



## The Mythical and Cultural Appropriation of Jayaraj's *Kannaki*

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The exchange of the semantic modes among different genres of arts, culture etc. is neither new nor a rare phenomenon. Being two distinct narrative mediums, film and literature transact their narrative properties each other inventively, thereby film adaptations become a special genre of filmic studies in the post-modern era. It widens the popularity of the literary canons too. Film adaptations enhance the pedagogical values of films by helping the cinephiles know more about literature, culture and tradition of the source text. In his influential text *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader*, Corrigan opines:

“One estimate claims that 30 percent of the movies today derive from novels and that 80 percent of the books classified as best sellers have been adapted to the cinema. If the connection between the two practices has persisted so adamantly through the years, it seems especially pressing new ... as an index of why the movies are important, why literature still matters, and what both have to offer a cultural period in which boundaries are continually being redrawn”.(2)

His observation reaffirms the scope of film adaptations in facilitating visual, literal and cultural literacy. While analysing the re-interpretations of literature in cinematic medium, the terms ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’ demand more concern. The eminent film theorist Julie Sanders makes a clear distinction between adaptation and appropriation. She interprets:

“An adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text... on the other hand, appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain”.(26)

Adaptation is generally treated as something that transmits the core ideas of the parent text to the target text. The filmic world utilizes the literary world very imaginatively

and produces a huge number of texts based on that. Literary genres such as drama, novel, poem, epic etc are taken as source texts and construct exquisite films out of them. The terms ‘transfer’ and ‘adaptation proper’ are read in relation with Julie Sanders’ coinages. ‘Transfer’ and adaptation proper are two concepts put forward by Brian McFarlane in order to analyse novel adaptations. By ‘transfer’, he means the transfer of almost all the elements of the novel to the film, on the other hand, ‘adaptation proper’ cannot transmit the thematic elements straightly but in a re-interpreted format. Thus Julie Sander’s notions regarding ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’ can be equated with McFarlane’s ‘transfer’ and ‘adaptation proper’ respectively. The wide spread passion for adapted films reinforces the discourse between literary and cinematic scenario.

Shakespeare is one of the most filmised authors in world literature. He is able to craft a film canon of his own. Film makers like Orson Welles, Oliver Parker, Franco Zeffirelli, Akira Kurosawa, Vishal Bharadwaj, Jayaraj, V.K.Prakash etc. re-interpret Shakespeare on screen as adaptations/appropriations. Jayaraj and V.K. Prakash adapt the Bard into Mollywood film scenario. Jayaraj Rajasekharan Nair is a gifted writer and director. He earns international notoriety through his film adaptations and his nava rasa series. He re-interprets three sublime tragedies of Shakespeare-*Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Macbeth* as *Kaliyattam*, *Kannaki* and *Veeram*. He could re-invent apposite sites to transplant the Bard’s thematic environment in the attire of Kerala culture, tradition etc. *Kaliyattam* is his debut attempt in Shakespeare. He applies the Kerala folk art *Theyyam*’s codes in the film, thereby igniting its regional flavour. His recent re-interpretation of the Bard is *Veeram* and it is the fifth film of his navarasa series. Being the screenplay writer of *Veeram*, Jayaraj magnificently blends the Northern folklore and the Shakespearean undertones from *Macbeth*. In order to indigenise the play, he exploits Kerala’s martial art *kalarippayattu* and *vadakkan pattukal*.

Jayaraj’s second endeavor is *Kannaki*, the oriental version of *Antony and Cleopatra*. He trans-creates the story of *Antony and Cleopatra* in a novel milieu, culture, tradition etc. The Japanese director Akira Kurosawa’s Shakespearean films act as fine models for him. For making a culturally appropriate environment in *Kannaki*, he operates the Kannaki myth which is prevalent in Tamil literature. Kannaki myth had been skillfully interwoven by Ilango Adigal into his magnum opus *Silappathikaram*. Kannaki and her husband Kovalan are the major characters in Ilango Adigal’s work. Kannaki is a mythical heroine who stood for proving her husband’s innocence. The evil figures accuse her, but many of the natives worship her as the deity of chastity. Kannaki myth has been borrowed into many works-both literary and filmic works before Jayaraj. Jayaraj finds a simulacrum of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra in Kannaki. Cleopatra is commonly regarded as ‘femme fatale’ and her beauty is praised as serpentine. Jayaraj juxtaposes the character portraits of Cleopatra and Kannaki and invokes the soul of Cleopatra in Kannaki. Cleopatra is one of the

stout lady characters of Shakespeare and with whom he invests the thread of the story of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Jayaraj recognizes the possibility of mixing up Kannaki myth and Shakespearean theme and he does it poignantly. Jayaraj's Kannaki, like Cleopatra, is a beautiful lady, her charm and appearance on frame captivate the audience.

Jayaraj transplants the Bard's text to the mythical and cultural background of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The exact milieu of the film is a village-Chemmanampathy-on Kerala-Tamilnadu border. Shakespeare's queen of Egypt becomes the village beauty of Chemmanampathy- Kannaki. The title of the adapted text is *Kannaki* and it ensures the predominance of the heroine in the target text. There are many male characters who are mooching around her locality at least for a look from her. But they are forbidden by the conviction that she has acquired some wicked/magical power from her father. Thus they are reluctant to approach her. In reality, she is protected from the lusty village men by this myth. Jayaraj presents her as a lady with sound medical knowledge who can cure patients from asp bite or any such poison. This delineation facilitates the cultural trans-creation profusely.

While adapting the story on screen, Jayaraj curtails the number of characters in order to retain the mood in the filmic craft. He has taken names-Gounder, Choman etc. for the Shakespearean counterparts in his films which has a Tamilian aroma. The principal characters from *Antony and Cleopatra* are Antony, Octavius Caesar, Lepidus, Sextus Pompey and Octavia. Their equivalent characters in *Kannaki* are Manikyam, Choman, Gounder, Kaliyappan, Kumudam respectively. Though a minor character, Ravunni (Kannaki's attendant)- counterpart of Queen Cleopatra's attendant Madrian- acts a stronger part in Kannaki's life. Jayaraj adds a new character in his story line-Kanakamma-the local fortune teller, who always carries a caged parrot with her. There is a belief in Kerala and Tamil Nadu that such trained parrots have the ability to foretell their future. Thus the filmmaker imaginatively applies the bird science (*pakshishastram*- in which parrot acts as astrologer) in his film in order to boost the cultural translation. Shakespeare uses the characters-witches, fortune tellers etc very creatively in his plays. In his Roman play- *Julius Caesar*-Shakespeare brings a soothsayer in order to warn Julius Caesar about his impending doom-"Beware the Ides of March". Jayaraj exploits the character of fortune teller-Kanakamma- in a novel way to expose the impediments in the lives of Manikyam and Kannaki. In the film, she approaches Kannaki, Kumudam, Manikyam, and Manikyam's helper Muthu (counterpart of Canidius). Her sayings are blindly followed by the local people and it causes their tragedy too.

Usually the adaptations become the center of cultural bricolage. The mixing up of source text's and the target text's culture creates a new cultural environment. Jayaraj handles the tran-culturation process in his adapted text by using 'cockfight' game impressively. He changes the war fields in the play as cockpits where the raged cocks are engaged in fighting. Each cock represents his owner in the competition. He

portrays the characters- Manikyam, Choman, Kaliyappan, Gounder-earning their livelihood from this cockpit. Kannaki too keeps violent cocks at her place. After getting to know about the recent victory of Manikyam's cock over Gounder's cock, she invites Manikyam to train her cocks. Like in the play, Kannaki is haunted by Gounder and Choman and Manikyam acts as her body guard in the course of the film. Meanwhile Choman arranges the marriage between his sister Kumudam and Manikyam by the advice of Kaliyappan and friends, for strengthening their bond and distances him from Kannaki. The scene reminds the play's scene in which Octavius decides to give his sister's hand to Antony by Lepidus's inspiration, for diverting his thoughts from Cleopatra and brings his concentration back to royal duties.

In fact the marriage news is really shocking to Manikyam and Kannaki. Like Antony, Manikyam loves Kumudam as his own sister. Kannaki's presence is always felt by Manikyam in his thought and it totally destroys him. For regaining his mental strength, he is advised by Choman and the elder members of the locality, to follow the famous ritual-*kavu theendal*. The local rituals and beliefs have a significant part in the process of trans-culturation. The character Kannaki is presented as the devotee of Goddess Kali and *Naga Daivangal* (Snake God). *Nagaradhana* (Snake worshipping) is a prevalent religious belief among Keralites, especially among Hindus. Jayaraj utilizes the images of Naga idols for enhancing the visual narration. There is a scene in the film in which she pours turmeric powder on the idols with due respect. Kannaki is pictured as an extremely pious lady who seeks blessings from Goddess *Kali*. The camera captures the regional signs such as the statues of *Kali*, *Kettukala*, and *Thulasithara*, *homakundam*, *kolam* etc. in the background of Kannaki's hut. The local ritual which refers in the film is *Veedu thendi Kavutheendal*. The ritual is screened with the aid of a song with the lyrics begin with "*Kodungalluramme varamarulu pallival thumbukalil thudiunaru*". The lyrics can initiate a moving experience in the spectators- both spiritual and passionate. The song has close connection with Kannaki myth. It is believed that 'Kodungaluramma' (Goddess of Kodungallur) is the incarnation of Goddess Kannaki:

"...Kannagi on her way to Kodungallur in Kerala, gave 'darsan' to the native at Attukal in Thiruvananthapuram. They constructed a temple at Attukal. It is also believed that Devi finally reached Kodungalloor and settled at Kodungalloor Devi Temple, south of Guruvayur. The events related to Kannagi have high influence in the traditions and culture of Tamil Nadu and Kerala". (web)

Manikyam and Kannaki appear on the screen in the costume of *Velichappadu* (oracle) and carries *pallival* with them. They perform the ritual reverently so as to gain the mental peace which was lost after their separation. Then the following scene shows the reunion of Manikyam and Kannaki. Their reunion infuriates Choman and it leads him to join in hands with their rival Gounder to take revenge on Manikyam. Kanakkama intrigues to create problems in between Manikyam and Kannaki.

Kumudam meets Manikyam privately but he repeats his sisterly affection towards her. In emotional fury Kumudam lies to Kannaki that she soon becomes the mother of Manikyam's child. Her words shatter Kannaki utterly. She opts her own death as the solution of the problem. He seeks support from Ravunni and asks him to inform her departure to Manikyam and her final plea-Manickyam will marry Kumudam.

The reason of Cleopatra's death in the play is the snakes' venom. Jayaraj takes the scene for his adapted text too. Kannaki, being an ardent worshipper of *Nagaraja* and the healer who gives medical aid to the people who are bitten by snakes, she ironically chooses her end with the asp bite. After bagging magnificent victory in the cockfight against Goundar and Choman, Manikyam approaches Kannaki. By hearing the news of her departure, he arranges a fight with his game cock Keerichekavan. The following close shot depicts the cardinal vein of the throat being cut by his raged cock. The climax scene-the dead bodies of Kannaki and Manikyam- lie closely and the snake which bites Kannaki is seen nearby the bodies. Ravunni, with broken heart witnesses the tragic end of the lovers. Jayaraj could retain the tragic effect in the climax scene as in the play and creates high impact in the audience.

Jayaraj's *Kannaki*, all in its mythical, cultural and thematic aspects, can be hailed as the prototype of Julie Sander's notion-an appropriation, not an adaptation. He operates a loose transaction of the theme of *Antony and Cleopatra* in his adapted text. The mise-en-scene of the film is entirely different from that of the play text. He transplants it into a new cultural milieu, era and race. Jayaraj's presentation of the character Cleopatra as Kannaki is noteworthy. He moulds the delineation by juxtaposing the chastity and divinity of Kannakki Amman and the serpentine beauty of Cleopatra. This incarnation boosts the cultural bricolage underlying in an adapted work. As adaptations are trans-cultural phenomena, this one is an inter-semiotic transaction too. It is as defined by Roman Jakobson: "transmutation of signs- an interpretation of verbal signs of non-verbal sign system"(114).

The famous film Semiotician Umberto Eco believes that there are four types of sign codes prevail in film analysis- **Indexical, Symbolic, Iconic and Enigma**. Indexical signs denote an idea indirectly. Symbolic codes are universal codes. Iconic signs emphasise the conceptual meaning. Engima code, usually use in trailers/posters, to instill curiosity among spectators. While trans-creating a text to another medium, the choice of appropriate semiotic codes are worth mentioning. The cultural and regional codes, such as cock fight (*Kozhikettu*), *Nagaradhana* etc. act as mighty signs in *Kannaki*. Indexical codes in the film are the idols of *Kali*, *Nagadaivangal*, and *Kettukala*. The predominant symbolic code is the use of the colour 'red' -red silk sari which is presented by Manikyam to Kannaki, 'blood' smeared from Manikyam and Kannaki, the red attire of *Velichappadu*. It facilitates the visual narration abundantly. The iconic signs are cocks and palmyra palms. The cock fight signifies the enmity among the characters. One cock's victory on cockpit symbolizes its owner's glory. The surroundings of the abode of Kannaki is packed

with palmyra palms. It ignites the supernatural demeanour attributed to Kannaki by the filmmaker. With the proper amalgamation of mythical, cultural, regional, semiotic elements in the thematic world of *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Kannaki* accomplishes the feature of a filmic appropriation. Thus the filmmaker invokes the politics of *Antony and Cleopatra* in the oriental poetics of *Kannaki*.

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