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## 'BEHIND THE FACADE OF SUBVERSION': EXTERIORIZING MALE FANTASY IN VADAKKAN PATTUKAL'S *BALLADS OF NORTH MALABAR*

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### **Abstract:**

Generally set against the backdrop of the feudal and medieval Kerala, ballads of Northern Malabar glorify and exalt the adventures of valiant men and women of Northern Malabar. This study mainly aims to demonstrate the apparent female heroism depicted in these ballads as sheer patriarchal constructions. The main objective of this study will be to challenge the hitherto notions generally attached to Vadakkan Pattukal as they constitute a paragon of female empowerment. Much attention has been offered to the study of specific ballad, Mathileri Kanni, from the point of its portrayal of heroic endeavours of the female characters. My intention is to look at it anew, reading it against the grain of the dominant patriarchal scholarship. In order to achieve this I would attempt to re-read the ballad by paying more attention to its narrative and poetic strategies that construct its meanings, thereby positioning the readers to understand the underlying patriarchal constructions employed in it from a specific point of view. Furthermore, in this paper, I would critically explore the various tropes of depiction of women which will evidently help to prove the deliberate obscuring of the male agencies. Moreover, the proposed study will strive to demonstrate how the general perception of cross-dressing as a possible avenue for exhibiting female sexual assertion and as a general liberative praxis gets completely overturned.

**Keywords:** *Vadakkan pattukal, patriarchy, stereotypes, gender, female heroism.*

Generally accepted as heroic ballads that exalt the adventures of valiant men and women of Northern Malabar, Vadakkan Pattukal holds a superior position in Malayalam folk literature. Among the diverse thematic and structural varieties of Vadakkan Pattukal, 'Ottapattukal' or single songs form a popular subgroup of ballads of great historical relevance. These are ballads that commonly laud the heroic endeavours of women. For the study, the research has concentrated mainly on one such 'Ottapattu', *Mathileri Kanni*. Believed to have originated in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the ballad is primarily centered on three female protagonists and distinctly portrays a social satire of the time.

Most of the Vadakkan Pattukal deals with the exploits in battles and in love, of the legendary heroic men and women of medieval Kerala. Among them, *Mathileri Kanni* distinguishes itself arresting, primarily for its complex plot structure. It largely centers around three powerful noble women, namely Mathileri Kanni, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni. The title character Mathileri Kanni, the daughter of Chirakkara Lord of the Kolathiri province, was brought up by her father who taught her martial arts in which she proved herself as a great warrior. She marries Venadu Prince who leaves his newlywed wife in her father's care and goes back to his homeland to address a political strife. In an interesting turn of events, Mathileri Kanni in the guise of a male warrior Ponnann, goes to battle in order to save her husband. Pleased with Ponnann, the Venadu Prince compels him to stay back in Venadu and entrust him with new administrative duties. Meanwhile, Venadu Prince's sister, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni madly falls in love with Ponnann whom she believed to be the man of her dreams. The plot gets further complicated when Churiyamani Kanni, consumed by her love for Venadu Prince, murder her sister Mathileri Kanni. Witnessing the death of his only daughter the Chirakkara Lord dies heartbroken and the

feeling of bereavement was so intense that Venadu Prince also dies. Thus, the ballad ends tragically with the death of all the three main characters.

The general reception of the ballad *Mathileri Kanni* throughout the ages as the embodiment of female empowerment sadly is left unquestioned. Readers are therefore inclined to identify this ballad as an instance of female chivalry. But whatever may be asserted about the female heroism of the ballad there are strong grounds to defy these contentions in order to bring into light the underlying male politics. The popular notion of exalting *Mathileri Kanni* as subversive is based on fallacious accounts as it is not entirely free from the hold of dominant ideologies. The invisible power dynamics sneaking behind the extravaganza need to be unveiled. The modern scholarship of the ballad fails to identify the oppressive structures used in the ballad that restrict the female characters from expressing their implicit privileges. Marilyn Frye asserts that oppression manifested can be “hard to recognize because individual, social, political, or economic arrangements, when taken on their own, do not seem to limit a person's freedom. It is only when one studies the whole system that it becomes clear that such structures limit the lives” (72). It will be through these lenses that I would critically endeavour to unravel the ballad's much distorted heroic understanding of the three female characters namely Mathileri Kanni, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni.

Except for a few published works, the studies so far done on *Mathileri Kanni* have not received any serious academic exploration. No official translations of the ballad have been reported. Most readings on *Mathileri Kanni* have assumed that the ballad reflects the socio-cultural reverberations of medieval Kerala and mostly in the line of caste and class. Besides a social-cultural approach towards *Mathileri Kanni*, most of the studies that have touched upon gender, have interpreted them as a vehement attack on the patriarchal society of the time. These studies depict the women in the ballad as courageous, aggressive and powerful, challenging the oppressive socio-cultural barriers. For instance, Payannur Balakrishnan's *Vadakkanpattukalile Veeranganamar*, a collection of fifty one stories of the heroic women of Vadakkan Pattukal, depicts *Mathileri Kanni* as an expression of female heroism. Through the current study, I primarily aim to prove that such general exposition of *Mathileri Kanni* as an assertion of female empowerment could not be impulsively applied.

The two main textual scholarships done on this particular ballad are by V. T. Kumaran and M. K. Panikkotti. Their studies seem facile as they evade hard political questions about gender and sexuality in *Mathileri Kanni*. These studies primarily foreground and idealize feminine stereotypes. V. T. Kumaran in his critical work studies the three central female characters, Mathileri Kanni, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni. He classifies them according to the three *gunas* advanced by the Sanhkhya school of Indian philosophy, namely 'sattva', 'rajas' and 'tamas' respectively. Furthermore, V. T. Kumaran declares that Mathileri Kanni epitomizes the 'sattvic' love; Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni, the 'rajasic' infatuation and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni the 'tamasic' sensuous love. Similarly, M. K. Panikkotti's critical study “Mathilerikanniyenna Mahakavyam” categorizes three female characters as Mathileri Kanni as *uttama*; Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni as *madhyama*; and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni as *adhama* characters. Such male denominations exclude female characters from articulating their true feminine self and thus indulge in censoring of feelings and emotions.

The portrayal of female sexuality in *Mathileri Kanni* seems itself quite vexing. Representation, according to Rey Chow, “is a word which indicates the process of the 'creation of signs' things that 'stand for' or 'take the place of something else’” (39). The depiction of female characters exercised in this particular ballad can be denounced and examined on various fronts. It is important therefore to cross examine and locate such erroneous depiction of feminine chivalry within the framework of oppression. How far does a women centered ballad like *Mathileri Kanni* exhibits female self, desire and femininity? The suspicion lingers in its portrayal of female characters either as weak or as devious. Butler asserts that the portrayal of female characters is often linked with several other aspects that essentially carry certain

“implications for how one should be viewed and treated; insofar as we structure our social life to accommodate the cultural meanings of the female (and male) body, females occupy an oppressed social position” (*Subjects of Sex* 160). Drawing cues from Butler's critical observations one can thus distinctly make a serious connection between representation and oppression.

The question of representation of women characters and its politics practiced in *Mathileri Kanni* need to be seriously re-read in order to unravel its underlying patriarchal ideology. Each representation shrewdly conceals the political ploy by rendering it a naturalized outlook. Most often such representations materialize itself as the result of male fantasies and anxieties. The male monolithic stereotyping of the female characters in the ballad further substantiates this. Male fantasy best gets exemplified in the delineation of the title character Mathileri Kanni. Strikingly enough, her disposition and temperament is absolutely defined from the moral and aesthetic demand of men. Mathileri Kanni is romanticized and sidelined in the entirety of the ballad by not providing sufficient space for conveying her true feelings and emotions.

The portrayal of the title character provides a typical example of male fantasy. The general understanding of the ballad's subversiveness mainly ensues from the cross dressing trope. Mathileri Kanni cross-dresses and takes the disguise of the warrior Ponnai. Even when she appropriates masculine identity and goes for the battle, the ballad fails to prove its transgressiveness. The character Mathileri Kanni appropriates specific male virtues along with conventional assigned feminine virtues. Mathileri Kanni is depicted as amalgamating male virtues without disrupting the feminine. One such instance can be noted in the scene where her father Chirakkara Lord giving advice to her before she takes the disguise of the male warrior. He says,

Aman must be known by his high and mighty valour;

While a woman by her modesty and restraint. (by the researcher translation)

Chirakkara Lord thus reminds his daughter not to flout her femininity even when she appropriates a male disguise. Such a demand obviously reflects a warning against the disgrace that may fall on the family. Mathileri Kanni was asked to subsume male valour with female dignity thereby strongly restricting her possibility of any kind of female transgression. Against the common perception that cross-dressing is a strategy to violate disciplinary patriarchal rules thereby acting as an empowering project for female characters, cross-dressing in the ballad does not necessarily curtail and reform the patriarchal dictates. Cross-dressing in *Mathileri Kanni* is a “vexed issue precisely because it explores the murky interface between the resilience of the individual pleasure and the constraints” (Bronfen 217) of male law. Located in such a paradigm, the question that needs to be seriously asked is what kind of subversiveness does the dominant readership ascribes to this ballad. Is it the supposed female heroism portrayed in the ballad? If so, can Mathileri Kanni's actions be termed as heroic? And who decides what female heroism is? Is there any power politics involved in preventing the female characters from any kind of transgression?

In the entirety of the ballad, it is found that Mathileri Kanni sticking to the ideal and thus her cross dressing is nothing but a harmonic blending of male and feminine virtues. What kind of transgression occurs in the ballad even when the character is seen unwilling to sacrifice the typical feminine ideals attached to her? On this ground the general exposition of this ballad as an instance of female subversion shatters into nothingness. Furthermore, the last episode of the ballad where Mathileri Kanni dies pleading forgiveness at her husband's lap for defying the laws once again reinstates the above point. Here the readers find the cross dressed female is being penalized with death punishment for her supposed transgressiveness. At this juncture, Butler's critical observation seems relevant. She asserts that if at all any sort of female subversion takes place in a work powerful in its patriarchal reverberations “it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law” (Butler, *Gender* 93). It is specifically along this line of thought the researcher wants to argue that the crossdressing trope used in this ballad cannot be read in the light of its disruptive traits primarily because it fails to repudiate the dominant patriarchal frameworks.

Moreover, it goes without saying that Mathileri Kanni's absolute humility through the entirety of the ballad seems deplorable. This is nothing but a kind of victimization. Reading along this line, it seems that all her actions are carried out in the form of sacrifice, which eventually ends in her fatal death. Mathileri Kanni plainly accepts her victimization from the very beginning of the ballad. For instance, even after knowing the dangers that lurk behind being on such an expedition, she determines to sacrifice herself for the Venadu Prince.

Even if I perish and battered by blades in the battle  
I would die seeing his face, my father! (My translation)

These lines suggest her absolute love and adoration for her husband which necessarily qualifies her perfect and therefore 'uttama' for Panikkotti. "Self-abnegation" (Glover and Kaplan 40) of power, a phrase also used by Lynne Pearce in her essay "Sexual Politics", seems to be the marker of her femininity which further points to the power dynamics underplayed. Mathileri Kanni's self-effacing character possesses no sign of interest to develop her own identity. She constantly appears in the ballad as someone who continuously merges her identity with that of her husband's and thereby deriving a state of contentment. Mathileri Kanni as a character thus proves itself as the fallacious extremity of patriarchy.

The type of feminine characterization the ballad exposes is fundamentally one of the male prejudices. Such a patriarchal enterprise seems to affirm only those facets of female character that concern to the masculine needs. Critically examining the three main female characters: Mathileri Kanni, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni of the ballad, one could easily discern the patriarchal monolithic stereotyping of the female. This in turn can be considered as an instance of male 'oppressive apparatus' used in the ballad. Strikingly enough, the title character Mathileri Kanni and all her importance is primarily defined and determined from the male point of view. Her nature and virtues are precisely defined from the moral expectations of men. Furthermore, it is essentially the male fantasy that determines femininity in terms of emotion, sensibility and sentiment.

In the essay "The Anxiety of Authorship", critics Sue Spaul and Elaine Millard draw largely on Gilbert and Gubar's observations regarding the male narrator's attempt to carve a "perfect" imagery of the women central to the "male dream of female perfection" (125). This male dream, according to the critics, is the most detrimental imagery dictated upon women characters. Spaul and Millard critically comment on how the two proliferating images of women, the 'angel' and the 'monstrous', in the male discourses hold a similar end" (125). The 'end' in itself is the disciplining and subjugation of women characters. Developing these observations and applying them to the study of this ballad specifically draws our attention to the patriarchal ascendancy over the female characters, namely Mathileri Kanni, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni. Denying these women a specific place in the social order, abducting their freedom and subjectivity by the dominant male agenda evidently projects these women characters in a light of ambiguity finally categorizing them as the 'other'. More pertinent to this discussion is how the male narrator within the patriarchal schema constructs an ambiguity that encircles the female characters in order to establish their otherness. Spaul and Millard's subsequent analysis of the 'angel' and 'monster' lying within a female character shows how she can readily mediate between both these images. Within this focus, we could trace a patriarchal schema adopted by the narratorial voice, especially in the case of Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni. She is portrayed both as an 'angel' and a 'monster' in the ballad. The dominant scholarship of the ballad identifies her monstrosity in terms of her being a seductress compelling Ponnann into adultery. Accordingly, Spaul and Millard suggest that these "contradictory images of woman created by man encapsulate his ambivalence towards female sexuality" (128). Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni's explicit sexual desire results in the sidelining of the character and causes ambiguities in the male scholarship. Her intense sexual urge for Ponnann can be clearly discerned during her conversation with her maid Kuttytheyi:

If I can surfeit my craving for him not at a rendezvous,  
 I will quench my thirst with a blissful conjugal life with him.  
 Forego I will princely amenities and Venadu itself for that  
 Regalia and riches, title and whatsoever avert me not. (Translation by the researcher)

Thus, the dominant male scholarship accordingly categorizes the female characters of the ballad into 'good/bad'. One such reading is V.T. Kumaran's study of the ballad *Mathileri Kanni*. His categorization of the female characters is primarily based on the *guna* theory of the Sankhya school. Accordingly, he classifies them as instances of 'sattva', 'rajas' and 'tamas' respectively. Thus, these characters are assessed on their implied inherent sexual desires. In contrast to the ideal title character, Mathileri Kanni, both Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni apparently exhibit their sentiments and emotions. This in turn is severely against the patriarchal morality and its censorship. Consequently, both the female characters are labelled as aberrant and ignoble. A similar partisan observation on female characterisation can be noted in M.K. Panikkotti's scholarly study conducted on the ballad *Mathileri Kanni*. In the particular work, he classifies Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni as 'madhyama' and Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni as 'adhama' characters. It is Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni's bold exposition of her sexual desires that made the male scholarship to codify her as evil. The male readership identifies her sexual desire and instincts as unclean mainly because of the common patriarchal delusion that women are barred from voicing their sexuality. It is also along this vein that Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni had been fatally criticized chiefly for declaring her love for Ponnann. If a female character falls for her passion and desire, she is demeaned and excluded from the mainstream. This explains the negative reception of both Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni and Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni in the mainstream scholarship of the ballad. Furthermore, Wolff claims that we can identify clear manifestations of patriarchal agenda underlying such stigmatizations of female characters which further points towards their subjugation. According to her,

the male projects his own broken emotions on to the women around him by mainly categorizing them into two distinct classes, namely 'good' and 'bad'. Consequently, 'good' women necessarily emanate his fondness and respect whereas the 'bad' women arouse him sexually. In literature it is such projections of the man's feelings that pave way to the stereotypes of the virtuous woman (who reflects his inhibitory tendencies (his 'superego') and the sensuous woman (who reflects his libidinal or 'id' tendencies) (Wolff 208).

Viewed thus, it could also be commented on the tone of the language employed by the narrator in this ballad to depict the women characters, which unquestionably discloses "the moral evaluation" (Wolff 209) of the female characters. Being presented as virtuous, Mathileri Kanni is essentially marked by certain aspects, such as, one who could bear untold miseries, who possesses unconditional love and devotion, and finally, who is "incapable of moral outrage" (Wolff 211). Again, Wolff's definition of the virtuous woman as one who is "never permitted to feel anger" (211) seems very true in the case of Mathileri Kanni. Moreover, according to Wolff, the character Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni, and more specifically, Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni, can be considered as "sensuous" women as they both exhibit certain characteristics which are generally claimed as "disruptive" in nature (209). For instance, V.T. Kumaran in his study defines Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni's desire for the Venadu Prince as emanating from intense lust and not love and categorizes her love for him as something barbaric in nature.

According to Wolff, the "sensuous woman is defined as sensuous because she affects men in a certain way (she arouses them, she makes them tend toward 'sinful' behaviour, she intrudes into their domestic arrangements in short, she is disruptive); and there is no place for such a character in any work of literature that is meant to conclude with social order" (209). This explains the general tendency of the dominant scholarship in viewing Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni as sensuous and the subsequent sidelining of the character. Since the male scholarship fails to see her attempt to seduce the Venadu Prince as an expression of sexual instinct, it often gets misinterpreted and categorized as vile. The critical explorations

about the categorization of the female characters into 'good' and 'bad' evidently signifies the underlying male agenda and more pointedly its reductive structure. The common critical practice of viewing Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni's sexual desire as perverse and therefore unacceptable, according to Wolff, necessarily reflects the patriarchal morality that governs the dominant readership of the ballad. Deconstructing the general interpretation of the characters as sexually perverse, Churiyamanikoyilom Kanni and Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni can turn out to be much strong and powerful as they distinctly voice their innate sexual desires. Unlike Mathileri Kanni, these two female characters, to an extent, challenge the patriarchal agenda by refusing to succumb to its moral censoring.

Again, the concept of 'chastity' can be considered as a symbolic dimension of patriarchal domination. Being a submissive and obedient wife gains her the favour of the Venadu Prince. The seemingly transgressive aspect of the ballad completely collapses when Mathileri Kanni attunes to the male domination scheme. It needs to be acknowledged that the dominant male readership inevitably has a sympathetic view of her submissiveness and passivity, mainly for silently conforming to the traditional idea of 'Pativrata Dharma' (Sujatha and Gokilavani 46). The fact that the character of Mathileri Kanni is not free from the sympathetic reception further exposes the male motif. According to the critics K. R. Sujatha and S. Gokilavani, the patriarchal authority inevitably devises concepts like 'good/bad' and 'acceptable/wicked' in order to characterise their ideologies. They further assert that "individual identity can be acquired only when these concepts are flouted" (47). The fact that Mathileri Kanni had never once attempted to transgress the male rules confirms her lack of an individual identity. Veena Jain argues that, "Patriarchy lays down the rules for the annihilation of the self of the female" (40). This observation gets reinforced in the ballad specifically when the narratorial voice exercises a moral appraisal of the female characters. Venadu Prince's extended speech on Mathileri Kanni's moral excellence exposes the devious patriarchal standardization enterprise. Venadu Prince draws largely on her moral attributes, beauty, intelligence that readily distinguishes Mathileri Kanni from other women of the eighteen lands and of the ten different clans. He praises her ability to conform to the rules of four different clans. Such idealization and worshipping, according to the critic Veena Jain, inevitably intends to restrict female sexual liberty. Undoubtedly, Mathileri Kanni's moral excellence curtails her sexual liberty by denying her an agency for expressing her innate desires and feelings. She is not presented as herself and, moreover, her 'self' is defined and regulated by the dominant male voice.

Moreover, the association of the female self with sentiments and slavery forms one of the main frameworks in which the patriarchal thought manifests. Prominent within these critical explorations, John Stuart Mill positions seems substantial. He examines mainly the working of male psychic regulation of the female self. Mill thus asserts that,

Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments. All men, except the most brutish, desire to have, in the woman most nearly connected with them, not a forced slave but a willing one, not a slave merely, but a favourite. They had therefore put everything in practice to enslave their minds (21).

Accordingly, Mathileri Kanni's psychological temperament completely fits to this critical paradigm. It is through the realm of sentiments and emotions that she has been subdued. Her idealness primarily rests on her unconditional love for her husband, Venadu Prince. Analyzing the character Mathileri Kanni in the light of the traditional prototype of chaste wife also binds her to the patriarchal agenda. Drawing arguments from the critic Val Plumwood, Veena Jain further analyses the role of the power structure by underlying the common practice of attributing virtues to women and the subsequent categorization. She remarks that categorizing women as 'good' does not necessarily empower them, but instead ostracizes them from the mainstream.

Furthermore, the illustrations of women characters in *Mathileri Kanni* are not free from the dominant male paradigm of womanhood which is deeply inherent in "grooming and beautification" (Jain,

J. 83). From the beginning of this ballad, one could easily decipher that it is the male focal interest that solely defines Mathileri Kanni and the other two female characters' sexual appeal. This argument can be further substantiated by the way they have often been portrayed in the text, specifically through the eyes of men. Their body parts are described sensually, exclusively projecting “its objectified appeal and its objectified vulnerability” (Glover and Kaplan 28). Implicit to women character descriptions in the text is the explicit sensual concentration on parts of their body. The reader's attentions are diversely directed to specific parts namely, their hair, eyes, cheeks, neck, bosom and arms. For instance, the ballad uses a list of phrases that describes female body parts namely, 'thatthamma chundu', 'aalila vayaru', 'kannadikotha kavilu', 'chitira pookavilu', 'poovinodotha pallu'. Moreover, the ballad indeed has numerous instances of enduring eroticization of bodily parts which often are impregnated with symbolic sexual implications. Of which the most frequently used in these is the eroticization of the characters' bosom.

*Marile marathaka kunnintha*  
*Marum mulathadam mudivechum*  
*Maru nirathali thankathali*  
*Marinadivaram thanu minni* (Kumaran 58)

In these lines, the narrator describes Mathileri Kanni's physical beauty which is primarily loaded with implicit overtones of sexuality. The initial word 'maru' corresponds to 'maridam' which refers to the bosom and the repetition of the word clearly implies the sexual emphasis placed on her bodily parts. One finds too many unnecessary sexual descriptions of female body parts clubbed on a single page. Evidently, the ballad's presentation of the female characters' seductive appearances is meant to gratify the pleasure and support the privileged male reader's power. All being said of the direct and indirect male gaze in the ballad, the representation of female characters also takes place in the ballad, through the character's own reflection in the mirrors, through the eyes of other women and even through the narratorial voice. The range of “narratorial collusion” (Glover and Kaplan 30) with sexualized imageries does indeed mark the ballad as mirroring the patriarchal sexual oppression. Thus, in accordance to Sandra Bartky's view, sexual objectification serves male dominance since it dissects an individual into parts in order to “elevate one interest above another” (108).

Again, in her essay “Five Faces of Oppression”, Marion Young takes up the question of respectability and locates it in the context of oppressive structures. She primarily does it by relating the idea of “discrimination” as an “instrument of oppression” (Young 92). These critical observations can further be extended in the analysis of the cross-dressing trope used in the ballad. The female character who disguises as a male warrior fails to get the same respectability of that of a man. Even though Mathileri Kanni appropriates the male mannerism of dressing, for instance, the 'veeralipattu', 'adayala mothiram', 'kacha' and 'ankathali', which can be identified as symbolic representations of masculine honour, it seems that Ponnan is deprived of the due reverence that his position as a chieftain offers. The ballad represents Ponnan primarily as sexual object for both male and female. For example, the following lines said by the Venadu Prince portray his interest in Ponnan and which in turn situates the latter as an object of sexual pleasure for the Venadu Prince:

On beholding your elegance and handsomeness  
I felt a sense of bewilderment  
A mysterious desire for you arose in me  
Verily I coveted you deep in my heart (My translation)

In the context of sexual objectification of Ponnan, the ballad exhibits a “paradoxical oppression” (Young 101) where the female character is demarcated by both stereotypes and rendered as inconspicuous.

Another serious issue that has to be critically examined in this context is the question of mobility. The critic Tim Cresswell defines mobility in terms of “socialized movement” (176). In his article entitled “Embodiment, power and the politics of mobility: the case of female tramps and hobos”, he brilliantly

analyses the idea of mobility as a social aspect that is chiefly linked with “meaning and power” (Cresswell 176). In the same vein, it would be suggested that even when Mathileri Kanni disguises as Ponnann and tries to appropriate masculinity, she fails to enjoy 'mobility' completely. It is true that she goes to the battle and thereby partially succeeds in penetrating the public space confined for men. Yet she does not wholly gain the social mobility assigned for a male chieftain. Implicit in this working is the traditional patriarchal notion of impurity and its constrictive structure. It can be substantiated by looking at the patriarchal restriction imposed on the character during her menstruation period, even when the character is under the disguise of a man. This gets reflected in the following lines of the ballad:

When the chief warrior, Ponnann  
Takes his monthly four days' fasting  
He shall not to be sought in his chamber  
Nor his Lord waits for him. (Translated by the researcher)

Even the disguised character Ponnann does not necessarily escape the constrictive patriarchal customs and practices. The idea of 'pollution' or 'uncleanliness' caused by a woman who has menstruation also gets entrenched in the ballad, when the character Ponnann is secluded into a four-day silence. Here, one could trace the dominant patriarchal animosity towards women.

Thus, contrary to the general conception of crossdressing maintained in the ballad as a 'liberativepraxis', it is a typical farcical portrayal of the female. The way in which Ponnann's plot of fallacious identities marks the comic glee built by the perplexity of clear gender categories applied in cross dressing must be considered seriously. It reflects completely a new dimension of misogyny depicted in the ballad. Such a critical reading can be attained only by exploring how the gender roles and sexual desires constructed and developed in the course of the ballad. The crossdressed female warrior, Ponnann, who becomes the locus of both male and female desire, is seen successfully performing the amorous play more tactically than any male characters. This can be an instance of humorous device where ironic implications are aimed to achieve a parody. The passionate episode between Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni and Ponnann in the former's private chamber is greatly charged with eroticism. The “verbal exchange between the cross-dressed heroine and the desiring subject” (Walen 65) is highly packed with sexual reverberations. For instance, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni's following words validates it,

From the very day of the royal feast  
I beheld your enchanting countenance  
Some unusual desire surged in me  
A never-ceasing desire as never before. (My translation)

The bedchamber episode is further amplified by the sexually charged scenes where the desiring subject, Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni, tries hard to seduce Ponnann. Initially, it is found that Ponnann deriving much pleasure in Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni's sexual entreaties. This can be asserted by the manner in which Ponnann incites her to express overtly her passionate affections for him. Even though, Ponnann clearly recognizes her intentions the former pretends as if s/he is bewildered. Ponnann repeats the following question four times in the entirety of bedchamber episode,

Let it be let it be, My Lady  
What is the reason of summoning me? (Translated by the researcher)

and each time Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni answers an overt exposition of her sexual craving for him. Such an enterprise could be apparently understood as a move tactically employed by Ponnann to essentially derive pleasure from Venadu Poonkoyilom Kanni's sexual appeals. Thus, the whole bedchamber episode can critically be apprehended as an instance of comical device where ironic overtones are mainly aimed to attain a parody. Even when this specific ballad is widely acclaimed to be a women-centered text it fails to convey a genuine female desire. At times, reading the ballad one may also feel that it does not seem to exist at all. What is portrayed as female heroism in this ballad is evidently an instance of trickery. The idea of



female heroism supposedly presented in this ballad is nothing but a mockery essentially reflecting the “insignificance of women” (Frye 86).

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