

Navigating Through Patriarchy: A New Historicist Reading of the Subversion and Containment in *Chirutha*

Krishnapriya. M

Research Scholar

Department of English Studies Central University of Tamil Nadu

Email: krishshines14@gmail.com

Abstract: *Chirutha* is a Malayalam song written by Shruthi Sharanyam, composed and sung by Sudeep Palanad, which was 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 introduced 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. Moreover, the paper highlights the possibility of changes offered by the text against the structures of patriarchy.

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. (navigate) This paper explores the different ways in which the selected text and co-text navigate through patriarchal structures. In the course of doing this, the selected texts undergo subversion and containment. However, the paper also highlights how these texts provide the possibility of changes against the patriarchal structures. To fulfil these objectives, a new historicist methodology is employed in this paper by using Stephen Greenblatt's idea of subversion and containment. New historicism is a theoretical area expounded by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s to initiate a parallel reading of the literary text and co-text. For the 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 both the 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. Thus, the idea of normalcy gets created in favour of the power structures. (Foucault) 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. (Greenblatt, 40-61)

In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir, mentions how gendering occurs in society. She explains how a woman gets constructed with all feminine attributes through different external processes. In the process, the woman is constructed as passive, secondary, and non-essential. (Beauvoir) Traditionally, gender gets constructed 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 gets accelerated through toys, television, and children's books. (Giddens) 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*.

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, known as Mollywood, has been transforming with varying socio-cultural values and changing the 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 from Vigatha Kumaran to the movies of the 1950s and 1960s in which 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. (Pillai, Thomas) 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.

The heinous incident of sexual assault and harassment faced by a famous film actress on February 17, 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. By using Greenblatt's idea of subversion and containment as the theoretical framework, this paper highlights how power structures contain different acts of subversion.

The initiation of the organisation itself can be considered a subversive act challenging the existing male-dominated and patriarchal structures within the movie industry. They are able to generate discourse against the hegemonic patriarchal structures within the industry,

and through their activities, they also initiate ways of challenging the codes of normalcy created through hegemonic practices.

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 many 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. (R)

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. (Rajendran) These instances indicate how the subversive activities undertaken by WCC are subjected to containment.

Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that WCC has opened up a platform for dialogues 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".(WCC). 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 are more aware of terms like sexism, misogyny and political correctness. WCC has played a prominent role in keeping such discussions alive.

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 yakshi/ spirit or as an extension of the 'feminine self' in the male protagonist. (Nagarajan) The current study takes into consideration both these aspects for analysis.

1) Female Protagonist as *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 around her. However, the makers have consciously reworked the yakshi myth and created a fresh perspective contradictory to the stereotypical image. From the beginning, *Chirutha* 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 femininity are also found in *Chirutha* in the scenes where she feeds and puts the child to sleep. The boy plays with her as the song progresses and even hugs her. The makers have carefully subverted the yakshi myth by portraying *Chirutha* as a friendly and loving figure.

The sacred versus profane divide is questioned through many shots in the song. For instance, a temple serves as the setting of this scene. 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 in this shot is Krishna Kireedam, a wildflower contrary to the traditional jasmine flowers used for the purpose. The distinction between the wild and domestic is blurred in the scene. 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. *Chirutha* removes the nail from the tree and digs up an earthen 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, thus blurring the sacred versus profane divide.

In another scene, she drinks 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 occurs through the scenes in which *Chirutha* smokes from the top of a tall tree and laughs loudly. 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 a male-dominated territory.

However, the second half of the song reveals that *Chirutha* is a revolutionary leader who was killed for raising her voice against patriarchal structures. Thus the traditional idea of yakshi as a spirit who wanders around gets reiterated in *Chirutha*. The boy's words indicate that she was a revolutionary who challenged the norms while alive. However, her attempts to challenge the traditional patriarchal norms

were curbed, and she was killed. Therefore the fact that she enjoys freedom only after death is ironic, and thus, subversive currents generated

in the beginning get contained towards the end of the song. (Note - The gender norms get subverted in a phallogentric manner which is explained in the next section.)

2) Female Protagonist is an Extension of the 'Feminine Self' in the Male Character

The text allows viewing the female as the feminine extension of the self in the boy. The song portrays the masculine and feminine selves within the boy, which is a progressive idea through which gender norms are blurred. The depiction of the feminine self in the boy is well-planned so that it appears as 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. Also, 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 gets 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. Also, the blurring of the gender norms becomes evident in scenes in which the feminine self performs actions like smoking and drinking, which are traditionally associated masculine gender in a patriarchal society. Such scenes stress the acts usually linked with the male gender and grab the attention of the viewers, who are also conditioned by the same patriarchal structures. This kind of representation can be seen as a phallogentric 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 phallogentrism as the tendency to associate females with passivity and as a paralysed other to the active masculine self. (Cixous) Blurring the gender divide through the feminine self, who engages in smoking and drinking, is a problematic representation, as the deconstruction of the gender norms is done through the performance of conventional masculine acts. A better mode of crossing the gender norms is shown in the initial part of the song, where the quality of courage in the feminine self gets represented through the performance of gender-neutral activities such as crossing the sacred versus profane divide.

The song's subversive construction of the feminine self reiterates the traditional gender norms and hence is a phallogentric approach, which brings containment.

The paper has shown the ways in which 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. (31-49, 212-219) Even though the patriarchal structures try to contain the efforts undertaken by WCC, 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. The organisation is slowly bringing positive changes through their activities. Although subversion and containment occur in *Chirutha*, the male protagonist in *Chirutha* is a character with a progressive outlook whose understanding of the feminine gender is not guided by patriarchal norms, which is a positive change in characterisation. It also highlights the need to look for alternative ways of blurring gender norms in visual narrative forms wherein the females need not be depicted as superheroic through a phallogocentric approach. Therefore it can be concluded that subversion and containment occur while navigating through patriarchal structures; such a process results in positive changes that cannot be neglected.

WORKS CITED

- Cixous, Helen. *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Translated by K. Cohen and P. Cohen. *Signs*, Vol1(4), pp.875-893.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Pantheon Books, New York, 1978.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Sociology*, 5th ed., Polity Press, Cambridge, 2006.
- Grady, Hugh. "Containment, subversion, and postmodern." *Textual Practise*, Vol 7(1), Taylor and Francis, 1993, pp.31-49.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion." *Glyph*. Vol 8, 1981, pp. 40-61.
- Motlagh, Hanieh Meher. "The tempest: A negotiable meta-panopticon." *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*. Vol 6(2), Australian International Academic Centre PTY. LTD, pp. 212-219.
- Nagarajan, Saraswathi. "Chirutha, written by Shruthi Sharanyam, composed and sung by Sudeep Palanad, fords time and narratives." *The Hindu*, 7 October 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/music/chirutha-music-video-by-shruthi-sharanyam-sudeep-palanad/article36876880.ece>
- "Navigate." *Cambridge Dictionary*.
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/navigate>
- Pillai, Meena T. "The Celluloid Women of Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol 48 (48), November 2013,
<https://www.epw.in/journal/2013/48/postscript/celluloid-women-kerala.html>.
- Sharanyam, Shruthi. *Chirutha*. Youtube, singer Sudeep Palanad, performed by Ramya Suvi, Bodhi S, Girijavallabhan, Sudeep Palanad Musical, 2021,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtKLeVPzVMM>.
- Thomas, Rosemol "Evolution of Female Characters in Malayalam Cinema from the 1990s till Now." *Education Today*, 22 April 2022,
<https://educationtoday.org.in/2022/04/22/evolution-of-female-characters-in-malayalam-cinema-from-1990s-till-now/>.
- R, Athira. M. "Who is afraid of Hema commission report?." Mathrubhoomi.com, 29 October 2021,
<https://englisharchives.mathrubhumi.com/features/specials/wcc-hema-commission-report-1.6127814>.
- Rajendran, Sowmya. "The price for speaking up: How the Malayalam industry treats women with an opinion." *The News Minute*, 25 October 2018,
<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/price-speaking-how-malayalam-industry-treats-women-opinion-90567>
- Women in Cinema Collective – pioneering gender equality in cinema. "Vision and Mission". <https://wccollective.org/d>