

Thangam: The Depiction of Trans Trauma in a Heteronormative Society

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Abstract: This study titled ‘*Thangam: The Depiction of Trans Trauma in a Heteronormative Society*’ carried out by Maryam Salim, a research scholar of Kerala University is an attempt to analyze the trauma experienced by individuals on the basis of gender and individual choices, how media is instrumental in propagating false messages, and the trauma associated with the complete disavowal of the established codes as well as the trauma of those who witness it.

Paava Kadhaigal is a 2020 anthology series directed by Sudha Kongara, Gautam Vasudev Menon, Vetrimaaran and Vignesh Shivan. *Paava Kadhaikal* is translated as ‘Stories of Sin’. The anthology examines the theme of honor in different contexts. The episodes explore how sexuality, caste, pride, honor and disobedience become instrumental in executing the heinous act of what we call ‘honor-killing.’ The study also endeavors to examine the consequences of traumatic experiences upon an individual and how the images of crime continue to exert and influence those who witness trauma on the screen. This study examines the trauma of the third gender in a heteronormative society.

Keywords: *Paava Kadhaigal*, trauma, heteronormativity, estrangement, visual media, honor

During the lockdown period, smartphones became a savior for all those who missed the movie experience. Smartphones that allow the user to connect to the internet are available and open to all. The screening of movies is no longer restricted to theatres. When the joy of frequenting theatres was restricted, OTT platforms ensured that the movie experiences of the spectators remain unchanged. When the whole world was gripped by a pandemic, Netflix offered, and is still offering a grand treat to those who were glued to Smartphone screens.

One of the popular outlets for obtaining digital copies of movies has been Netflix. Subscription to Netflix allows users to legally watch movies that are available in Netflix (Mitra, 27). It is also a challenging task for the content producers to create material that would call the attraction from a large audience and any content that would offer something unique is

likely to become popular. There is a constant quest to find something special that would also meet the general expectations of the audience.

The process of storytelling is happening everywhere. Narratives have enormous power to impact the public's opinion about a community, group or a nation. As Benedict Anderson said in his 'Imagined Communities,' community and people are always imagined around the way they are represented through language and images. The material that we are offering to people informs their opinion about us. Such representations in popular culture are critical in what kind of attributions is made to a place, country, and people. Knowledge of the stories about a person, community, group or population would allow for a specific understanding of the subject of the stories. It becomes especially powerful when the stories become connected with each other or repeat themselves, and are circulated within a popular culture over and over again (Mitra, 3&4).

What kind of image conjures up in your mind when you hear of Arab culture? Of course, images of belly dance, desert, camels etc. rushes to our mind. Women lounging, half naked dancing to erotic tunes, exotic, colorful, seductive and a plethora of sensual imagery ravage the internet world as well as the minds of people. We have acquired this through numerous narratives like The Arabian Nights. Attributes are not critical constructs, but these are real things that people do, based on their best understanding of a situation. But attributions should be authentic. If not, it impacts the behavior and perceptions of the spectator.

Every society follows a set of practices. These practices inform the nature of their culture. This is called 'culture of honor.' People who are part of a culture know what to expect. In other terms, they are taught exactly what they should expect. And people are trained to act according to the cultural expectations. This is called Cultural Fluency. Culture is a specific meaning-making framework, a "mindset" that influences what feels fluent, what is attended to, which goals or mental procedures are salient (Oyserman, 2011). Yet, people do sometimes experience violation of their culture-based expectations. This is called cultural disfluency. Cultural disfluency arises as a result of a mismatch between culture-based conscious or unconscious expectation and situation. One finds it extremely difficult to adjust with such a rigid society because the inner values nurtured by the self and the outer social demands are incompatible and totally unacceptable at times.

Taking action to avenge slights and restore reputation is experienced as necessary by some people and in some societies more than others. In 'honor' societies, what others think matters and undivided attention to the possibility of losing face or losing respect is placed above everything else. Honor is equated with the dignity of a person and it is often mistaken with morality. The obsession with 'honor culture' makes people go to any length even if it may cost a life.

Past is just a story that can be changed only if serious and deliberate efforts are taken to alter it. The difficulty to do so arises due to the patriarchal nature of the myth and the fact that it articulates falsehood. The fact that the stories are set in the past century is a contributing

factor to establish the truth that nothing has really changed even in this era. Similar crimes continue to spring up even today and the cultural attitudes of society cannot accept anything that crosses the limits set by them. Anybody who is caught violating the norms are deemed unfit to the society and inhuman actions are carried out to either mend their so called deformities or drive them away from the society.

Paava Kadhaikal explores the issues that are very rarely addressed in Indian movies. With the three levels of culture proposed by the culture as cognition theory, it is possible to examine the way cultural practices and its perception of honor and shame and how it comes to influence the actions and judgements of people in a dangerous way. While the victimizer goes on to great lengths to keep up the appearance and expectations of societal values, the trauma of the victimized goes unnoticed.

People usually complain about irritating behaviour from trans genders. Mostly, this is true. But the fact we often ignore or fail to understand is our attitude that is the primary reason for this behaviour. We deny the existence of trans genders, dismissing same sex behaviour as immoral and disgusting. The term ‘transgender’ is an umbrella term which includes binary trans men and women, non-binary people, gendering persons and gender non-confirming persons. Their gender does not match with the one assigned to them at birth. This feeling of misalignment is called ‘gender dysphoria’. The term itself is used to describe those who transgress social gender norms. They include pre-operative and postoperative transsexual people who strongly identify with gender opposite to their biological sex (UNDP India Report, 2010).

Gender is deeply rooted in not ‘how we see ourselves’ rather ‘how others see us’. Trans genders stand against the notion where men have to be ‘masculine’ and women have to be ‘feminine’. UNDP (2010) studied the issues pertaining to transgender communities and stated that they faced various forms of oppression and health related hazards. One can also study how this community is excluded from participating in social and cultural life and have been restricted from gaining access to all the privileges that males or females enjoy without question.

In visual culture, South Indian films that are beacons of transgender visibility like, *Njaan Marykkutty*, *Super Deluxe*, *Ardhanaari*, and *Moothon* poignantly presents the lives of trans genders. The present chapter is grounded on observation of the story *Thangam* from the Tamil anthology movie *Paava Kadhaikal* and other relevant available materials in print and online pertaining to trans trauma. The section reflects on the causes of ostracization and exclusion of transgender and how media can help in bringing a change.

Thangam is the first story of sin starring Kalidas Jayaram, Shanthanu Bhagyaraj and Bhavani Sree. *Thangam* translates to ‘My Precious’. It sheds light on the several social elements that range from sexual orientation to gender identity and the insular living experience and echo chamber that gets established when people of same kind and thought process live with one another. The story is set in the 1980s in a small town. The central character is Sathar,

a transwoman who is mocked and bullied by the people in the name of her sexuality. The society and family expects her to behave like a man and her inability to do so puts her in danger. When the story begins with criticizing trans woman while Sathar was standing near the shop, the villagers drive her away in disgust. But she deals with it hiding her pain.

The issue of gender inequality continues to be an indispensable element in the society. Here, let's take a look at how gender evolves in the first place. Gender is performative. The theory of 'performativity' is associated with Judith Butler. It is influenced by the psychoanalytic theory concerning the unconscious formation of conscious desires and identities. Gender is repeated and this process of repetition is what helps in the continuity of assigning responsibilities against a certain gender. To participate in social life, one has to obey the established rules. Acting upon our instincts is not a matter of free choice rather we are forced to perform a gender.

By talking about gender as performative, Butler aims not only to describe the production of gender but also to identify the practices through which the rules and violence governing gender identity can be subverted. The gender is not the cultural expression of biological sex difference. It is an effect of gender performance. Gender roles are copied and imitated and we come to realise that it has become an inescapable reality. Gender is central to allocating roles, responsibilities, resources and rights in a society. These roles ensure that women are inferior to men in the traditional Indian household. But society also claims that women are goddesses even though their actions convey the opposite.

Eunuchs are considered as a third gender. Their lives are miserable. They are poor, illiterate and look upon themselves as cursed for the sins of their past life. They are rarely employed in regular jobs and hence often resort to prostitution and begging for survival, though many of them would like to lead normal lives. Even though homosexuality is legalized in India, they are often gripped in isolation, poverty, public ridicule and are treated worse than untouchables.

In *Thangam*, Sathar is the frequent target of harassment and mockery. She is a victimized not just by sexual abuse but also of a heterosexual normative that forces her to oblige to a life not of her choosing. Being a transwoman, Sathar expresses her wish to undergo sex reassignment surgery and even saves some money to do the same. It took her eight years of hustling at a ration shop to earn 15,000rs for her surgery. It is certain that her family would never consider this decision ever in their life. She chews betel leaves to make her lips dark red instead of using lipstick. She is aware that using cosmetics would infuriate her family. Her right to live as she pleases is denied by her family which has an Islamic Background. In an Islamic society homosexuality is a sin. If you are homosexual, you are considered to have no shame, to be abnormal, even; and you have no right to live as a normal citizen because you are living against human nature and religion. There is no respect or tolerance (Kargar,139). They have to hide their sexuality for fear of being punished or disowned by their parents.

Even if the story is set in an earlier era, it is about a transwoman who always knew she was different and who has learnt to live with it. Hiding is not an option, so she flaunts it. Sathar

is that one person among millions who wants to prove that trans people are as capable and deserving as any other person, thus breaking the stereotype. Trying to achieve her dreams in a country where people routinely mock and harass him makes her life even more miserable. Only Saravanan and Sahira are polite enough to treat him like one among them.

Sathar fears the hooligans around her and it is her childhood friend Saravanan who comes to her rescue. Even Saravanan is teased by the hooligans for his acquaintance with Sathar. Being a transwoman is a big taboo. If you hand out with them, you will be judged in a negative way for accepting them as friends. But Sathar sometimes allows for her own exploitation as she knows there is nobody to lend her a helping hand. Even Saravanan scolds her for her behavior and he is unable to accept Sathar's sexuality. In response, Sathar says, 'They get abused by their wives. Let them have their fun with me.' Her numbness to the abuse that she receives throws light at how sexual minorities are forced into prostitution for their survival.

A person like Sathar is unique in her lifetime. Sathar has been shunned by her family and the society. The entire village labelling her as 'it' or 'creature' or 'that one' sheds light on the torment and plight many individuals still experience in our society. A person like her confronts the same situation even in the present time. In October 2020, a Trans woman Sajana Shaji who was selling biryani on the roadside was harassed and attacked by shopkeepers. Even the policemen refused to file her complaint. Following cyber bullying and false accusations, she attempted suicide. People's attitudes to minorities are still the same.

The denial and rejection by her own family makes Sathar feel alienated but she endures the pain of ostracization and bullying until Saravanan hugs her while he is about to elope with Sahira. Her trauma spurts out all of a sudden when he says 'If I touch someone, they either take advantage of me or move away in disgust. Nobody's ever hugged me with love before, precious,' Sathar says tearfully. Her trauma shatters her identity and it had remained outside normal memory till then. The pain she endures is like a tumor in consciousness that wounds her very self. She is that person who is craving for a little bit of love from those around him. She suffers from anguish of existence in an antagonistic society. Sathar is not capable of communicating her feelings to others and he is spiritually and emotionally alone though she doesn't show it in her behaviour. The inability to connect with society results in exploring and seeking their own self. She spends most of her time alone gazing at the mirror, coloring her lips and looking at the childhood pic of Saravanan and herself.

Being a trans woman is more dangerous than being a girl. Sathar runs to her home before it gets too dark fearing sexual harassment from the hooligans. This approach to minorities are backed by an enforced invisibility which exposes them to discrimination and assaults. Sexual discrimination against sexuality minorities manifests itself in the production of ideology of heterosexism which validates only the malefemale sexual relationship as normal and renders all other kinds of relationship as invalid. The idea of heterosexuality has been so ingrained in our minds to make us blind victims of the old fool's game.

Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the normal mode of sexual orientation. It assumes that there are only two genders and that sexual relations are appropriate between people of opposite sex. Honor requires different things from men and women. Female honor involves shame, chastity, and purity. Honorable women may gaze down as a sign of modesty (Vandello and Cohen, 2003). In contrast, male honor involves potency, including strength, power, and agentic action. Male honor is based on toughness, strength, and power to protect oneself, one's property, and one's family from insults and threats (Nisbett and Cohen, 1996; Vandello and Cohen, 2003). Honorable men stand up straight as a sign of confidence (e.g., IJzerman and Cohen, 2011). So the conflict of autonomy remains as unfinished combat. This ideology pervades all dominant institutions like, family, marriage, public spaces, workspaces and in households. In a nutshell, almost everywhere, sexual minorities are oppressed.

Let us examine where this oppression stems from. The family is the first institution that perpetuates the heterosexual ideology. Most parents feel deeply worried and confused when they see their child's cross dressing. The moment children reveal their identity; their life takes a different turn. They go through human rights issue and bear the trauma of being a transgender all through their lives, though there are a few who rise above the anomalies that come their way. At a time when young people develop their identity and learn to express themselves socially, ostracization and discrimination can damage their self-esteem. This leads to exclusion, and stigmatization and it affects their mental health considerably.

Most homosexuals refuse to express their alternative fearing violent rejection and rebuke. If at all they disclose the truth they are disowned by their families. Even worse is the attempt of the families to let their children undergo a psychiatric treatment harbouring the hopes of bringing them back to heterosexuality. They may push them into marriage where the couples suffer from the burden of an unbroken marriage and their sexual freedom curbed. In one reported case, a boy studying in a prestigious college in Bangalore, when he came out to his parents, they chose to disown him. They stopped paying his college fees forcing him to discontinue his studies for one year. However, after a year had passed they were mollified enough to finally accept him. In another reported case a young man whose mother found out he was gay, she threatened to take legal action against him (Saxena, 216).

However, there are families who have taken time to adjust to a new reality, going through phases of denial, hatred, bitterness and finally acceptance. What needs to be learnt is that nothing prepares parents for such a disclosure considering the absolute lack of non-judgemental information. In popular culture consisting of organs of mass media such as the press, television, films, these don't offer any positive role models for relationships between sexuality minorities. Everywhere the call for freedom of trans genders resound, while practice lags. Sexuality minorities figure in popular culture only as objects of derision and replaying stereotypes of gay men as effeminate and lesbians as manly.

All our socialization is based purposively on sex. Certain temperamental characteristics are expected from people based on sex. If a person violates these expectations, much effort is taken to bring them back what society thinks is normal through punishments. Transgender individuals have frequent experiences of trauma, often related to societal prejudice, hatred, or intolerance, because of their gender identity (Mizock & Lewis, 2008; Richmond, Burnes, & Carroll, 2012; Singh & Burnes, 2010). Being the parents of a trans child is very shameful. Sathar is always scolded by her father for sleeping with her sisters and he also berates her for her feminine behavior. Sathar is even chided by her mother for her sexuality. She begs him to die at the hands of hooligans for the good of her family as she refuses to give her shelter. Her parents view her through the eyes of the society.

Curbing sexual freedom has also become the norm of the society. Sathar experienced multiple forms of violence including interpersonal, self-directed and collective. Sathar is chased by the hooligans even in daylight and nobody cares to help her out except her childhood friend Saravanan. Those around her remain as silent voyeurs waiting to see her robbed off her dignity. This is evident when Saravanan responds to the news of Sathar's death. 'Those who witnessed the crime are much worse than who committed the crime.'

Saravanan is always warned by his father to cut off his friendship ties with Sathar. His father expresses his anxiety that he may not get a suitable girl for marriage if he hangs out with Sathar. What happiness to Sathar at the end reveals that sexual minorities are seen as objects of pleasure, fun and derision. The discrimination based on sex is purely culture and not biological. Sathar is scorned by people because she doesn't exhibit manliness, rather she behaves in her own way. The hooligans take advantage of her body and kill her while the whole world turns a deaf ear to her pleas. Sathar runs to everybody for help. And the obstinacy and inhumane nature of the people in terms of sexuality costs Sathar her life. This is where it becomes evident how absurd the concept of gender is. To add to the misery, Sathar also extends her help in an inter community relationship which again goes against the interests of the society and this ensures that Sathar's pleas would remain unheard. The transgender community is disproportionately affected by violence (Wilchins, Lombardi, Priesing, & Malouf, 1997). Transphobia - prejudice, discrimination, and gender-related violence due to negative attitudes toward transgender identity—may pose a risk factor for experiencing trauma in transgender individuals. Unchecked negative attitudes towards transgender persons may result in transphobia. The impact of suffering on trans people as well as their families is so intense that the actions become violent and inhumane at times.

The views of society towards an individual, a group, or a community starts from us, because we are very much part of the society. If we change our mind-sets and choose to become rational and understanding, sooner or later the mind-set of society as a whole becomes more rational, progressive, and inclusive. This statement can be validated by looking into the changes happening in the lives of women. A girl child was restricted from getting educated in the colonial times. Most of them didn't even see the light of the day. But with greater

awareness and protests, the mind-sets of people have changed a lot in urban areas and the change is evident in rural areas as well. The same applies to transgender children as well.

Conclusion

Sathar is mistreated and harassed because of a deep rooted patriarchal mind-set which was also influenced by the views of British towards gender identity and norms. Anybody questioning norms was often ridiculed inferior. *Thangam* also instead of spreading awareness about their problems, portrayed him as a caricature, thus increasing social stigma and discrimination surrounding trans genders. It just shows the tragic outcome of expressing one's sexuality rather than presenting a solution to the issue

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