Sunil Kumar Mannil

Popular Oppana: A Critical Commentary

*The paper "*The Popular Oppana: A Critical Commentary*" essays to make a close reading of the socio-cultural horizons of the Mappila performing art form of Oppana. The paper tries to interpret the episteme of the catalyst force inherent in the spectrum of Oppana as a performing art prevalent among the Mappilas in Malabar. Attempting to locate the politics of the body inthe spectacle, the paper tries to critique the kind of representation channelized through the structure of the art called Oppana. The paper also looks at its being, as a performing art, with respect to the nature of the ideological and political motives ingrained in the text of popular Oppana. It is an attempt to understand the defense and synthesize it tries to construct in the social, cultural and religious locale of Kerala. The study is made not on the traditional form, but on the popular form of the traditional art as it is presented and popularized in and through the mechanical reproduction.*

Keywords: Oppana, Mappila, Episteme, Erotic, Gaze, Representation.

Introduction

Mappilas often used as a synonym for Muslims in the Malabar region of Kerala, though embodies multiple socio-cultural 'signifieds', refers to a highly influential religious populace in the polity of Kerala. As a community Mappila Muslims are assumed to have been evolved as a result of the State's unfailing connections with the Islamic Arab civilization. Coming to the Malabar Coast of Kerala as early as seventh century AD, the religious sect, Mappilas, grew to a hefty political and social force with a remarkable socio- political and cultural 'diachrony' that constitutes for them an inseparable space in the modern history of the state. Though having witnessed acculturation, assimilation and linguistic identification by mimicking the parole of Malayalam tongue, the language of the state, the Mappilas in the Malabar Coast could eventually create a remarkably decisive space in the socio-cultural and political milieu of the state. Comprising, today, a large community, Muslims of Kerala, of which Mappilas constitute a majority, has created an indispensable cultural unity that prevails as opposed to the Hindu culture which had been the authoritarian elite culture in the region with the coming of Arians for the Hindus being the majority populace in the state. Identifying with the Arabs as Muslims, the Mappilas of Kerala through profound socio-cultural relations with the Arabs, mimicked and imbibed the life and culture of the Arabs as well. The influence of their imitation of the Islamic ways of socio-cultural life, as imbibed by them from the Quranic interpretations and religious scholars, and the positivist acculturation they could willingly and ideally undergo in the Haindava culture of the state of Kerala, has gained them a significant socio-cultural and political space which is highly reflected and represented in varied modes of artistic production.The typical ways of artistic representation of the Mappilas prevalent among them are stemming in vivid narratives under the titles of Mappila Arts and Mappila Literature which represents and problematizes the Mappila self, culture, tradition and identity. One of such socio-cultural narrative spectacle is Oppana. A highly effervescent, colourful and exhilarating traditional performing art, "Oppana is a song and dance performance popular among the Muslims of Malabar. It is commonly seen at their

Sunil Kumar Mannil is Assistant Professor in English, Central University of Kashmir

various festive occasions like weddings, ceremonies held to herald puberty...,a *Maarkkakalyanam*, and a *Naalppathukali*" (www.keralaculture.org).

A Discourse on Popular *Oppana*

A factual reality of the socio-cultural representation through performing art, Oppana, a popular form of social entertainment among the Mappila community of Kerala, is one of the prominent mainstream art forms prevalentin Kerala. It is a vivid, energetic and colourfulspectacle generally performed by young women numbering about fifteen. Being a ceremonial performance, it generally represents the ritual of marriage and celebrates the traditional and conventional notions of the rituals of marriage as practiced by Muslims in Kerala.The name oppana is believed to have been originated either from the Arabic word Afna, a kind of performance popular among some Muslim societies in the middle east, or from the Tamil word, Oppanai, which means make-up or beautification. Though a typical cultural artifact of a religious group called Mappilas, oppana, in its textual structure, shares a number of elements of folk theatre.Indian Folk Theatre is an art which is conspicuous of "a fusion of elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic and ballad recitation, graphic and plastic arts, religion and festival peasantry" (Sheelita Das, 1). The Folk theatre having roots in ethnic culture is embedded in local identity, ethnicand local social values besides providing mass entertainment. It helps the society as indigenous tools of interpersonal, inter-group and inter-village communication.As a communication system, it is "embedded in the culture which existed much before the arrival of mass media, and which still exists as a vital mode of communication in many parts of the world presenting a certain degree of continuity, despite changes" (Dissanayake, qtd. in Das). Folk theatre has been at use in distinct ways in Indian cultural milieu to propagate and discourse vitalsocio-cultural concerns from time to time. It carries and disseminates moral, social cultural and political ideas among the spectators/ the social group to be followed and imitated by them. As a communicative art form it transcends all kinds of formal barriers of human communication and familiarizes the knowledge. Each folk theatre form has typical media of socio-cultural representation for a particular religion, community, language, locale and way of life.

The identity that the art form of Oppana tries to represent is a unique thing in itself. Oppana essays to impart a cultural self to every Muslims in Kerala on one hand and it ventures to create a space to locate the cultural self in the socio-cultural milieu of Kerala on the other hand. Art is necessary for every human group living with other groups for socio-cultural representation which would help the group free itself from any kind of phobia from other social groups. Kerala has different religious groups living together for centuries. It had societies before the coming of Islam.

Coming of Islam marks a definite cultural shift. Islam as a social group among others, had to create its own social and cultural space on the base of which grew the Mappila politics in the state. Oppana, as a form of art to represent a quintessential cultural identity of the Mappilas, seems to make an unfailing cultural resistance. It operates to represent a Mappila identity so as to create an otherness with all the other groups in the society. The art of Oppana per se is different from the art forms of the dominant social group, the Hindus. On one hand, the Hundus, being the dominant group could have easily rejected the different cultural space for the Mappilas and thus could segregate them as the Other. The cultural resistance that the

art of Oppana makes is twofold. At one level it rejects the art forms of the dominant hegemonic group and it has a method of socialization which is necessary for acceptability for coexistence. When it rejects the dominant art forms, it dismisses the possible cultural assimilation of the Mappilas to the dominant ways through the dominant art forms. As a medium for entertainment, it resists the community against its members seeking space in the Hindu art forms. The Hindu art forms celebrate religious myths and divine figures from the Hindu scriptures which is an extremely challenging idea of monotheism, the quintessential foundation of Islam.

The team of Oppana is divided into three significant parts: the singers, dancers and the bride who is the centre of the performance. A traditional Oppana is performed as a part of wedding ceremonies a day before the wedding day. The bride, dressed in all finery, often jwelled with gold ornaments, is the nucleus of the spectacle of the art. She sits on a *royal* chair, around which the singing and dancing being performed. The dance with typical artistic maneuvers is in tune with a typical song with definite musical elements. The performers do appear in typically made traditional dress in varied colours. While they sing, they clap their hands rhythmically and move around the bride. Two or three girls begin the song and the rest of the performers accompany the song as a chorus:the dancers simultaneously sing and dance.

A typical Oppana song celebrates many a cultural and social element that are often associated with the Mappilas in Malabar. The song begins with an invocation to the divine and a praise of the ways of the prophet. In the beginning part of the song can be, often, though not always, heard as is seeking the consent of the spectators for the performance to start. The song in its typical colloquial language celebrates the virtues of sacred figures such as Beevi Khadija, Fathima and Prophet Mohammed. Through a vivid ritual musical dance performance it tries to recreate the past of the community by referring to the models of perfect life in Islam, Mohamed, Fathima and Khadija etc. The song is simultaneously a ritual and a glorious idolization of the aforementioned sacred figures.

This mode of celebration has a conscious process of identification by the bride and groom with those sacred figures: these sacred figures are the perfect model for them to live their life as Muslims.This process of identification has an inherent tool of creating a socio-cultural identity of which the image of the bride is set as a stereotype, "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing" (Judy Pearsall). The prototype, Khadija, and the stereotype, the image of the bride in the performance are unified.This unified stereotype representswomen in a socio-cultural milieu that signifies the Mappilas in Malabar. With the art form this cultural milieu tries to locate all the Muslims in Kerala, though they differ themselves with cultural variants in tune with regional differences. The idealization through the spectacle reinforces the religiosity and morale. The colourful ritual performance by a team of young women, Oppana tries to celebrate the lineage and reinvokes memories of the traditional past of the community against any discernible attempt of cultural imperialism the dominant social group tends to drill.

The popular oppana songs really add to the charm of the spectacle. They can be interpreted at multiple levels: linguistic, cultural and thematic. The songs are inseparable parts of the performance. The dancers move and behave in course of the performance in tune with the songs. A group of singers, who may or may not be part of the dance, sing the song.The songs traditionally embody teasing and pleasing comments on the shy bride,

besides seeking marital bliss from the spectators around. The language of the songs is a combination of Arabic, Tamil and Malayalam.

Thematically the songs' inherent motive is to enhance the religious ways of marital life, the mutual unity of the husband and wife and devotion to the way the prototypes modeled for the happiness of life. Apart from the moral, ritualistic and religious republic the popular oppana songs try to create for the spectators, what attracts us most is the way the republic of the erotic is at work in the domain of the song. The 'teasing' nature of the song finds meaning in the literary and emotive language in which the songs are produced. The parole of the song is replete with phrases and idioms that carry connotations of the physical union of the two whose marriage is socially consummated through the ceremony and the ritual of which oppana is a part. The songs try to create an anxiety, especially in the bride, but apparently in the spectators about the erotics associated with the institution of marriage. The physical pleasures the institution of marriage would sanction to the two is forecast in the song.The erotic space of the songs seems to "be able to satisfy their curiosity about sex directly," and to transform the adult spectators "as invisible voyeurs positioned to view the sex"act" itself rather than only hearing about it" (Linda Williams, 2). The institution of marriage is sanctified and mythified through the 'bliss-to-come' narration of the song lies at one level whereas the domestication of sex, especially the female sexuality, as the desired, accepted and the disciplined is conspicuous on the other side: "sex acts can be communicated to viewers only through certain visual and aural conventions of representation" (Linda Williams 122).

Oppana, as an art form, is also a highly patriarchal product in multiple ways. A close reading of the textuality of the spectacle of oppana throws light into its broader limits of politics. The politics of patriarchy and the institutionalization of it are visible in the whole of oppana beyond question. They are prima facie functional at two levels: at the outset, oppana as an art form, though performed by the fair sex, seems to be a hefty patriarchal product. But at the deeper level, the ideological terrain with which the art form is impregnated clues us also at patriarchy. The song's conscious attempt to glorify the bride groom as the source of bliss to the bride invites further concerns pertaining to the patriarchal agent, whom the bride in the life to come is described as to treat with undue respect, obedience and loyalty. The song seems to celebrate these qualities- respecting, religious, patience, obedience, loyal and dedicated- of the bride as customary that the physical as well as the personal life of her would prove blissful in the long run. The songs, in their conscious effort to celebrate the strand of desire for the human other, objectifies "the desire not only for pleasure but also for the "knowledge of pleasure," the pleasure of knowing pleasure" (Foucault qtd. in Williams). He is the all knowing and the provider of everything assumes to be inherent, yet unambiguous, in the epistemic space of the cultural existence of the textuality of oppana. It is at his hand, with him, or at least beside him that she experiences the pleasures, the bliss and the euphoria, if she can imagine she can ever attain it: "women are different but did not actively seek detailed knowledge of women's pleasure" (Williams).A highly euphemistic language of the songs of popular oppana, which contains "the metaphor ofspeech-of discourses of sexuality as ways of talking about sex-hasbeen crucial to this construction" (122).The language seems to reiterate the idea that *his* knowledge about *her* pleasures is more valid and authentic. The way the figure of the bridegroom narrated and portrayed in the Oppana songs indirectly authenticates his knowledge of her lack of knowledge about the production of pleasure in many ways.Thus the whole spectacle of popular oppana and the temporal and spacial ambiance and atmosphere it transmits through distinct performative or verbal techniques like "All sound,

whether music, sound effects, or speech, thus functionsto bolster the diegetic illusion of an imaginary space-time andof the human body's place within it" (122).

One of the most significant patriarchal motives in Oppana lies in the fact of *gaze* that the spectacle invites as is being performed. It is performed by a group of young women. The space of the performance becomes an exhilarating spectacle of gaze. The spectators include both men and women: women are willingly and silently objectified or rather the female body is irresistibly transgressed as unfailing objects of male gaze. The body of the women and especially that of the bride is enormously fetishized and "valued as objects, things;…Subject to the logic of phallocratic domination of nature,…her value as a sexual being, appears in their measurement"(Iris Marion Young 78). The social and cultural practice of the performance sanctions the male gaze in this space. This space of oppana, thus legitimizes the male gaze directed to the female body which is firmly rejected on the religious grounds in the community. Hence what is uncultured involved in the spectacle prevails cultured and forms a social defense mechanism against the repression. The base of this male gaze has deep erotic implications. The male spectator derives pleasure which is highly erotic. It gives immense visual pleasure to the patriarchal psyche that male spectator specifically experiences arousal that "may occur, may seem like reflexes, but they are all culturally mediated" especially in "the visual pleasure and spectator sport" intrinsic of the artistic space of Oppana (Williams 5).

The performance portrays a stereotypical image of the bride adorned in jewellery and costumes. The figure of the bride is no way a simple centre of performance but it transmits the economyingrained in the institution of marriage. The bride is objectified at two levels: an object of erotic gaze and as an economic object. This stereotype, a construct modelled on the prototypes, is an ingenious source that transgresses the legitimization of economy transaction associated with the ritual. The ritual itself becomes a social channel of legitimized economic flow. The bride is jewelled in abundance assuming to celebrate the custom of using jewelry. The jewellery, generally gold, thus used by the bride,is believed to be a "Status Symbol" as it conveys the bride's "family's status and wealth" and a symbol of bride's "luck and happiness throughout the married life" (Divya Bhargavi).The gold ornaments, a normative of the bride's physical appearance in the performance as "a symbol of affluence, authority, health, wealth, feminity and prosperity within Indian culture"(Prabhjot Kaur) is pragmatically wealth or asset in economic terms as "gold is considered an equivalent for liquid cash" (Bhargavi) and"pure surplus capital" (Kevin Murray). The image of the bride is internalized, as stereotype, by the community and the bride's use of the jewel as a social practice prevails over the religious preferences in this regard. A conscious tableau of socialization *economic disciplining* through the cultural artefact is clearly evident in oppana and "the disciplinary practices well have operated more powerfully on the bodies of women than on those of men" (Foucault qtd. in Williams 4). Moreover the ritualistic spectacle of popular Oppana unconsciously shares the antique notion that women "fail to imagine their pleasures outside a dominant male economy" which has "institutionalized pleasures" through its powerful body of ideology (Williams 122).

Conclusion

"A genre and an ideology that is most transparently about sexual difference as viewed from a male perspective", popular oppana is a highly patriarchal artefact that is impregnated

with indomitable campaigns of patriarchal ideologies and politics (Williams). As an art form it disseminates the self and identity with its cultural traits that the social and religious group has imbibed over the years. The socialization of the economic disciplining and the spectrum of irresistible gaze channelized in popular oppana to serve the patriarchal ideology invite further insights into the textuality of popular oppana. At the same time, the conscious efforts to seek and reflect on the religious lineage of the community to construct and define their identity- religious and cultural- can be seldom rejected. Moreover, Oppana is an art form with folk elements that has its own aesthetic qualities which make it unique.

References

Bhargavi, Divya. ***Why do Indian Women Love Gold Jewellery.*** https://www.quora.com/. Retrieved on 11/11/2016.

Das, Sheelita. ***Folk Theatre-Its Relevance in Development Communication in India.*** Global Media Journal-Indian Edition/ISSN 2249-5835.Winter Issue/December 2013/Vol.4/No.2.

Murray, Kevin. ***Aesthetics Versus Ethicsjudgement Day for Contemporary Jewellery.*** http://kevinmurray.com.au/ Retrieved on 10/11/2016.

Oppana. www.keralaculture.org. Retrieved on 17/11/2016.

Pearsall, Judy**.** ed. **Stereotype.** *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*. London: Oxford UP, 2000.

Prabhjot Kaur. ***Women and Jewellery -The Traditional and Religious Dimensions of Ornamentation.*** https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303844521.January 2012. Retrieved on 10/03/2016.

William, Linda. ***Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."*** Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. Print.

Young, Iris Marion. ***On female body experience: "Throwing like a girl" and other essays.*** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.Print.