

Paranormal as the Tool for the Exploration of Insanity in *Yakshi* by Malayattur Ramakrishnan

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Abstract: *Paranormal refers to what lies beyond the borders of normal, a collection of experiences and figures that rationality fails to explain. Paranormalism is found in literature from ancient times. It is a very interesting area for writers as it manipulates human emotions and hence fantastic stories can be woven. In his novel Yakshi, Malayattur Ramakrishnan combines normal and paranormal to give rise to a gripping psychological drama. The first person narration of the story that travels between past and present takes the reader into a state of confusion regarding what is real and what is unreal. In this paper I intend to look at paranormalism as a device to explore the notions of insanity. I use Freud's concept of unconscious and Yakshi myth as the base of my analysis.*

Keywords: *paranormalism, insanity, complex, imagination, reality*

Full Paper

About the author and the Novel

Malayattoor Ramakrishnan was a very versatile writer, cartoonist and journalist who hailed from Palakkad, Kerala. Apart from being a creative person he had also been a practising lawyer and an IAS officer. His stories, novels and memoirs were welcomed alike by readers because of their fascinating variety. His celebrated works include *Verukal*, *Ponni*, *Yanthram*, *Yakshi*, *Paambu*, *Soochimukhi* etc. His most famous novel *Verukal* has autobiographical elements in it, *Ponni* deals with a tribal romance, *Yanthram* talks about the unrevealed facets of governance in India. The style of his writing is so intriguing that the reader gets immersed in it. *Yakshi* by Malayattur is one of the most fascinating tales ever told in Malayalam so far. It is a very popular novel which has been translated into Tamil, Hindi and English. Published serially as *Mukham* in a Malayalam weekly, it was made into the book format titled *Yakshi* in 1967. It was filmed in the same year under the same title. Both the movie and the novel were instant hits, the former being the first psycho thriller movie in Malayalam. *Yakshi* was also filmed in Hindi as *Mohini* in 1995 and adapted into a contemporary context in a recent

Malayalam movie titled *Akam*. It had also been telecasted in *Off the Shelf* programme of BBC World Service. *Yakshi* is a psychological thriller novel that explores the hidden arenas of human mind. Chemistry lecturer Sreenivasan, a handsome young man desired by many women, meets with an accident in his lab which leads to the horrific disfiguration of his face. Shunned away by his lover and the world itself, he turns into an addictive research on yakshis and black magic in Kerala. His life takes an unexpected turn when the unearthly beautiful Ragini walks into his life, whom he later suspects to be a yakshi and finally kills ending up as a criminal and a lunatic at the same time.

The Paranormal

Paranormal elements figure in literature from time immemorable. Figures and experiences that lie beyond the realm of our normal perception has always been a fascinating area for writers. In English literature, traces of paranormal elements can be seen right from Arthurian legends and the works of Cretien de Troyes. Later Shakespeare and Marlowe used it as an effective tool of fascination in their writing. Eighteenth century witnessed a gothic tradition in English but all gothic literature was not paranormal literature. In twenty first century literature, we have paranormal literature as a specific genre and have subgenres like paranormal romance. Paranormalism in which logic and rationality has no role is generally considered as opposite to science, “At the time of the rise of the physical sciences and their cold equations, the paranormal emerged in France as a Cartesian reaction to this invasion of *res extensa*, which threatened to sweep away the privileged role of mind as opposed to matter” (Slusser 24). In Cartesian culture paranormalism is an accepted phenomenon, in which the other realm is the dwelling place of ghosts and phantoms free from the laws of material world. “In a Cartesian culture one can accept the paranormal as something that functions like science's pineal gland. This assures the interface between the material world and the unique qualities associated with the human mind, as opposed simply to a material brain” (Slusser 25). The point of intersection of these two worlds is interesting because binaries like possible-impossible, logical-illogical, rational –irrational merge beautifully giving rise to gripping pieces of literature like the one I intend to explore here, *Yakshi*.

India being an exotic country provides room for paranormal entities in literature like in the stories of *Vikramaditya* and *Bethal* which has translations in almost all Indian languages. If we go from state to state, it is sure that we find paranormal beings specific to each cultures like the ‘*Daayan*’ or ‘*Chudeil*’ and the ‘*Yakshi*’, interestingly many of them are female figures. *Yakshi*, according to mythology is the counterpart of *Yakshan* and both are attendees of Lord *Kubera*. *Yakshi* features the typical Indian notion of female beauty; supple body, narrow waist, fuller breasts, long hair, magnetic eyes and a luring smile. According to legends in Kerala, *Yakshi* is the lonely female that lures young men to her dwelling, the palm tree, with her beauty only to savour them and discard only the bones and hair the next morning. She appears in a number of literary works like *Aithiyamaala* by Kottarathil Shankunni. ‘*Kalliyankaattu Neeli*’ is one legendary figure that Keralites are familiar of. The gigantic sculpture of *yakshi* in Malampuzha gardens by Kanai Kunjiraman is quite a vision to look at. In this paper I intend to examine how the concept of paranormalism is used to explore the notion of sanity. For this I use Freud’s idea of the unconscious in the framework

of the yakshi myth. As I use the original Malayalam copy of the book, the quotations are given in translation.

Sreenivasan, the handsome protagonist of the novel, had always been proud of himself in terms of academic qualities and physical features alike. The fair complexioned Sreeni had a perfect face with high cheekbones, deep eyes, thick moustache and a fit body being the best tennis player of the college, making his students drool over him. He was a respected person in social and professional circle whose personal life was equally perfect with his girlfriend Vijayalakshmi. He beamed with confidence and a feeling of superiority attributing to his long list of qualities. But the Sreeni we meet in the beginning of the novel in a mental asylum narrating his own story doesn't have a tint of confidence and aura he once possessed. The fatal accident in his lab that involved a severe acid burn carved the left side of his face into a gory mess. He lost his left eyebrow, half of the nasal bridge and his left cheek looked like molten wax inside a thin membrane of skin. The first instance of paranormalism is seen here when he looks into the mirror after his treatment and finds a beast there. The air of superiority vanished and that of inferiority thickened in him. The rejection of his girlfriend and the insult from his students and colleagues made him shrink into a shell where he needed something to engage himself. That is where he starts a research on yakshis and black magic of Kerala. Paranormalism here is an escape from the harsh realities of his newly changed scenario. His colleagues are surprised about his new found interest, doubting the compatibility between science and superstition which goes as:

ഒരു സയന്റിസ്റ്റു മന്ത്രവാദത്തിൽ വിശ്വസിക്കുകയോ?
വിശ്വസിക്കുന്നെന്ന് ആര് പറഞ്ഞു? ഞാൻ പറിക്കാൻ നോക്കുന്നു. മുൻവിധികളില്ലാതെ ഞാൻ അന്വേഷണം നടത്തുന്നു. അതല്ലേ ഒരു സയന്റിസ്റ്റിന്റെ ജോലി?

A scientist believing in black magic?

Who said that I believe? I try to study. I enquire without being judgemental. Isn't that what a scientist should do? (Ramakrishnan 18)

But as the novel progresses Sreeni proves himself wrong. His underlying complex about his appearance is what actually pushes into something beyond normal because he starts to consider himself as not a normal being. Physical beauty was a key component of the foundation of his confidence that upon losing it he confirms that a normal life is something beyond him now; that he would never have a woman in his life “മുത്തശ്ശിക്കഥകളിലെ പെൺകുട്ടികൾ മാത്രമാണ് കൂനന്മാരെയും വിരൂപന്മാരെയും മുടന്തന്മാരെയും വിവാഹം കഴിക്കുന്നത്” “only the girls in grandma tales marry men with hump or limp or who are disfigured”(Ramakrishnan 19).

Ragini, the unearthly beautiful woman walks into Sreeni's life when he is totally crushed by his horrible appearance. She glides into his world effortlessly on a fine night, alone, making it revolve around her. Sreeni is instantly drawn to her because she appeared calm and loving when seeing his face. All their meetings happen accidentally in the time of night and strange things happen after her visit to his home like the flowering of 'Paala' tree (Indian devil tree), middle aged neighbour conceiving and the neighbour's dog behaving weirdly. The whole instance is presented as a parallel to the age old legends of Yakshis luring people to them; gorgeous woman alone at night easily obliging to a young man. The use of symbols like Paala tree (whose smell is associated with yakshis), foetus (which is said to be

Yakhis' favourite delicacy) and the dog (that can sense things beyond normal) adds to the paranormal aura of the work. Sreeni doesn't sense anything unusual about the sudden appearances and disappearances of Ragini then but is delighted that he is being loved by the most beautiful women in the world. Their first kiss is such a rejuvenating experience for Sreeni, "എന്റെ ആത്മവിശ്വാസം കര കവിഞ്ഞൊഴുകി ഒരു സുന്ദരി എന്തെങ്കിലും ചുംബിച്ചുവെന്നല്ല എനിക്ക് തോന്നിയത്. എന്റെ മുഖം തിരിച്ചു കിട്ടിയിരിക്കുന്നു" 'My self confidence overflowed. I felt like I got my face back, not only that a beautiful girl kissed me.' (Ramakrishnan 41). Hence Ragini becomes his confidence, his solace and his pride so that he decides to marry her. Ragini is his tool for momentary success in front of people who insulted him as in the case of Vanaja, a student, whom he once discouraged for a sexual advance ; he enjoys the disbelief in Vanaja's eyes upon seeing Ragini. The paranormal here is employed to elevate the mental state of the subject pushing his complexes aside; Sreeni is made dependent on Ragini as a source of his happiness.

Sreeni had thought that marrying Ragini would shower upon him all the happiness in the world. Instead it actually leads to an array of doubts and confusion. Sreeni is intoxicated by Ragini's beauty but discovers that he fails each time he attempts a physical contact with her. He is confused by this unexpected turn of events that he begins examining his sexuality. After the acid accident, he began feeling an unusually heightened sexual urge that he once felt like raping Vanaja and in another occasion ended up with a prostitute. In Freudian sense, Sreeni's id tried to break all chains of moral conventions drag the repressed desires out of the unconscious. This urge to conquer a female stemmed from his realization of his disfigurement; that no girl would lovingly consent him. At the prostitute's place Sreeni encounters with his failure but he attributes it to the lack of love, but with Ragini his failure petrifies him" മുമ്പിൽ ഇരുട്ടു പരക്കുന്നതായി തോന്നി ഞാൻ ആരോഗ്യവാനാണ് ബലിഷ്ഠനാണ് കോളേജിലെ ഒന്നാമകിട ഒന്നിന് കളിക്കാരനായിരുന്നു എനിട്ടും . . ." 'I felt like darkness crawling in. I am healthy, strong. I was the number one tennis player in college. Still...' (Ramakrishnan 61). He helplessly tries to argue with himself repeating the tennis player thing each time he fails. There is also a dream that occurs to Sreeni multiple times; a stairway leading to heaven on which beautiful women welcome him. On the top there is a gorgeous lady, but the lady cries as she sees Sreeni. Gradually the lady in Sreeni's dream gets Ragini's face and hence he interprets it as symbolic of his impotency.

The death of neighbour's dog Judy triggers a long chain of horrifying doubts in Sreeni. He lands in a state of confusion where he starts to analyse all events related to Ragini. Ragini's vague whereabouts, her indifference to his burnt face, her easily obliging to his wishes and sugary words and the series of strange events after her arrival in his house intensifies his doubts. He also recalls a weird incident in Kanyakumari where he blacked out and later found his lip bleeding. He begins to feel that Ragini's back is hollow and feet don't touch the ground. The bleeding lips actually is a prominent aspect of yakshi stories where they try to drink the blood of the victim; hollow back, floating feet and extreme beauty is the typical features of a Yakshi. The author cleverly uses the paranormal here as the driving force behind Sreeni's loss of mental stability. Sreeni's complex about his appearance, his impotency and his history of research in black magic and yakshis urges him to almost solidify his doubts. His dreams about neighbour Kalyanikkutti's abortion which happens after a few days leaves

him horrified as he believes it was Ragini who ate the foetus . Sreeni avoids Ragini and talks to his friends about his doubts only to get labelled as mentally unstable. He gets hallucinations about heavenly music playing at night, the Paala tree turning into a Gandharvan and Ragini walking to it. The recurring dream about crying Ragini finds a new interpretation, “ആ കോണിപ്പടി സ്വപ്നത്തിന്റെ അർത്ഥം ഇതാണ് .മുകളിലത്തെ പടിയിൽ കയറരുത്,ആ പട്ടമെത്തയിൽ കയറിയിരിക്കരുത് . അത് നിന്റെ ചൂടുകാടാണ് .മടങ്ങൂ! ഉരുണ്ടു വീഴൂ! ഭൂമിയിലേക്ക് !” ‘ the stairway dream actually means this. Do not climb the top stair. Do not sit on that silk bed .That is your cemetery .Go back! fall down to earth!(Ramakrishnan 120).

The scientist in Sreeni is only awake now in forming theories regarding Ragini’s past where he connects two incidents of young men dying and wife gone missing as parallels to his own story. Sreeni cannot differentiate between real and unreal, his mind get crammed with weird assumptions and superstitious beliefs that he harms Ragini when she confronts him with his impotency. The truth doesn’t hit Sreeni where it should have been to lead to the realization of his problem but hit his ego; the number one tennis players ego. Paranormal now becomes Sreeni’s resort to run away from his failures that he decides to kill Ragini. His neighbour Anandan’s efforts to pacify him with Ragini’s real story of being a women who had been married once and discarded only cements his doubts that everyone is turning against him. Sreeni doing unimaginable things like ‘urumbuhomam (ant sacrifice) ,‘aaniyadikkal’(piercing iron nail on the forehead, here Ragini’s) and chopping of the Paala tree is proof that he has now lost his sanity completely . ‘Urumbu homam’ and ‘aaniyadikkal’ are typical methods mentioned in the legends of yakshis to destroy them. The employment of those in the text intensifies the degree of Sreeni’s insanity. On one such horrific situation, Sreeni actually kills his wife which but his insane mind believes something else; that Ragini vanished into air.

The Sreeni we meet in the mental asylum is a person who lives in an imaginative world, or rather the one that oscillates between sane and insane worlds. In his version, Ragini ,a Yakshi, told the story of her centuries old love to a poet who had a burnt face and disappeared as smoke. Sreeni is at peace now because he has answers for his questions, “Ragini loved him, she hadn’t come to his life to kill him, she lives in another world; a paranormal world: our worlds are different. Both have different rules” (Ramakrishnan 161). Sreeni has completely lost himself into hallucinations where he sees the other world as one with silver rivers, blue sun and red tunnels. He now suffers from the guilt of suspecting Ragini, of losing her, the only women who loved the beast while the world outside is screaming for the justice of the murdered wife Ragini. The last court scene where Sreeni who is half delirious sees the only hand raised in favour of his release and he conforms that to be Ragini’s. The paranormal here is the base of his mental peace. The urge to be loved and inferiority complex was what brought Sreeni to the peak of insanity, now imagining that he had been loved, Sreeni finds peace but never leaves that world. Sreeni is the victim of his own complex; an example for how human mind can react when something disastrous happens. His high intelligence and imaginative power coupled with his anxieties and disbelief in Ragini’s intentions of coming into his life lead him to creative a whole paranormal version of world where he is trapped at first and liberated in the last. As Sreeni rightly asks, “ഭാവനയുടെ മുൻപന്തിനു ഭ്രാന്തൻ പേരിട്ടുകൂടെ?” ‘couldn’t the peak of imagination be called as insanity ?’ (Ramakrishnan 6)

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