

Navigating through Patriarchy: A New Historicist reading of the Subversion and Containment in *Chirutha*

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Abstract

Chirutha is a Malayalam song written by Shruthi Sharanyam, composed and sung by Sudeep Palanad, which is well received by the audience for its novel portrayal of the *yakshi* myth and the progressive conception of femininity. By subjecting *Chirutha* to a new historicist analysis, this paper reveals the subversive undercurrents present in the text. New historicism is a theoretical area expounded by Stephen Greenblatt that encourages the parallel reading of literary texts and co-texts. In his essay, *Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion*, Greenblatt introduces two concepts, subversion and containment. Subversion refers to any attempt to change or undermine a political system, and containment prevents this change from disturbing the existing power structures. This paper employs a new historicist methodology and uses Greenblatt's 'subversion' and 'containment' as anchoring mechanisms to analyse the subversive activities undertaken by the 'Women in Cinema Collective', which is chosen as the co-text to initiate a parallel reading of the ways in which the stereotypes are subverted in the text, *Chirutha*. Thus, the paper sheds light on how the patriarchal structures contain acts of subversion. The text, a form of representation, and the co-text, the activities undertaken by Women in Cinema Collective, can be read parallelly because both are movements through the patriarchal structures, which in the long run have the potential to bring positive changes.

Keywords:

Subversion, Containment, New Historicism, *Chirutha*, Women in Cinema Collective

Introduction:

The Cambridge dictionary defines the word 'navigate' as finding a direction across, along, or over an area of water or land. (1) The word 'navigate' figures in the title because

navigation through a water body is comparatively more difficult than a movement through the land. This is mainly because there are no clear paths laid for the journey through the water as on the land. Only a few signs are available other than the basic navigational

markers, and weather conditions may not be always favourable for the journey. As this paper is an attempt to demonstrate how the text and the co-text make their way through the patriarchal structures, which, like the water, possess challenges throughout the journey. Thus, the word 'navigate' seems to describe perfectly the movement of texts through the patriarchal structures. Virginia-Woolf says, "The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting than the story of that emancipation itself." (2) Through this quote, Woolf highlights the structural and systemic barriers that women have to face in their journey towards emancipation. Hence, this quotation is relevant to the paper because the study explores the different ways in which the selected text and co-text navigate through patriarchal structures, and in the course of doing this, the texts undergo subversion and containment. However, the paper also highlights how these texts offer the possibility of changes while navigating through the patriarchal structures that try to contain the subversive forces.

Methodology:

The paper employs a new historicist methodology by using Stephen Greenblatt's idea of subversion and containment to fulfil the objectives stated above. New historicism is a theoretical area expounded by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s, which initiates a parallel reading of the literary text and co-text. For formalists who came before the new historicists, literature was an autonomous form

of knowledge, and they gave more importance to the 'word' of the past.

Contrary to this, new historicists gave importance to the 'world' of the past and focused on the processes and conditions from which the text is constructed. Therefore, they gave equal importance to literary texts and non-literary co-texts. Michael Foucault's idea of power inspired Greenblatt to develop subversion and containment. According to Foucault, discourse produces the social reality, and the people in power essentially control the discourse. Therefore, the idea of normalcy is created in favour of the power structures. (3) In his essay, *Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion*, Greenblatt tests a theory of political power which states that a system of power can create and contain its destructive forces. He introduces the idea of subversion and containment in his analysis of the co-text *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* to study Shakespeare's Henry plays. Greenblatt observes that power permits subversion and containment. Subversion refers to any attempt to change or undermine a political system, and containment prevents this change from disturbing the existing power structures. Greenblatt's analysis shows that subversion and containment occur to the extent that it does not threaten the existing power structures. (4)

How gendering occurs?

In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir, mentions how gendering occurs in

society. She explains the process of construction of women with all feminine attributes through different external processes, and in turn, the woman is seen as a passive, secondary, and non-essential being. (5) Traditionally, the construction of gender occurs in terms of binaries. The male is identified with traits such as courage, assertiveness, strength, independence etc., whereas nurturance, gentleness, humility, and so on constitute feminine traits. Thus, the construction of gender difference starts right from the time when a child is born. Anthony Giddens opines that gendering is accelerated through toys, television, and children's books. (6) This paper employs a new historicist methodology and uses Greenblatt's 'subversion' and 'containment' as anchoring mechanisms to analyse the subversive activities undertaken by the Women in Cinema Collective, which is chosen as the co-text to initiate a parallel reading of the ways in which the gender stereotypes are subverted in the text, *Chirutha*. (7) The text, a form of representation and the co-text, the activities undertaken by WCC, can be read parallelly because both are movements through the patriarchal structures, which in the long run has the potential to bring positive changes.

Representation of female figures in Malayalam movies

It is paradoxical to notice that on one side, the superior status of women in Kerala is glorified based on matrilineal lineage, sex ratio, and female literacy, while on the other, women still

suffer injustices and are troubled by the weight of patriarchal structures. The representation of women in the movies reveals this. For a significant time, the female protagonists in Malayalam movies reinforced the hegemonic patriarchal stereotypes. The Malayalam cinema industry, popularly known as Mollywood, has been transforming with varying socio-cultural values and sensibilities of the audience. According to Meena T Pillai, movies played an essential role in propagating the attitude of servitude and docility by reinstating female stereotypes and roles that a woman is expected to play in a patriarchal society. She observes that from *Vigatha Kumaran* to the movies of the 1950s and 1960s, women were confined to stereotypes such as tolerant wives, victims, and self-sacrificing and loving mothers. Though the art films of the 1970s were a new approach, they could not be completely free from the clutches of patriarchy. An emerging modern society was depicted in the 1990s, yet the female University students and employees in the movies were subordinate to the heroic male figures. The early 2000s witnessed movies with masculine heroes who stole the scenes with misogynistic dialogues. In the end, the strong female characters who appeared on screen were dominated by male heroes through their love. (8,9) Thus, cinema as a popular medium of representation played a significant role in naturalising male hegemony and propagating the traditionally conceived notions about gender. New-generation films marked a visible change in the characterisation of female figures who retaliated against the

patriarchal structures. With the emergence of organisations like Women in Cinema Collective, a discursive field is opened for the discussion of gender-related issues in the film industry.

Subversion and Containment in Women in Cinema Collective

The heinous sexual assault and harassment faced by a famous film actress on 17 February 2017 led eighteen women from the industry to stand by the survivor, eventually forming the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC). Since its inception, the organisation has actively undertaken many subversive activities against the existing patriarchal structures within the movie industry. This paper highlights how power structures contain subversive acts using Greenblatt's idea of subversion and containment as the theoretical framework.

The initiation of Women in Cinema Collective can be viewed as a subversive act challenging the existing male-dominated and patriarchal structures in the movie industry. Through its activities, WCC is able to generate discourse against the hegemonic patriarchal structures within the industry and initiate ways of challenging the codes of normalcy created through hegemonic practices.

One such instance is the formation of the Hema Commission. The State government formed Hema Commission at the request of the WCC

three months after the assault of the actress to enquire into the problems women encounter in the Malayalam film industry, which were largely ignored till then. The creation of the Hema Commission gave an opportunity for women to share the problems they faced in the industry, including casting couch issues and gender discrimination. As a consequence of the report, it is hoped that safe and secure working conditions for women will be created by implementing legal jurisdictions. However, the content of the report remains unknown to the public, and the fact that the report is not yet tabled in parliament can be seen as an act of containment. Justice Hema refused to answer questions regarding the report, and B. Valsala Kumari (a member of the Hema Commission) said the Commission's job was to submit the report, and the jurisdiction had to be done by the government. (10)

WCC members have also raised their voices against the gender disparity in the remuneration of actors. According to the existing patriarchal culture, female actresses do not receive fair pay. Ramya Nambisan, a member of WCC, opines that the directors and producers are often offended when asked for fair pay or the script of a movie they are supposed to perform. Parvathy Thiruvoth, another member from WCC, was subjected to massive social media bullying when she raised her voice against the misogynistic dialogues used by a superstar in his movie. The actors and technicians who are part of WCC are labelled as a 'notorious group' and denied

opportunities in movies. (11) These instances indicate how the subversive activities undertaken by WCC are subjected to containment.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that WCC has opened up a platform for dialogue and dissent. One of the objectives of WCC is to "encourage responsible filmmaking practices accelerating the work culture transformations required for gender-just film industry and cinema".(12). Through initiatives like 'Punarvaayana', the organisation generates discussions and understanding regarding gender-just representations in movies. Compared to the past, the filmmakers and the viewers in Kerala are more aware of terms like sexism, misogyny and political correctness. WCC has played a prominent role in keeping such discussions alive, and it is in this milieu that a text like *Chirutha* appears.

Subversion and Containment in *Chirutha*

Due to its novel portrayal of the *yakshi* myth and the progressive conception of femininity, *Chirutha*, a Malayalam song written by Shruthi Sharanyam, and composed and sung by Sudeep Palanad, received a warm reception from the audience. The feminine figure depicted in the text can be interpreted in two ways.

The female protagonist is seen as :

- i) *Yakshi*/ spirit
- ii) An extension of the 'feminine self' within the male protagonist. (10)

The current study takes into consideration both these aspects for analysis.

i) Female protagonist as *yakshi*

Subversion in *Chirutha* occurs mainly in three ways, i.e. portrayal of *yakshi*, blurring of sacred/profane boundaries, and breaking gender stereotypes.

a) Portrayal of *yakshi*

The song received attention for the novelty with which it presented the *yakshi* myth. Traditionally in myths and movies, *yakshi* is represented as a bloodthirsty figure who instils fear in people. However, the makers have consciously reworked the *yakshi* myth and provided a fresh perspective contrary to the stereotypical image. From the beginning, *Chirutha* (the female protagonist) is presented as a friendly and playful figure. In the introduction shot, she plays hide and seek with the boy, and there is not even a tinge of fear on his face. The nurturing and caring aspects generally associated with females are found in *Chirutha*, revealed through the scenes where she feeds and puts the child to sleep. The boy plays with her as the song progresses and even hugs her. Thus, the makers of the song have carefully subverted the *yakshi* myth by portraying *Chirutha* as a friendly and loving figure.

b) Blurring of sacred versus profane divide

The sacred versus profane divide undergoes subversion in many scenes. For instance, a

temple serves as the setting for the opening scene, where the female protagonist plays with the child. Usually, temples are considered sacred places reserved for God. By placing a spirit in a sacred setting, the makers of the song subvert the strict sacred versus profane divide. In another shot, the boy places flowers on Chirutha's head, and the flower used is *Krishna Kireedam*, a wildflower contrary to the traditional jasmine flowers used for the purpose. Thus, the distinction between the wild and domestic is blurred. They also engage in many playful activities as the song progresses. There is a highly symbolic shot in which the female removes a nail from a tree. As per the traditional *yakshi* myth, trouble-making spirits are nailed by priests (manthravathis) on trees to prevent them from interacting with living beings. Along with the boy, Chirutha removes the nail from the tree and digs up an earthen burial pot. These are daring acts because such things are considered sacred and not supposed to be touched. She gives the nail and the female figure from the earthen pot to the boy. By doing so, the boundaries between the sacred and the profane get subverted.

c) Blurring of the gender stereotypes

The song also blurs traditional gender boundaries. The female protagonist is shown drinking toddy (a traditional fermented drink), and the look of surprise on the boy's face indicates the traditional gender coding, which reserves drinking for men. The blurring of gender boundaries is again evident when Chirutha smokes and laughs loudly from the

top of a tall tree. Through such acts, she emerges as a woman who challenges the patriarchal conditioning, which considers politeness, passivity and humility as the markers of female identity. As the song progresses, it is also revealed that Chirutha was a rebellious leader who fought for women's rights in the past. Through this, the makers break the traditional gender rules, which reserve leadership and rebellion as male-dominated territory. It is evident that by subverting the gender norms, conscious efforts are taken to break the gender stereotypes through the female protagonist.

However, the second half of the song reveals that Chirutha is a revolutionary leader who is killed for raising her voice against the patriarchal structures. Thus, the song reiterates the traditional idea of *yakshi* as a spirit who wanders around. The boy's words indicate that she was a revolutionary who challenged the norms while alive. However, her attempts to question the traditional patriarchal norms were curbed, and she was killed. Therefore, the fact that she enjoys freedom after death is ironic. Thus, subversive currents generated in the beginning get contained towards the end of the song. (Note - The gender norms get subverted in a phallogocentric manner which is explained in the next section.)

ii) Female Protagonist as an extension of the 'feminine self' within the male character

The text allows viewing the female as the

feminine extension of the self in the male protagonist. Following the yin-yang principle, the song, through the female protagonist, depicts the feminine self within the boy, which is a progressive idea that blurs the gender divide. The depiction of the feminine self in the boy is executed well with a careful amalgamation of desirable male attributes within the feminine self. On the one hand, the feminine self in the boy is supplied with motherly qualities such as love, care and nurture, traditionally associated with the female gender, thereby breaking the strict gender norms. While on the other, through the smoking and drinking scenes, she emerges as a daring figure who challenges the conventional patriarchal conditioning, which reserves specific gender roles for males and females. The wild and daring energy in the boy is linked with the feminine part of his 'self.' Thus through the portrayal of a sufficiently masculinised feminine self, the makers subvert the traditional gender norms and share a progressive outlook.

However, the patriarchal gender coding is reiterated in the subversive acts. In the song, the feminine self, not the masculine, displays motherly qualities like care and nurture, thus reifying traditional gender coding. In addition, the blurring of the gender norms becomes evident, especially in scenes where the feminine self performs actions like smoking and drinking. Such scenes stress the acts usually linked with the male gender and grab the attention of the viewers, who are also

conditioned by the patriarchal structures. This kind of representation can be viewed as a phallogocentric approach wherein the feminine self rises to a heroic stature when engaged in actions traditionally reserved for men, such as smoking and drinking. Helen Cixous describes phallogocentrism as the tendency to associate females with passivity and as a paralysed 'other' to the active masculine self. (13) It is evident that the deconstruction of gender norms occurs through the performance of conventional masculine acts. Thus, the song's subversive construction of the feminine self reiterates the traditional gender norms and hence is a phallogocentric approach, which brings containment.

Conclusion

The paper has shown how the text and the co-text have found ways to navigate through patriarchal structures by undergoing acts of subversion and containment. According to Grady and Motlagh, the new historicist approach is not inherently pessimistic in explaining power circulation through subversion and containment. Instead, it throws light on the possibility of change and negotiations. (14) Even though the patriarchal structures try to contain the efforts undertaken by the Women in Cinema Collective still, the organisation is also able to create a platform for the discussion of gender issues in the film industry, which was largely ignored in the past. Thus, WCC is slowly bringing positive changes through their activities.

Similarly, though subversion and containment occur in *Chirutha*, the male protagonist in the song is portrayed as a character with a progressive outlook whose understanding of the feminine gender is not guided by patriarchal norms, which can be seen as a positive change in characterisation. His admiration for Chirutha and the conviction that a strong, bold woman like her will not commit suicide indicates this. The analysis also suggests the need for alternative gender-neutral ways other than a phallogocentric approach of blurring the masculine-feminine divide. Such an attempt is visible in the initial part of the song, where the feminine self exhibits courage through gender-neutral acts such as digging the burial pot and removing the nail, through which the sacred/profane boundary is blurred. Therefore, subjecting the text and the co-text to a new historicist analysis concludes that though subversion and containment occur while navigating through patriarchal structures, the positive changes brought along the journey cannot be ignored in the long run.

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