

Appropriating Narrative Agency and Accusation: A Contrapuntal Reading of *Ennodenthinee Pinakkam* in *Kaliyattam* (1997) as an Adaptation of Willow Song from *Othello* (1625)

¹**Gopika Hari**, Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Management, Dr B.R Ambedkar National Institute of Technology Jalandhar (Punjab),
[India. gopikah.hm.22@nitj.ac.in](mailto:gopikah.hm.22@nitj.ac.in) ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7756-2672.

²**Dr. Vaibhav Pathak**, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Management, Dr B.R Ambedkar National Institute of Technology, Jalandhar (Punjab), India.
pathakv@nitj.ac.in ORCID ID: 0000-0001-8118-2130.
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Abstract

The paper reads the song Ennodenthinee Pinakkam from the film Kaliyattam (1997), a Malayalam film adaptation of Shakespeare, as an adaptation of the Willow Song from Othello (1625). It situates the Willow Song within the existing critical discourse on its relation to Desdemona's sense of agency and individuality, and explores how the film song appropriates the context of the song in extending narrative agency to the Desdemona-equivalent, Thamara. It also undertakes a contrapuntal reading of the song, utilising Martin Oja's (2024) framework of conflicting modalities in feature films, to argue that the film song's use of conflicting modalities, including body-painting of snakes used in the murder scene, lead to clear accusation of the hero by the heroine.

Keywords: *Kaliyattam, Othello, Regional Shakespeare Adaptation, Indian Shakespeare Adaptation, Contrapuntal Film Analysis.*

Introduction

Shakespeare adaptations in regional languages have been garnering academic attention recently, with books such as *Local Habitations* (Trivedi and Chakravarti 2019) and special issues in mainstream journals such as *Shakespeare* featuring regional cinemas ranging from the 1960s to contemporary productions. Malayalam cinema, whose regional engagement with the Bard has resulted in 11 films as of 2023, started its full-length adaptation of Shakespearean plays in 1997 with Jayaraj's *Kaliyattam* (1997). A reworking of *Othello* (1625), where the eponymous Venetian Moor General elopes with and later murders his Venetian lady love Desdemona upon sexual jealousy and suspicion of adultery that were triggered and fanned by his confidante Iago's machinations, the film transposes *Othello* as Kannan, a performer of a North Kerala ritualistic performance tradition, Theyyam, and Desdemona as the upper-caste girl Thamara. This article takes for analysis a song from the play that comments on adultery and heartbreak, known as the Willow Song, sung by Desdemona to Iago's wife Emilia, and studies *Kaliyattam*'s song *Ennodenthinee Pinakkam*, sung by Thamara to the Emilia-equivalent Cheerma, which questions the lover on why he did not visit her, as an adaptation of the former. It examines, in light of the existing critical discourse on Willow Song's contribution to Desdemona's agency, the adaptive

techniques used in the song and its context to shape the questions of agency, individuality, and narrative authority of Thamara. It also inquires whether the film song changes the relevance of the play's Willow Song in lending narrative authority to the heroine's final narration of self.

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Songs from Indian Shakespeare film adaptations are an emerging site of academic inquiry, as they facilitate the oft-cited function of song sequence in Indian cinema, which "allows things to be said which cannot be said elsewhere" (Dwyer 292) in transcreating the Bard for the screen. Localisation strategies used in songs to adapt plays' soliloquies, motifs, and themes such as visual uncertainty and women's agency have been analysed in films such as *Omkara* (Bans), *Eeda*, *Annayum Rasoolum*, *Veeram* and *Karmayogi* (Burnett, Buckley). While *Kaliyattam* has been analysed from multiple angles of postcolonialism (Ania Loomba), auteur theory (Burnett), regional myths and legends (C.S Venkiteswaram), etc., the songs in it have not received much critical attention. Alongside the film, the song *Ennodenthinee Pinakkam* has been particularly mentioned by the scholars (Jayakumar) and Buckley (2022). While these studies on *Kaliyattam* mention this particular song as a Willow Song equivalent, they neither engage with the songs in particular nor raise the question of its function in the adapted narrative, a gap which the present study seeks to bridge.

This article, through the qualitative methodology of close reading, analyses the song sequence and the play's Willow Song, alongside their respective contexts. However, since the film song is neither a literal translation nor even a thematic translation of the latter, the point of analysis would be the significance of this departure, instead of a comparative analysis of the lyrics. The change in context and theme is understood as a changed focus on Thamara's agency and self-assertion in comparison to Desdemona, which the article explores through a framework that builds on the concept of "extensive sisterhood of grief" by Eamon Grennan (1987) and the arguments of Desdemona's non-individuality in Willow Song put forth by Pak Sunghie and Maggie Winter in terms of its shared nature (2024). The article reads the film song's and its narrative context's engagement with the questions of the heroine's agency, self-assertion, individuality and narrative authority, which critics raise on Desdemona's Willow Song, as marks of its functions as an adaptation, even when the lyrics and the theme of these songs' original context vastly differ.

The contrasting and parallel mode of presenting the lyrics and visual modalities in the song to adapt the play's Willow Song would be analysed using Martin Oja's (2024) reading of conflicting modalities in feature films. Oja undertakes a detailed study of the varied ways of approaching "modalities mismatch in film," wherein "the soundtrack and visuals present contradictory meanings" (95), drawing from the contrapuntal use of sound developed by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov (1982), which called for a "distinct nonsynchronization" of sound with the "visual images" (200-201). He proposes that as a "semiotic strategy", conflicting modalities in film be employed with varied intentions, that range from "ironical comments to the fundamental prompts for completely altering the viewing regime" (123). His advocacy to include "characters' speeches" as a part of the incongruity of the film's aural with the visual modalities allows us to analyse lyrics, as well the speeches of Desdemona/ Thamara and Emilia/Cheerma, which precede and succeed the songs in the play and the film, as aural modalities which contribute to the meaning-making and sense of agency associated with their respective song sequences.

Appropriation of Narrative Authority through Context: Critics and Agency

The Willow Song in *Othello*'s Folio version is appropriated from the association of mourning

with wearing garlands made of willow leaves, which abound in England's folk songs (Gardner-Merwin 237-239), forming part of a wider "repertoire of moriturus lyrics" that mourns the loss of loved ones, to heartbreak or death (Pantano 4). This theme of lament is retained in the Shakespearean play, while it is adapted with significant contrast in the film. In both the film and the play, these songs come at a juncture wherein the women anticipate the arrival of their husbands, who rebuked them for adultery without giving reasons, and yet ask them to wait for them in the bedroom afterwards. The audience has been foretold of the husbands' oath to murder them in bed, but the women themselves, unaware of the impending fate, choose different songs as they await their return: Desdemona recounts a song sung by her mother's maid Barbary as she died, a lament over betrayal in love. Its narrator sings of "a poor soul who sat by a sycamore tree", a fresh stream and stones nearby, participating audience in her sorrow, as she sang of how a green willow must be her garland, and how no one should blame her lover, for she approves her scorn. It also conveys the sting of accusation of betrayal, as the narrator conveys how, upon her calling her lover false, he retorted that she also slept with other men (4.2.43-62).

Critics differ on the function of the Willow Song in the play. Eanon Grennan reads it as Desdemona's act of solidarity with women before her, as an "extensive sisterhood of grief," connecting Desdemona to Barbara and to countless heartbroken women before them (279). The personal nature of her song denies Thamara this solidarity. Desdemona makes at least a reference to her past through the occasion of her song, a past wherein she is free of Othello's claims to her as a lover or wife, while Thamara's song places her in a past where not only the song's content, but also the initial context of singing it, is related to Kannan. The only feminine solidarity Thamara receives on account of the song is through Cheerma's reception of it.

The loss of sisterhood through context is, however, a trade-off, since, as Maggie Winter and Sunghie Pak highlight, the same "shared nature" of the song, sung by the people from "different races, classes and genders", acts as a hindrance to Desdemona's agency, since it is not "original or unique" (61). On the other hand, in the film, Thamara's song is noteworthy for the absence of this line of suffering women, both in conception and transmission. Penned by Kaithapram Damodaran Namboodiri and sung by Bhavana Radhakrishnan, the song is placed as Thamara's remembrance of her first rendition of it as related to her first meeting with Kannan, as if in a response to Emilia's wish that Desdemona "had never *seen*" (4.3.19) Othello (emphasis mine). *Kaliyattam*'s adapted Willow Song takes from this context, when Thamara asks Cheerma whether she knows when she first met Kannan, and recounts that it was on a festival day in the sacred grove near them where he performed Theyyam, contracted significant burns and was taken to her palace's granary to rest and recover. She had sung this song to him then to help decrease the pain and aid him in sleep. Even though Kannan mentions the granary while recounting their love story to the village elders, he leaves out her song, and its function as the initiator of their romance, thus increasing the significance of Thamara's story behind the song for reclaiming her narrative agency.

The song's context gives a space for the Desdemona figure to narrate her version of her love story's beginnings to the narratee (both the intra-diegetic narratee Cheerma, and the audience who watch the film). This is unlike the play, wherein Othello is the sole source of information on how the couple met, for the senate and the play's audience. Othello tells the senate that since her father often invited him to relate his experiences of "most disastrous chances" and "moving accidents by flood and field" (1.3.155-156) etc., he observed that Desdemona "would seriously incline" (1.3.170) to hear them. He speaks of how she would, "with a greedy ear,/Devour up *my* discourse" (1.3.173-174) (emphasis mine), and tell him later that his story would "woo" her (1.3.192). Hence, Othello's account of his acquaintance with her performatively constructs

an image of him as the master storyteller who, by telling *his* stories, draws her to him. On the other hand, according to Thamara's account of her song's context, it is her song that began the "wooing," and the conveying of attraction in their romance's starting stage, turning the tables on Thamara's ability to use narrative in effecting romance. Moreover, as Thamara asks Cheerma whether she knows when is the first time she met Kannan, Cheerma, interested to know her tale, says "no, you tell me, let me hear," and leans forward with her fists placed on cheek, displaying the body language that frames Cheerma as "seriously inclined" (1.3.170) and ready to "devour" Thamara's discourse (1.3.174), in the manner Desdemona is stated to be drawn to Othello's tales, according to him. Thus, this song's context confers upon Thamara the agency and admiration given earlier to Kannan/Othello as a speaker.

Multimodal Accusation in Song and Extension to Strangulation Scene: A Contrapuntal Reading

The lyrics of *Ennodenthinee Pinakkam* are a constant accusation posed by the narrator to the lover, asking him the reason for absenting himself from meeting her, while the visuals execute the accusation through juxtaposition shots of Kannan preparing for murder; an accusation which, in its execution of dramatic irony, is hidden from Thamara but known to the audience. The contrasting auditory and visual language thus form a contrapuntal contradiction, heightening the song's execution of Thamara's accusatory agency, considering "the auditory modality as consisting of music, sound, and speech as modes with their medial variants and submodes" (Oja 119). The lyrics speak of the narrator "lining eyes with kajal, / looking into the ornate mirror *valkkannadi*/ adorning forehead with turmeric, and lighting the *kartika* lamp in my eyes", and asks her beloved why, even then, only he "did not turn up to swing in my golden dreams' swing"?) (*my translation*). The line reflects the portrayal of love according to *rasa* theory, which mentions that getting ready to meet the lover in anticipation of union is one way to portray and evoke the *sringara* *rasa* and its underlying emotion of romance. The lyrics, when applied to Thamara getting ready in the shot preceding the lines, work to performatively constitute the *sringara* *rasa*. But the juxtaposing scene of kajal being applied on Kannan as he lays down to be prepared for Theyyam (01:56:21- 01:56:30), as well as murder and thus separation of lovers, gives *sringara* a gruesome turn, in an "ironic comment", which Oja cites to be a "frequent practice" (120) that is noticed to be present in the studies of incongruent film music, creating a layered adaptation of the Willow Song's pathos to the regional film's song sequence. Similarly, in strangulation scene, Kannan arrives when Thamara is asleep (resolving the song's complaint of him not arriving in her "golden dreams") at the *padippura*/ door and closes it without noise, without calling for her, and it is she who, when, woken up by his kiss, calls out to him, in what constitutes a tragic similarity in action and contradiction in intention to those of Thamara as expressed in her song's last stanza, where she talks of how, "on hearing footsteps", she "goes to the *padippura*, walks without tinkling of anklets, longing to hear (his) voice calling her." Kannan's internal monologue adds the adjective "mute" to Othello's description of her as rose, and utilizes her silence to kiss her for the last time. However, woken up by the kiss, Thamara is no longer mute, and utilizes her agency to questions his intention for wearing Theyyam makeup to bedroom when he finally arrived, similar to her song asking him reason for not coming to her. Thus, the strangulation scene takes the song's lyrics and theme to heighten the irony and accusation in the succeeding scene through contrapuntal means. Additionally, in contrapuntal reading in multimodality, the notion of contrapuntal does not mean total similarity or difference, but the "interplay between these principles; to a model where contrast and commonality are joined" (Oja 102). Thamara's initial intent for the song to aid Kannan's sleep has a similar interplay with that of the words of Othello repeated by Kannan in the strangulation scene, that of putting out the light (of life) from Desdemona/ Thamara, in a

translation of Othello's infamous lines: "Put out the light, and then put out the light" (5.2.7-8) (latter referring to Thamara in the film), musing on how he can "never relume" the latter. The ominous association of the image of light with life in *Othello*'s context continues, as the song's narrator speaks of keeping the *kartika* lamp (the auspicious light that is lit to ward off darkness) lit in her eyes, and Thamara is seen literally lighting the lamps in bedroom in the visuals (1:57:43-46) to welcome Kannan, the very lights he would later put out as he enters the space. The lamp's image is also brought into focus in *mise-en-scène* in an adjacent scene, this time as a facilitator of Kannan's makeup, where Kannan is framed lying down for face and body painting for Theyyam performance, the irony of the scene being the lamp facilitating the makeup which he would have on him in the strangulation scene as well.

The body-painting of snakes on Kannan, which is portrayed as being carried out during the song through visual mode, helps in furthering Thamara's agency of self-assertion during the strangulation scene that succeeds the song. When Kannan overthrows Thamara into bed and makes clear his intention to kill her, her response is not one that, like Desdemona, states that she is undone, nor does she accept his decision to kill her through her words, unlike Desdemona who agrees to being killed by the end and only pleads to be left alive for the duration of a night, half an hour, and eventually, for the time when she could say a prayer. Thamara's responses, instead, are repeatedly voiced and clear objections of "No, do not kill me," and at last, the action of hugging him tight. This final response of bodily embrace is shown to catch Kannan unawares for a second's duration, and then, overcome by traces of his earlier love for her, eyes welling up and lips whimpering, he hugs her back (02:09:18-02:09:22): for the first half of the hug, the pain and love is clear in his face, but in the second half, it changes back to fits of suspicion and anger, and he breaks away from her hug, overthrowing her in a murderous rage. Thus, Thamara's response extends to a bodily action that is able to elicit a bodily response of affection in return from Kannan, and influence his decision, even if for mere seconds. Moreover, the act of hugging his torso presses her bodily self against the serpents' picture painted on Kannan's upper body for the performance of *Kandanar Kelan Theyyam*, which he is to perform after the murder. According to this Theyyam's myth, when Kelan was human, he set a forest on fire to clear land for farming, and when he got engulfed in it, jumped to a gooseberry tree where resided two snakes who jumped onto his body, biting him in self-defence, before the trio perished in the fire (Radhakrishnan, n.p). Thus, Thamara's act of hugging him re-inscribes her upon his body, similar to the snakes, especially when one considers how, when being strangled to death, her hands stray and rest on the painted snakes. Moreover, Kandanar Kelan wears the snakes on his torso to embody and thus give voice to the victims of his actions, which he committed before becoming a God. Although Kannan does not share Kelan's attitude towards the death he caused, Thamara's act of nonverbal addition of her victimhood to this torso, by her own volition and agency, asserts his crime and her efforts to stop it. Thus the scene takes from the reference to the Theyyam tradition as seen in, and extended from, the song sequence, to frame Thamara's agency through multimodal accusation and assertion of individuality, constituted via a contrapuntal interplay of similarity and difference.

The snakes painted on Kannan as shown in the song's visual mode also help to constitute a dissonance in meaning, when read against the imagery of Thamara "looking into the mirror" that is conveyed simultaneously by the song's aural modality, lyrics. This is unlike the *kajal* scene, where the reference to decoration in lyrics succeeds the same described act shown in visuals. However, as Oja states, "the information expressed by different modalities is semantically coherent" (118) here as well, since the simultaneous portrayal of Thamara on screen and the word mirror in the lyrics gestures to her mirroring and identification with their victimhood, foreshadowing both her hugging the snake-painted torso and the painting as her hands' final

resting place. Hence, the lyrics' reference to the mirror with its association to the couple's romance is incongruous to the visual mode of body painting depicted on screen.

Joan Montgomery Byles argues, Desdemona's love for Othello is "intensely subjective," which "puts her dangerously out of touch with objective reality", as she dismisses his murderous jealousy and the possibility of him harming her and instead seek Iago's aid in helping to secure back his affections, and "refuses to believe the overwhelming evidence that their relationship has changed beyond all recognition" (50). While Thamara's comment that Kannan's anger might spring from his increasing love for her points to an identification with Byle's notion of Desdemona, the analysis of the song and the murder scene showcases a framing of her objective reality through the accusatory nature of the contrapuntal analysis of the juxtaposed visuals and lyrics and their extension in the murder scene, giving the adaptation a Desdemona who is more expressive of her agency and narrative individuality. The film song strips the accusation of adultery in Willow Song, but with it, it also strips away the voice of the male who accuses her of the same, making the narration completely the woman's own. In the Willow Song, when the narrator accuses her lover of cheating her, he is reported as accusing her back, with his line "If I court more women, you'll couch with more men" (4.3.61-62), mentioned in the song. Shakespeare added this line to the existing version of the Willow Song, and it captures Desdemona's pain at Othello's condemnation of her as a whore. On the other hand, in the film song, this conversational element is absent, and its tone, instead of being a lament, is one of accusation of the non-arrival of the male lover. The song completely forgoes any mention of the accusations of adultery which the hero places on her, instead highlighting his role as the culprit for their distance, calling out his refusal to meet her and convey to her the reason for his displeasure.

Conclusion

Through this study, this article highlights the narrative function of the song *Ennodenthinee Pinakkam* from *Kaliyattam* in its adaptation of *Othello*'s Willow Song. The article traces the context of the Willow Song in *Othello* and the dissimilarities between it and the film song at the outset. It situates the Willow Song within the major strands of critical discourse on Desdemona's agency in relation to the Willow Song, and brings out how the film song grants more narrative authority to Thamara through its appropriation of the narrative context, since it frames the song as her own conception, which she relies on at her time of crisis. This article also identifies the song's multimodal portrayal of accusation as its tool in advancing Thamara's agency and individuality, as compared to Desdemona in the Willow Song. It portrays how the song takes away the authoritative and accusatory male voice, giving the woman narrator complete narrative authority and agency over presenting the issues in their relationship, through both the lyrics and the conflicting visual modalities on screen, including Thamara's interaction and identification with the victimhood of snakes related to the Theyyam whose makeup Kannan has on his body at the time of murder. The study expands the existing repertoire of research in the arena of songs in Shakespeare film adaptations, by bringing contrapuntal mode of analysis as a tool to read the juxtaposition of modalities in these songs. It also adds to the regional framework of reading Shakespearean adaptations, by highlighting the use of regional rituals as one of the multiple modalities of locating and extending agency of the adapted characters. Furthermore, the article broadens the existing critical discourse on Desdemona's Willow Song by giving the angle of accusation as a framework to read Desdemona's assertion of identity.

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