shift of the ruling system; matriarchy to patriarchy and its effects in a family. Moreover dealing with a historical change, *Ozhimuri* concentrates on the lives of some individuals who witnessed the shift and who were brought up within the system. This paper attempts to study the women characters of the film belonging of different generations in the light of their experiences, changes in attitude and how they treat the traditional construction of womanhood. Moreover, the film also analyses the women characters with their perspectives in handling different situations which they commonly face as a woman and finally leading to their identity assertion in the wake of masculine power structures working in the system.

Keywords: Women, Identity, Oppression, Power, Matrilineal, Self-Acceptance

Introduction

Ozhimuri, the 2012 Malayalam film by the director Madhupal is a tale of intense and emotional journey through the lives of a few who were victims of their traditions and experience. It is based on the novel *Uravidangal* by bilingual writer Jayamohan. Though the film concentrates on a complex family relationship, it possesses a strong underlying commentary on the role of women who fell into distinct categories. Nanjinadu, a province in Travancore, was the locality, once occupied the territory of Kerala, and transported, without physical displacement to the state, Tamil Nadu. The plot of the film is firmly planted on a specific culture of south Travancore and it is set in Kanyakumari district, once a part of erstwhile Travancore. The movie sheds light to the matriarchal society which once existed in the prominent Nair *Tharavads* of the region. Under the matrilineal

system, women had the power to divorce their husbands by giving 'ozhimuri' on a piece of palm-leaf which is accepted as a valid document of separation. In *Ozhimuri*, Madhupal tries to explore the complex issues revolving around a period when the matrilineal system had been the highlights of the day where Nair women owned properties and they were powerful. The transition soon occurred with the coming of new laws and the film explores how these changes affected the generations and how each struggles to maintain the power status in the society. It is a journey through the life of some individuals who are caught in different social as well as cultural categories.

Thengumpura veetil Kaali Pillai Ammachi, the role played by Swetha Menon is a powerful matriarch and the characters played by Lal : Thaanu Pillai and Sivan Pillai Chattambi represents two different periods of men in system. Meenakshi Pillai, the role played by Mallika is a submissive woman in the patriarchal world. The story unfolds the mystery in the behavior of these characters in certain situations and portrays how it is linked with their power status. The problematic nature of these characters is resulted from the changes in the social order which are contradictory in approach. Along with the characters of Kali Pillai and Meenakshi Pillai, we could see the presence of a modern woman through the character of Balamani, the character played by Bhavana, a young lawyer.

The core of the story lies in the relationship between Thaanu Pillai and Meenakshi Pillai and it revolves around the friction in their life which made Meenakshi to demand divorce at the age of fifty five. The story starts off with a scene in a court where the old couple is going through divorce proceedings. Thanu Pillai is nearly seventy one and the petition for divorce from this very old couple surprises the court and its council. Meenakshi is determined to go through with the divorce even when everyone around her is ridiculing her for petitioning for divorce at such a late stage in their lives. On approaching the couple's only son Sarath, character played by Asif Ali, to see if reconciliation is possible between the two. It is through the narrations of Sarath to Bala, an advocate that we get to see the trauma that he and his mother had to go through at the hands of his cruel father. He recollects his childhood memories which witnessed the brutal deeds of his father. The opening scenes of the film portray Thanu Pillai's inhuman abuse of his wife and son, mainly as Sarath's memories.

The story weaves between past and present to reveal different points of view of each character. In the beginning it appears just as a story of a son who hates his father for being rude. But later it exposes the complexities of a transformational period when the matrilineal system dissolved and gave way to the patrilineal structure. Kaali Pillai belonged to the matrilineal society which holds women to the centre of the system. Though the system changed, she tried to maintain her privileges in life. She single handedly managed the affairs of her extended *Tharavad*. She is presented as tough and arrogant woman who didn't think twice before thrashing a man who occupied her land, or before reclining royally before the sub-inspector when summoned to the police station. As Kaali Pillai executed her authority everywhere, Thanu couldn't accept her "prestigious" deeds. A strong sense of hatred towards his mother is visible in Thanu. He decided not to marry from a matrilineal family and felt that the women treat men like their slaves and married Meenakshi from makkathaya tradition. Kali Pillai doesn't like seeing her son overturn the natural order of things and treat his wife like a slave and her pride is wounded by his lack of respect for her. This ended in conflict between mother and son and she left his home and lived alone. On the other hand, Meenakshiamma's version about Thanu was different. Even though he harassed her physically and mentally, she finds justification for his acts. He demanded her inherited properties and brought everything under his control. But in the court whenever the lawyers asked about his controversial behavior, she always says she still loves him because he is a good man.

On the day of Judgment, Thanu fails to appear in court. Later they came to know that he had a heart attack and was admitted in the hospital. Meenakshi decided to nurse him not as her husband but as a well wisher. Everyone including Thanu expected that she is ready for a settlement. But she was firm that she will not change her decision even if she has to lose all her prestige. He emphasized that though unappreciable to him, his mother's actions were heroic and these words imply that mother is a woman while wife is a slave. He substantiated his arguments by citing her ingratitude to her brother who struggled to safeguard her dignity, and her decision not to leave Thanu Pilla's home to see her father in his death bed, without Thanu's permission. These are eye openers for Meenakshi, who internalized the victim position as her fate and justified the state as her love. So, she demanded 'ozhimuri' and

does not fully exclude Thanu out of her life but she claims that she is not his wife. *Ozhimuri* is a candid account of old Travancore, as much as it is about the institution of marriage.

A Parallel Study of the Women Characters: Difference in Perspectives

The film *Ozhimuri* with the traditional Nair environment is a saga of three generations, out of which the earlier one is the matriarchal. It portrays the lives of three women who are part of Thanu Pillai's life: his mother, wife and his lawyer who later became daughter-in-law. These women fell into distinct categories, a matriarch, a submissive wife and a young woman who respects the traditional family values. The film shows women losing their self and surrendering to patriarchy, generation after generation. As it celebrates the practices of an extinct matrilineal system, the character of Kaali Pillai has great significance in the film. The influence of Kaali Pillai's presence in Meenakshi's life slowly comes into light when she demands for 'ozhimuri' and decides to be independent. Bala, a modern woman with traditional values could not accept Meenakshiamma's decision.

The first part of the film portrays the character of Kaali Pillai Ammachi, the matriarch. She is proud of her womanhood and not scared to articulate or even command. Financially independent, she could gain respect from the society. Even though the system changed she was not ready to accept the social order; for her, "woman is Devi". So she continued her life as it was. This is visible when she attacks a man who occupies her land. When she was summoned to the police station, she never fears and it is evident that such offences are not new for her. Kaali Pillai notices that the photo of Indira Gandhi was replaced by Nehru in the station and she comments that: "...that woman is the queen of this country." (*Ozhimuri*). She enquires about the inspector's family and tells about her acquaintance with his grandfather. Through such a brave conversation, Kaali Pillai proves to be a strong woman of all time. She comments to the officer: "You look really smart .The uniform suits you well." (*Ozhimuri*) and the officer claims that "You look like Rani of Travancore ,but your son doesn't seem so." (*Ozhimuri*)

Thanu Pillai's father Sivan Pillai Chattambi was a wrestler whom Kaali Pillai easily dismissed by placing his betel box (chellam) on the verandah. This is a practice of the matrilineal system to abandon the relationship and denied him the rights over his son. Finally, he suffered helplessly and damned to death. Thanu starts hating his mother and fears that he would become a victim like his father. So he tried to overpower his wife: "I will never be subservient to a woman...." (*Ozhimuri*). Though Thanu hates Kaali Pillai, she never gives up on him really and still tries to protect him in her own way despite her estrangement. When Thanu decides to marry from makkathaya family, she could not accept it, but later agrees and tries to find herself in her daughter-in-law. She instructs Meenakshi: "Why do you walk like a cat? If you are a Nair woman, walk like an elephant,with firm footsteps , ok?" (*Ozhimuri*). Meenakshi was brought up with the love and care of her father and brother. When her brother says to Kaali: "Please look after her like your own daughter." (*Ozhimuri*). And she admonishes: "Why should a woman need someone to take care of her? A woman must know to take care of herself. Why should she need anybody else?" (*Ozhimuri*). Kaali behaves rudely; showing her concern for Meenakshi by constantly picking faults and tells her what to do. She believed that it is her mistake in controlling Thanu, she wants Thanu to respect his wife: "Call her Meenakshi Pillai...." (*Ozhimuri*)

She was enraged by her son's treatment of his wife but she found it even more insulting when Meenakshi submitted to his control. Contrary to the power of women in the Nair matrilineal system, we see Kaali Pillai as a highly authoritative woman. But in depth it is clear that what she holds do not represent an absolute woman in power of matriarchal rule. Analyzing the matrilineal system it is clearly visible that the "power" that Kaali Pillai has is not an inherited right. The wealth is inherited, she executes her power with the wealth she has. What prompts a woman to assume herself powerful is self acceptance; asserting her identity. This can mould the physical and emotional strength of a woman. In her last days Kaali longs for her son's care and protection. We could see motherhood rules her and she could not hold back her maternal love. There we find Kaali Pillai as a mother rather than a strong woman. Thanu remained adamant to take revenge of his father. But as a mother Kali wants to justify her son so she abuses Meenakshi who cared her: "You did not tell my son. You ungrateful bitch! I know my son. I know he will come for me. It is all because of you. You are not a woman." (*Ozhimuri*).And

finally she dies. A strong sense of dependency arises in Kaali Pillai in her suffering days. She turns to be a “mother” who leaves all her privileges which she holds throughout her life. Here the stereotypical formula of motherhood is reinforced that a woman’s satisfaction is always bounded with her family. But the stronger side of Kaali Pillai had a great impact on Meenakshi Pillai and it is her great asset. Kaali Pillai is not merely a product of her generation but a complex combination of power and emotions conflicting in a feminine psyche.

The “ideal womanhood” is presented through the character of Meenakshiamma. She is a faithful wife, loving mother and endures the domestic violence. But in the beginning we could see her as woman demanding ozhimuri to end her married life of three decades. The film thus travels through her transformation from a passive woman to a liberated one. Meenakshi is portrayed as a submissive woman who endures rather than fights, but who is strong and resilient in her non-confrontational way. She was the woman who hardly came out of the four walls. She was so shy that she did not even look at her groom’s face. Meenakshi being a product of patriarchy was indoctrinated with the values, pertaining to the discipline of a loyal wife. Thanu Pillai, her husband treated her like a slave and she did not dare to question his authority. Fearing his wife that she may overpower him, Thanu found expressing love as a weakness and buried all his affection for his family deep down his heart. Meenakshi ignored his violence understanding him: “When there is more love, cruelty also increases”(Ozhimuri).

Everyone including her son Sarath was confused of Meenakshi’s need for divorce. In the beginning, Sarath supports her because he witnessed the cruelties of his father. Bala tries to understand her intentions; she couldn’t find any sort of hatred in Meenakshi towards Thanu. So, she unsuccessfully attempt for a reconciliation but fails: “Even if I die in between, it’d be nice to feel I did something”(Ozhimuri). Nobody seems to want to really listen to Meenakshi, they just want to tell her what to do. She remains calm using her strength gained from experiences. As the story progresses, she become a complex woman who made some choices then and is making different choices now. She admired Kaali Pillai for her strength, love and concern. She recalls her words: “Women should rule and men should follow. This was my ammavi’s (mother-in-law) idea. I could not do it” (Ozhimuri). We could find a sense of regret in Meenakshi for ignoring Kaali’s advices. She is the only person in the family who really supported Kaali but in turn she was awarded curse from her. When Sarath asks his mother about it she tells him: “I know very well that my mother-in-law is lying. But any woman, however bad, would like to appear as goddess to her children and to prove it, they will go to any extent” (Ozhimuri). What projects in Meenakshi’s character is she genuinely sees the good in people and justifies their acts. But finally she realizes her value in her husband’s life through his words: “What did you tell my mother on the day she died? She is a queen and you are an ungrateful slave. My mother said you were. You said womething that is why my mother left. You are a slave”(Ozhimuri).

Meenakshi who endured all the violence from Thanu was ready to care him when he was ill. But these words are the eye-openers for her. Whatever she did for her family is devalued and she understood her love could never be accepted if she doesn’t assert herself as a person rather than a slave.

“That day, I was convinced of one thing. Till then, I thought I was a chaste and loving wife. I finally understood that a slave doesn’t have any freedom to love. A slave can only serve. The love of a slave is just like the dog’s tail wagging. I have lived as a slave, let me die as a proud woman.”(Ozhimuri)

On the day of Judgment, Thanu fails to appear in court but the Judge gave Ozhimuri. Later they came to know that he had a heart attack and was admitted in the hospital for heart attack. Meenakshi decided to nurse him not as her husband but as a well wisher. She was firm that she will not change her decision even if she has to lose all her prestige. As for Meenakshi her reconciliation is not in having won the separation, but in fact that she could return to her family as an independent woman. She comes to know what she wants out of life and understands finally what her mother-in-law had tried to teach her; a slave is bound with force rather than love. The power that Meenakshi shows in the end of the film is the output of her own revolt with the feminine psyche. This proves that a woman can be powerful without any societal attributes. She is there for her family and for herself too. The transformation of Meenakshiamma is noteworthy in the stereotypical context that for a submissive woman finding a space for herself is considered to be a “revolutionary” act.

In the common scenario a woman is always expected to support another woman who fights for independence. But in *Ozhimuri* we could find a young woman lawyer appearing opposite to the woman who demands divorce.

This combination is highlighted purposefully to exhibit a parallel journey of tradition and modernity which is contradicting each other to the “normal” version. Balamani belongs to a Brahmin family and she accepts the norms that men rule the family. Her father demands coffee while reading the newspaper in the morning as if his wife is a slave. Her mother and grandmother are the victims of the patriarchal system. This made her curious in the case of Thanu Pillai’s ‘ozhimuri’ which links with the matrilineal system of powerful women. She is educated, employed woman and quite socially conservative. She believes divorce is bad for families regardless of the situation at home. So she approaches Sarath to see if a reconciliation is possible: “It is you who should convince them, instead of spreading the stink all around.” (*Ozhimuri*)

Later she understands that Meenakshamma will not change her decision and she tries to analyze the reason behind it. When Sarath supports his mother citing the harassments of his father, Bala defends:

“Most of the wives here are the victims of domestic violence. They continue with their marital lives because they can’t face the society. Had divorce been easy, most of the marriages would have been broken.....Then? What else? Is divorce a solution? Marriage is not something made for men and women to live happily ever after. It is for children.” (*Ozhimuri*)

She represents the modern woman who considers her rights as the benevolence of her family. Bala used to always quote her ‘Vedam Patti’ (grandmother) who used to say even the female dog alone nurses the puppies and the male dog just watches fun. She sympathizes with the submissive woman but accepts it as a social order. She and Sarath talk about their own families and future plans, and while sometimes it come across as a fear to face the institution of marriage. Balamani is advocating a patriarchal view that happiness lies in submission. Sarath visits Thanu Pillai’s home when he was admitted in hospital. In order to console, Bala accompanies him. They indulge in sexual intercourse which she considers to be “sacred” in a relationship. She asks him: “Don’t your parents have such nights in their life? How can they easily forget everything?” (*Ozhimuri*) She also fears: “....that something like this will happen in our relationship too.” (*Ozhimuri*)

This proves that she is immersed in the traditional beliefs and could not bear any change of it. Finally she expects Meenakshamma to withdraw the divorce petition which she believed to be the for sake of the family. Balamani was employed, but she did not have the strength to be independent or create change in lives. She did not swim against the stream of society; she has accepted the institution of marriage as chauvinistic in nature.

Conclusion

The film concentrates on independence of feminine psyche reminding women that she will not be respected until she becomes a person and learns to accept herself. Through the lives of Kaali Pillai, Meenakshi Pillai and Balamani, it is evident that a woman’s dignity issolely depends on her self-acceptance. Kaali Pillai lived in a Nair matrilineal family. Though claimed to be an era of matriarchal rule, the so-called system does not provide absolute power for women. The historical analysis proves that only the lineage was traced through women, whereas the eldest male member ruled the family. So what Kaali exhibited throughout her life is not fully an inherited privilege. She learned to be independent by asserting identity. Kaali is aware that suppression is executed only through fear. That fear rules the relationship; when one is afraid of another the defeat is sure. In the accepted family version husband is the one who advocates suppression and the wife fears him. Kaali Pillai was against this notion and she wants her daughter-in-law not to be submissive. Meenakshi played the role of a faithful wife ignoring the violence from her husband. But later she realizes that she could not gain anything from submission; a forceful surrendering of one to another is slavery devoid of love. So she rectifies her mistake through ‘ozhimuri’ without any resentment to her husband. She does not totally escape from her family rather than sacrificing herself. Balamani, an educated and modern woman is expected to fight against the patriarchal society but she accepts it. For her family is not meant only for enjoyment, it is the core of generations. She witnessed the lives of her grandmother and mother crushed under patriarchy, she sympathizes with them but not ready to change the system. The film puts forward an impartial view of tradition and modernity. It shows that the changes happening through generations are relative. It is not the changes in system or generations that influence the liberation of woman; but asserting one’s own identity by rethinking the idea of womanhood.

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