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# Re-reading the Silences: Patriarchy, Gender, and Sexual Politics in Vadakkan Pattu

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## Introduction

"When we speak of Vadakkan Paatukal, it is impossible to avoid mentioning Puthuram Veettil Aromal Chekavar's sister Unniyarcha[1] and Mathileri Kanni[2]".[3] Historians have identified them as symbols of the distinctive qualities of feminine power, determination, willpower, courage, and the spirit of freedom. It is from such identifications that the necessity of this study arises, and with it, the beginning of this work.

The possibility of such a study becomes evident through the emergence of oral history. The unique feature of oral history studies lies in recording the voices of those silenced and excluded from mainstream history. Human society was first formed through oral speech; literacy appeared very late in history[4]. After the first conference on oral history, its possibilities began to be discussed at various levels[5]. Lucia Passiani, in her paper, questioned the objectivity of history. She argued that what needs to be read in oral traditions are not merely the spoken words, but the silences—since it is in these silences that ideology operates.[6]

Later, oral traditions began to be used in ethnic and community studies, women's studies, and regional historiography. Thus, to explore the histories of those expelled from written history, alternative pathways became necessary. Oral tradition studies came to be understood as one such parallel possibility. In the early studies, even though race and discrimination were considered in oral tradition studies, gender was ignored; the subject there too remained focused on the life and experiences of men. The same situation existed in Vadakkan Paatukal. Though the valour of some women is mentioned,

unspoken realities still remain embedded within them. Northern Ballads are not mere songs of heroism; beyond that, they enable us, through close readings, to understand the real conditions of women and the broader social situations of the time.

Furthermore, the resistance of marginalized women such as Poomaathai Ponnamma—belonging to the Dalit[7] or Puluva[8] community—has been ignored and sidelined in history. As mentioned earlier, Unniyarcha and Mathileri Kanni are celebrated in popular culture. However, beyond war or martial arts, the history of the Pulaya woman who resisted for the rights over her own body has not been popular in history.

Centuries ago, the thoughts and emotions of such marginalized and subordinated communities can be found in these songs. In songs such as that of Poomaathai Ponnamma, what we encounter is a raw and unembellished expression of their lives. Through such ballads, the histories of marginalized communities can be read and retrieved. Thus, by focusing on the ballad of Poomaathai Ponnamma, my attempt in this study is to bring forward the history of marginalized women and highlight their historical participation. Early studies gave importance mainly to bravery, war, and the glorification of legendary heroes. Later, this shifted towards gender studies—examining women's conditions and activities. Yet, stories like that of Poomaathai, which challenge feudal patriarchal authority, were confined to the status of "martyrdom" and such actions of marginalized women were excluded from the forefront.

This study, therefore, methodologically approaches the subject through cultural studies and the lens of intersectionality. In doing so, it focuses beyond the surface of heroism—towards the silent voices, especially of women, their lower-caste social conditions, prevailing sexual moralities, and the patriarchal social order.Even though several studies are currently being conducted in this field, I believe that a study of this kind remains particularly significant.

Vadakkan Paatukal is one of the most important branches of Malayalam literature . A vital sub-genre of naadan paattu (folk songs), they belong to the category of narrative ballads. They deeply reflect the ancient culture and life of Kerala, a southern Indian state.

Parallel to them, Kerala also has another ballad tradition the Thekkan Paattu which spread into the southern regions extending up to Kanyakumari. Many studies are available on Thekkan Paattu as well. This thesis, however, mainly examines the Vadakkan Paatukal. Through them, it discusses the actions of marginalized women, their social conditions, the patriarchal system, and sexual exploitation.

The ballads most prominent in Vadakkan Paattu circulated in regions like Kolothunadu, Kadathanadu, and Wayanad. According to M.C. Appunni Nambiar, the epicentre of Vadakkan Paatukal was in areas belonging to Vadakara taluk of Kadathanadu.[9] M.K. Pannikkotti opined that the ballads were widespread in Malayalam-speaking regions of Kannur and Kasaragod districts as well as in Wayanad, Kozhikode, Malappuram, and Palakkad.[10]

K.K. Nair and M.A.M. Litt recorded that this was a period not under centralized governance but under the local naduvazhi feudal system.[11] The Vadakkan Paattu were thus folk ballads shaped during feudal times. Like the European ballads, the important Vadakkan Paatukal too are believed to have been composed during the medieval period. Their exact chronology cannot be traced, since these were orally transmitted across generations among rural people. Hence historians differ in their opinions.[12] It is generally assumed that they took shape between the 14th century and the early 19th century. M.K. Pannikkotti further suggests that their composition extended even into the colonial period after Kerala became part of British India—roughly from the 12th century until the late 19th century.[13] Possibly, with the spread of devotional movements and the Brahminical Sanskritic ideology, local subaltern cultures lost their voice—though some may still remain invisible and unrecorded.[14]

Achyutha Menon Chelanadu broadly classified Vadakkan Paattu into three categories—Thacholi Paattu[15], Puthuram Paattu[16], and Ottappaattu[17]. However, historians differ regarding this classification[18]. Puthuram Paattu revolves around the Puthuram tharavad, Thacholi Paattu around the Thacholi tharavad, and apart from these, other ballads that fall under Vadakkan Paattu are grouped as Ottappaattu. Being oral traditions rooted in people's memory, their collection and transcription were significantly contributed to by

several individuals[19]. These songs were created by working people—sung to enliven their labour. Their performance grounds were fields and courtyards.

M.R. Raghava Warrier, in his book, states that Vadakkan Paatukal contain descriptions tied to habitual practices.Moreover, he points out that in song composition, a range of small and large adjectives, along with single phrases, are employed. In his view, the Vadakkan Paattu is characterized by these prepared expressions, counter-expressions, idioms, and repetitions. He considers them as a performing art[20]. Though he notes such features as limitations, they can also be seen as distinctive characteristics of these ballads.

Predominantly, Vadakkan Paatukal recounts the bravery, duels, and martial prowess of men warriors, heroes, and experts in Kalaripayattu. Alongside, as I mentioned earlier, they also contain stories of valiant women. While these ballads are generally perceived as tales of heroism, they also narrate the stories of women exploited and deceived by feudal chieftains (local naduvazhi). Their close readings allow us to understand the social conditions of that period, particularly the caste-feudal structures and their political-social implications within Kerala society.

**Women in ballads :Beyond heroism**

This study focuses on the ballad Poomaathai Ponnamma, to examine how patriarchal authority, feudal dominance, and caste hierarchy governed women's lives.Poomaathai Ponnamma is regarded as a very ancient song, with its narrative set in a locality known as Kadalum Kara. The story centres on a Pulaya woman resisting the sexual advances of a feudal lord. Unlike others in the ballads, Poomathai had not studied martial arts or combat skills; she was an ordinary Pulaya woman. This itself distinguishes her character. She represents a marginalized, subordinated Pulaya woman. Through this ballad, it becomes evident that Vadakkan Paatukal are not limited to popular celebratory heroic tales but also contain narratives of resistance by marginalized women whose voices remain uncelebrated.Through such readings, one can grasp the oppressions and cruelties suffered by the lower castes and their women under the feudal order.

Desire swells to behold her body's form.A blossom of this town-long within my reach, yet I failed to taste its sweetness ,Go, ask if she'll welcome me, Merging like honey,to quench my longing"[21]

Through these lines, we can understand how women are viewed not as individuals, but as objects of desire. We can see how a ruling landlord claims ownership over a woman's body. Here, being a Pulaya woman, Poomaathai is subjected to multiple layers of marginalization.Dalit women had to bear a *triple burden,*[22] In this way, women are exploited in the name of both their gender and caste. When power physically subjugates Dalits, it physically destroys the woman.

Among Dalits, those who have to face the most caste-based oppression are the Pulayas. They were considered the chattel of the landlord, counted as fully owned property. Even for trivial reasons, they were subjected to exploitation by the upper castes.For the Pulaya community, having a beautiful girl was like carrying a fire in the heart. If she catches the eye of the landlord and his sons, women are reduced to objects of consumption. If she does not submit to the upper-caste men, she has to endure severe punishments. Through this song, one can understand the actual condition of women.

A lower-caste woman had to endure exploitation on account of both male domination and caste hierarchy. Through this song, we can also understand the types of punishments a woman faced socially and caste-wise if she engaged in a sexual relationship. When the landlord accused Poomathai of sexual misconduct through deceit, her punishment was expulsion from her caste and having her breasts and head burned. At the same time, the songs show the landlord expressing his sexual desire fully. From this, we can also understand that men of that era did not have to face such problems.

Through these lines of the song itself, we can see how women were viewed in that period. The sexual anarchy and licentiousness of the landlords can be understood through this song. The desire that the landlord feels for Poomathai helps us understand the social conditions in Kerala at that time. Through this song, we see only a part of the

oppression exercised by the upper castes in ancient Kerala. It also shows the firm voice of the domination where any marginalized woman is considered the property of the landlord. Through this, we can understand the real experiences of women in the feudal period. Women were considered merely as instruments to fulfill the needs of men. Mainly, upper-caste men exploited lower-caste women. Dalit women's bodies became site of both exploitation and social control[23]. The rule that a lower-caste woman must walk bare-chested also highlights the sexual exploitation prevalent at that time.[24]

"I will take revenge for your deeds,
l will strike without shedding blood,
I will burn you with fire, Do not flaunt your pride, Poomaathai."[25]

Through these lines, we do not see any heroism; instead, by focusing beyond heroism, we understand the harsh reality of how patriarchy and caste hierarchy shaped the lives of women from marginalized castes. These lines also show that Vadakkan Paattu is not merely a collection of heroic tales, but contains hidden narratives of oppression and social inequality.

**Resistance and Agency of Women in *Vadakkan Paatukal***

"Even if lands and mountains are offered in tribute,
Even if my hair is bathed and adorned in gold,
No glitter can bend the will of a Puluva girl,
I am not willing - my dignity will not be sold."[26]

This is a response to the landlord's temptations, implying that if she fulfilled his sexual desire, she could receive many things in return. Even though he offered gold, hills, and fields, Poomaathai firmly decides not to give her body. Through this, we see Poomaathai's strong resistance as a defence of her body against the landlord. Popular heroic songs, which generally focus only on wars or martial arts, often omit such acts of courage that reflect a woman's autonomy, bodily self-governance, and resistance to patriarchal control. The idea that valour exists not only in war but also in such acts is rarely acknowledged.

In contrast, figures like Unniyarcha and Mathileri Kanni are celebrated in popular culture as symbols of women's empowerment. However, a close reading of their songs shows that they are not just symbols of heroic women but also reveal their social positions. They are celebrated largely because they belonged to higher-caste households and lived within the norms of a patriarchal society. Poomaathai, however, comes from a marginalized community and resists patriarchal society. Because of this, she is often removed from the forefront in historical and cultural narratives. Caste patriarchy links male dominance with land ownership and ritual power.[27]

" I will not be swayed by anything,
O ruler Even if you kill me, I do not care;
Even if you consume me, I do not care;
But do not touch me, do not touch my body."

Through Poomathai's resistance, a strong message emerges about indignation against oppression, personal courage, and bodily self-governance. This is particularly significant considering the "reward" of a Pulaya woman from a lower caste. Here, we can observe a contradiction: on one hand, she is subjected to the landlord's desires as a lower-caste woman, and on the other, it is her lower-caste identity that enables her resistance. Her ability to resist is linked to her belonging to a subordinate group, as these women sustained themselves through labour. For Dalits, labour was central to their survival. Since lower-caste women lacked property, women and children of Dalit families had to work, often in the fields or elsewhere. [28]The continuation of caste-based labour made women's work socially essential.[29]It may have been through such labour that she could secure her life, maintain her purity, and recognize that her body did not belong to the landlord. This realization enabled her to resist the patriarchal hierarchy. These acts show that valour is not confined to war or martial deeds but also exists in such everyday resistances.

Even when educated or high-caste women could remain passive, such forms of steadfast resistance existed during the medieval period. Yet, this has been silenced in mainstream historical narratives. At a time when lower-caste communities were not

organized against the injustices of the elite, the resistance of a woman like Poomaathai gained special significance. In an era without modern notions of women's empowerment, such acts of defiance were crucial.

Despite her resistance, under the feudal system, she had to face punishment. Yet she refused to compromise the sanctity of her body. As part of her defiance, she was restricted in many ways and subjected to false sexual allegations as a form of punishment. Even when people realized these accusations were false, she chose to protect her bodily integrity by jumping into a well and dying.

This song also reflects the mythical tradition commonly found in folk songs. After her death, Poomaathai was regarded as a deity. In the social context of that time, women, especially from lower castes, had no freedom. This may explain why songwriters deified such women as a form of posthumous justice. By elevating them to divine status, they became symbols of power and justice. This posthumous transformation also preserves the memory of their actions.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this study goes beyond the conventional heroic reading of Vadakkan Pattuand seeks to uncover the silenced layers of meaning that these ballads hold. Far from being merely celebratory accounts of martial valor, the songs embed within them social commentaries on caste, patriarchy, sexuality, and resistance. They function not just as repositories of popular memory but also as counter-archives that preserve voices excluded from formal historical narratives.

By focusing on Poomathai Ponnamma, this paper brings to the forefront a narrative of female defiance that disrupts feudal and patriarchal authority. Poomathai's refusal to surrender her body to the feudal lord demonstrates that heroism in the Malabar context cannot be limited to battlefield courage or the exploits of celebrated male warriors. Rather, it must also include acts of bodily autonomy, refusal, and moral steadfastness, forms of everyday heroism that are often erased from canonical historiography.

These songs simultaneously expose the violence of caste patriarchy ,where women's bodies were made into sites of control, exploitation and punishment and demonstrate the capacity of women from marginalized communities to assert their dignity and agency. Poomathai's act of resistance, culminating in her death, transforms her from a victim into a symbol of justice and moral courage. Through such narratives, the ballads challenge the reduction of subaltern women to passive sufferers of oppression and reposition them as historical agents.

Furthermore, the preservation of these songs among marginalized communities, including lower-caste performers highlights a unique cultural dynamic in Malabar. Despite belonging to socially stigmatized sections of society, these singers were entrusted with narrating the exploits and even the failures of upper-caste men and women. This paradox underlines how oral traditions could create spaces where caste hierarchies were temporarily suspended, allowing marginalized voices to articulate alternative social ethics.

Even today, when discourses around cultural identity and social norms attempt to impose rigid gender expectations and control female sexuality, the study of Vadakkan Pattu gains renewed relevance. These ballads remind us that premodern Kerala had more fluid and plural moral worlds, where expressions of female sexuality and acts of resistance were present.

Ultimately, reading Vadakkan Pattu through the lens of gender and subaltern studies makes it possible to craft a more inclusive, intersectional, and critical cultural history of Kerala. It compels historians to rethink heroism, not merely as a masculine and martial category, but as a spectrum of struggles, social, moral, and bodily through which marginalized women, like Poomathai, carved out their agency and left behind enduring legacies of resistance.

## End notes

1. Unniyarcha was a legendary warrior heroine from northern Kerala, India, celebrated in the region's folk ballads (Vadakkan Pattukal). She was born into the famous Puthooram Veedu of Kadathanad within the Chekavar warrior lineage. Renowned for her exceptional valor and skill in Kalaripayattu (traditional martial arts), she was particularly noted for her mastery of the urumi, a flexible, whip-like sword, and was the sister of the famed warrior Aromal Chekavar.
2. Mathilerikkanni is a heroine from the Vadakkan Pattukal. She is the daughter of a king from Venadu and is known for her martial skills and for supporting her husband in battle, helping him achieve victory.
3. (PANIKKATTI, 2008, p.I)
4. Walter J. Ong notes that writing was initially limited to small groups, meaning most of human culture evolved within an oral framework (ONG, 2005, p. 2). This reminds us that oral traditions like Vadakkan Pattu are not "primitive," but the original form of cultural memory and communication.
5. In 1979, the first international conference on Oral History was held at the University of Essex in England. The conference discussed the possibilities of oral history at various levels.
6. (HUSSAIN, 2011, p. 509)
7. Dalits, meaning "broken" or "scattered" in Sanskrit, are a historically marginalized group in India, often referred to as "untouchables." Excluded from the traditional Hindu caste system, they have faced social, economic, and cultural discrimination for centuries.
8. The Pulaya (or puluva ) are a Dalit community in Kerala, India, historically classified as a Scheduled Caste. Traditionally landless agricultural laborers, they faced severe social, economic, and ritual discrimination under the caste system and lived in conditions of extreme deprivation and servitude to upper-caste landowners.
9. (APPUNNI NAMBIAR, 1960, p. vi)
10. (PANIKKATTI, 2008, p.IV)
11. (APPUNNI NAMBIAR, 1960, p.vii)
12. There is very little clarity regarding the period in which these songs were composed. Chelanattu. Achutamenon asserts that the aromal chekevar songs from this genre were composed as early as the 12th century, while the Othenan songs were composed four or five hundred years later.
13. According to Panikkatti (2008, p. V), the earliest of these songs were composed sometime during the early 16th century and the latest ones in the 19th century.
14. (PAVITRAN, 1999, p. 167)
15. Thacholi Pattu narrates the legendary adventures of Thacholi Othenan, the most celebrated hero of the ballads. These songs highlight his unmatched skill in Kalaripayattu, his duels, acts of valor, and his role as a defender of justice, portraying him as an iconic warrior figure in North Malabar folklore.
16. Puthuram Pattu revolves around the heroic exploits of Aromal Chekavar, his courageous sister Unniyarcha, and his son Aromal Unni. The songs celebrate their bravery, martial skills, and the legacy of the Puthuram family, making them central figures in the ballad tradition.
17. Ottappattu consists of individual songs that narrate the stories of different men and women, each told separately. Unlike Thacholi Pattu and Puthuram Pattu, which follow the continuous exploits of recurring heroes, the characters in Ottappattu usually appear in only one song, making each ballad a standalone story.
18. Historians hold differing views on the classification of Vadakkan Pattu. William Logan, P. Govindhan Pillai, and R. Narayan Panikkar consider only the Thacholi Pattu as Vadakkan Pattu. In contrast, Mahakavi Ulloor includes both Thacholi Pattu and Puthuram Pattu within the category. M. C. Appunni Namppiran further expands this classification by including Ottappattu as well.
19. The collection of Vadakkan Pattu has been contributed to by many scholars and collectors over time, including Gundert, Dais, Logan,Percy Macqueen, Chelattu Achuthamenon, and M. C.

Appunni Nair. Their efforts helped preserve and document the ballads, ensuring that the heroic tales of North Malabar remained accessible for study and performance.

20. (VARIER, M. RAGAVA, 1982, p. 11)
21. All translations from Malayalam in this paper are by the author (p. 140).
22. Uma Chakravarti argues that this threefold oppression is unique to Dalit women because it combines caste-based exploitation, economic subjugation, and patriarchal control within their families. This makes their experiences qualitatively different from those of upper-caste women, who may suffer gender discrimination but do not face systemic caste and class exploitation. (CHAKRAVARTI, 2018, p. 4)
23. Chakravarti points out that sexual violence against Dalit women functions doubly: it allows dominant castes to assert power over Dalit women while humiliating Dalit men, thereby reinforcing the caste order and its gendered hierarchies (CHAKRAVARTI, 2018, p. 142).
24. By custom, women of the lower castes were prohibited from covering their breasts with an upper cloth. The king, however, manipulated this social restriction to serve his own interests
25. All translations from Malayalam in this paper are by the author (p.140).
26. All translations from Malayalam in this paper are by the author (p.158).
27. As Chakravarti notes, control over women's sexuality was crucial to maintain caste purity, ensure inheritance of land within caste boundaries, and preserve ritual status. This "closed structure" of land, women, and ritual quality formed the very foundation of Hindu caste society. (CHAKRAVARTI, 2018, p. 142).
28. Ilaiah Shepherd emphasizes that Dalit women are fully integrated into labor systems, not just as an economic necessity but as a cultural reality that shapes their identity and work ethic. Their labor simultaneously sustains their families and reinforces their subordinate position in caste hierarchy. (CHAKRAVARTI, 2018, p. 82)
29. Leela Dube shows that women perform indispensable roles in agriculture, craft production, service occupations, and ritual work tied to caste. Even when men leave caste-linked work due to low status or poor returns, women often continue it, sometimes carrying a double burden.

    This is visible among Dalit and lower-caste women, who sustain household production and caste identity under social and patriarchal constraints.