



Demons of Delusion: An Eco feminist Reading of *Akam*

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ABSTRACT

Malayattoor Ramakrishnan is a much reckoned figure in the annals of Malayalam literature. His *Yakshi* is such a gripping novel that has conjured the Malayali imagination. The novel is developed from the building blocks of *yakshi* imagination in the minds of Keralites. The film *Akam* is a contemporary retelling of the novel *Yakshi*. Both the genres are placed in a mesh of fact and fantasy and explore into the confusions in the psychedelic state of a man. The story spins around Srinivas, a young architect who is trapped in a psychedelic state after an accident. His incapability to understand his wife which eventually leads to her death forms the crux of the story. A re-reading of the film's text and context provides a clear vision of Ragini's synonymity with nature and her destruction by a skeptical male human being, which in effect voices out both feministic and environmental concerns. The paper therefore strives to employ an eco-feminist lens to re-read and re-interpret the filmic text of *Akam*.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Female sexuality, Nature, Patriarchy, Woman, Yakshi.*

Malayattoor Ramakrishnan is considered a pioneering figure in the arena of Malayalam fiction writers. Unique in his narrative style and tone, Malayattoor has contributed pure gems to the treasury of Malayalam literature. His thrilling novel *Yakshi* (1967) has occupied a significant position in the gallery of Malayalam literature. The novel was adapted into a film of the same name (*Yakshi*) in 1967 and in 2013 as *Akam*. Both the genres are based on the imagination of *yakshi* in Keralite mindset and express the psychedelic confusions happening in the mind of Srinivas which eventually lead to the death of his wife, Ragini. The deluded psychological state of Srinivas, brimming on Schizophrenia, his fear of female sexuality and his incapability to understand his wife are effectively conveyed in both the genres.

The story spins around the trope of the *yakshi*. *Yakshi* in the popular Malayali imagination is a female ghoulish spirit, who seduces men and drinks their blood. Media project the image of *yakshi* as a sensuous woman in white robes, with disheveled hair and smell of *palappoo* who wanders at night to harm men. They are mostly presented as the other worldly creatures who after death comes down to earth to revenge against the man who caused their death. They are not satiated by a single revenge; their aversion is pointed towards the entire male race. Many narratives, films and soaps used to project and propagate such a horrific image of *yakshi* and nailed

them in the Malayali imagination. There are many myths, legends and narratives that revolve around the figure of *yakshi*. *Yakshis* mostly doesn't harm women, but they are described as possessing the female bodies as a medium for revenge. Stories of magicians, priests, shamans overpowering the *yakshis* and nailing them to trees form a major chunk of narratives.

The novel was twice adapted into film. *Akam* (2013) is a contemporary adaptation of the novel. Even though the crux of the film intersects with that of the novel, both the genres diverge at many points. *Akam* is directed by Shalini Usha Nair. Srinivas, the male lead in the movie is a dashing young architect who was abandoned by his lover Tara as he got grotesquely disfigured in the accident. The film is set up in a contemporary urban setting. The time, space and the circumstances in which he met Ragini is not stated. But a winding stair is used to set the transformation in Srinivas's character and his encounter with Ragini. In this scene itself, Ragini who is positioned in the top of a light house is presented as looking into the eternity of sea. The eternal azure sea, the greenish landscape and the enigmatic Ragini fuses well into the frame. This frame itself indicates Ragini as a part of the calm yet unfathomable nature.

Srinivas's traumatized self was trapped in the pall of desolation and introversion. He believed that no women in the world will approach him with love as he lost all his charming looks. When Ragini loves him affectionately he couldn't withstand the passion. He began to conceive that Ragini doesn't belong to the corporeal world. He began to assume that Ragini is a *yakshi*, a demon who is masquerading as his affectionate wife. He also thinks that he was fortunate that he couldn't consummate their marriage as she would have murdered him at that point. There are several instances in the novel, where Srinivas fails to engage in any kind of sexual activity. Srinivas's traumatized self also displays a deep fear of female sexuality. For this reason, he is scared of Ragini, as she was an epitome of beauty, sensuousness and passion. In order to escape from this fear, he tries to nail her, a practice used by magicians or priests to fix the demoniac spirits. It appears that his inferiority complex reaches an extreme stage brimming on delusion and schizophrenia. His aversion and fear towards Ragini was coupled with hallucinations which offered him enough evidences to assert her as a demon.

The film is narrated with less dialogues, more flashes of memory creating a mesh of past and present. Such a unique narration aptly conveys the deluded mental state of Srinivas. When Malayattoor places the character of Ragini in the chasm of ethereal and real, *Akam* asserts the existence of Ragini as a human. The climax scene which displays the cadaver of Ragini in the pond also asserts this reason. Ragini is shown as immersing herself in a pond while Srinivas is staying on the bank observing her. Next scene shows Srinivas in his wet dress sitting with a blank face on the bank, being enquired about Ragini by his friend, for which Srinivas stays silent. The death of Ragini is presented in an unusual manner. But no presence of supernatural can be traced. Ragini's death can be a suicide or in a way a case of murder.

Srinivas's dynamic professional life which is engaged in constructing huge infrastructures and his personal life which disastrously ended both his and Ragini's

life are intricately connected. Srini is a representative of a huge crew of human beings whose deluded imaginations are simultaneously engaged in a process of destroying both women and nature. Hence, the text can re-read with an eco feminist lens, as ecofeminism implies “the meeting between ecology and feminism” (Griffin 215). Gretchen T. Legler notes that Ecofeminist criticism “...offers a unique combination of literary and philosophical perspectives that gives literary and cultural critics a special lens through which they can investigate the ways of representation of nature, which also includes an analysis of language, desire, knowledge and power” (227).

Ragini is an epitome of nature. Srini, the architect wizard appears blind to both the exquisiteness of nature and his wife. According to Pramod K. Nayar, “Eco feminists argue that patriarchal society’s values and beliefs have resulted in the oppression of both women and nature” (249). The greenish landscape being devoured by the concrete structures forms the backdrop of many scenes. Human vs. nature binary is also emphasized in the narrative. The skyscrapers under construction have the look of a gigantic monster, and spotting Ragini at twilight in the midst of this constructed site later adds to the eeriness in Srini’s mind. Ecofeminists are accused by many scholars for the stereotyped representation of nature as feminine. “Nature is imaged as a woman whose basic tasks include reproduction and nurture” (Nayar 250) which is rejected by many ecofeminists and social ecologists. Many ecofeminists propose the intrinsic ways in which a woman becomes closely associated with nature. In *Akam*, Ragini is not associated with this all tolerating, nurturing ‘motherly’ nature. Ragini represents not only the calmness of nature, but also its sensuous impulses. She is not a fragile woman. She is bold enough to loiter around during night and fearlessly walk into the theatre hall for a night show. Ragini is presented in dim lighted lanes and dented landscapes. She bravely transgresses into the nocturnal landscape of the city, which is usually considered as a realm of men. She represents not only the nature illuminated by sunlight, but also the mysterious nocturnal one.

When Srini asks about her home, she points to a dark distant grove of trees. Srini couldn’t see anything clearly there and he never tries to decipher it also. He was mesmerized by Ragini’s charms. But later, the same incident creates suspicion as to whether Ragini is a *yakshi*. The trope of *yakshi* is also significant. Even though *yakshi* is popularly considered as a monstrous figure by the populace, many historians, folklorists and anthropologists suggests that *yakshi* was being worshipped by the natives of Kerala, along with the mother goddess during prehistoric times. *Yakshis* along with other aniconic mother goddesses were worshipped in the lap of sacred groves. They were part of the nature worship practiced by the primitive folks. In the ritual art of *Padayani*, which is popular in the Central Travancore region of Kerala, *yakshi* in the form of a *kolam*, is worshipped as deity. Songs of *yakshikolam* in *Padayani* reveres *yakshi* as the tutelary deity of the forest. It was this *yakshi* who as a result of cultural acculturations and mythic retellings got manipulated into a demoniac being later. The image of sensuous *yakshi* as told in many popular myths, legends and narratives can be reinterpreted as a creation of the patriarchal society which feared female sexuality. Thus, *yakshi* the deity of nature was being metamorphosed into a

female vampire, by myths constructed in the male imagination. Similarly, Srini's deluded imagination assumes Ragini in the shape of a *yakshi*.

Ragini, with her ethereal beauty, not tainted even by a tint of urbaness in her looks, slang and character was incomprehensible to him. Her sensuousness and a sense of freedom scared him. In a scene from the beach, Ragini easily climbs the small rocks much ahead of Srini creating dismay and a sense of defeat in him. His physical inferiority added with his wounded male ego which couldn't accept his defeat, kindled anger and irritation in his mind. The scene can also be read in terms of Ragini's easiness with nature and Srini's struggle and his failure while dealing with it. Ragini relishes and relaxes the time they spend on the beach. But the episode on the beach seems to clearly irritate Srini, sowing seeds of bitterness in his mind about Ragini. Shalini, the director of the film explains:

Srini never quite understands Ragini. In this world she always seems slightly out of context. Everything from her clothes to her accent seems a little out of place. Initially, to him, her difference is her charm. Once they are together though, his inability to understand her drives him to frustration; it is Srini's own securities that he projects onto Ragini and their relationship. It is at once the story of Srini and Ragini and that of a million other couples grappling with the unbridgeable between them.
(Sathyendran)

Srinivas's journey to Ragini's house shows a sudden shift in the backdrop. Ragini's house was situated in a rustic hamlet which was devoid of skyscrapers and mansions. The rustic background was in stark contrast to Srinivas's personal and professional ambience. Ragini's old house was also too different from his palatial apartment. The next scenes also shows Srinivas accompanying Ragini into a place resembling a grove, clad in green with bushes, trees and ivies. What happens between them is not clearly stated. But the film ends showing Ragini's corpse in the pond, indirectly pointing fingers towards Srini as the sole reason for her death. Ragini who can be read as a paragon of nature merges with nature at last. Whether it was a suicide or a murder is not stated clearly, but it was the psychic Srini or the patriarchal society in general which couldn't accept an emancipated woman, that choked her into death.

The director of the movie opines that Ragini's "mystery becomes a threat to his very existence, a threat that he needs to overcome" (Sathyendran). She also adds that in a sense, "Ragini is a metaphor for nature; nature that eventually intimidates him, turns against him" (Sathyendran). In the words of the director, Srinivas of the film is an architect who dissects the urban landscape and Ragini stands as the epitome of nature. She is presented in dented faint landscapes, and at last merges with the nature. Ragini is the paragon of the nature which affectionately tries to sustain human existence, but was ignored and murdered by the psychic skeptical human who couldn't understand the unfathomed mystery of nature.

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