



Alluring Afterlives: Decrypting the Parallels Grooved into *Yakshi* and *Pontianak* from South Asian Folklore

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Abstract— *The concept of vampires is found ubiquitously in folklore and mythologies across civilizations. The notion of a beautiful belle who faces a tragic end in life, usually by the hands of a vile man, then transcends into the afterlife and remains fuelled by vengeance against men as a whole, especially lecherous men, is one that holds timeless fascination and fear, at the same time. Historical records show that the Yakshis were perceived as harmless fairies, salabhanjikas, in earlier times, in many religious belief systems. Several readings about the gender issues, the issues of marginalised subaltern, issues related to patriarchy and misogyny, all leading to exploitation of vulnerable, unwed women, have already been done. This paper is an attempt to look at the notion of these miasmatic creatures as found in Malayalam lore, and to use the concept of the Pontianak from Malay lore as a point of comparison, to decode the parallels encoded in them.*



Keywords— *Malay lore, Malayalam folklore, Pontianak, Yakshi*

I. INTRODUCTION

Fear is a primary emotion of evolved living beings, and a prime necessity for survival in the face of adversities. Myths, folklores and legends within a civilization often cater to instilling fear in the minds of people, probably in an attempt to lead them down the path of righteousness, by infusing the threat of punishment unless they do, as incorporated in the moral codes. In her article, “Mythical Allegories of Fear (A Psychoanalytic Aspect)”, Moklytsia observes that “[m]yths of all nations [are] filled with images of scary creatures” (Moklytsia). Whether physical appearances are scary or not, most stories have an innate element of fear, a fundamental message to evoke fear in the listener’s mind. Interestingly enough, in Greek mythology, Phobos, the God of Fear, was a son of Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love with her long-term lover, Ares, God of War. The siblings of Phobos include Deimos, the God of terror, Harmonia, Goddess of harmony and Eros, the God of Love, Passion and Fertility (greekmythology.com). That the genesis of Phobos is itself an amalgamation of contradictory emotions – of Love and

of Conflict – is an indication of the bundle of contradictions that might be involved in the emotion of fear. Also important is the bifurcation into “Fear” and “Terror”, and assigning two different Gods, though they are brothers, thereby suggesting the intensity of the emotions.

From classical mythology to local folklores and regional legends, this trend continues – that of installing fear among the community members so as to keep them reigned in. At various times, various types of figures and storylines were used, but ultimately, they all aimed at evoking different degrees of fear, thereby triggering the most primary instinct in human beings – that of self-preservation. This is what is highlighted by Hiimäe, the Estonian folklorist, when she says, “It is characteristic of human nature to fight against fear, trying to reduce or prevent it, and this aim reverberates in the folk narratives” (Hiimäe). If superhumans and Gods were used in Classical mythology, it can be seen that later on, lesser beings such as Fallen Angels like Lucifer, “Valkyries, Fairies, Leprechauns, and Djinns” were used for this

purpose, as indigenous faiths and traditions started to be subdued, amalgamated and marginalised by dominant religions such as Brahminism (Sukesh). The *Yakshis*, for instance, “were believed to be nature deities signifying trees, rivers, and hills. They were later incorporated into Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism during Vedic times and known to be secondary tutelary/guardian type deities to the Gods and Goddesses of the upper echelons in Hinduism” (Sukesh).

II. YAKSHI IN KERALA LORE

Kerala, God’s Own Country, is rich in fascinating narratives about the realistic and the fantastic, many that are unique to its history and tradition, many that are common to Indian or South Asian culture and history. *Yakshi* is such a concept, that is referenced extensively in Kerala Lore. It is also used as a common expression with varying semantic contexts – to indicate an evil woman who behaves dreadfully to others, to indicate a woman’s ungroomed appearances or even to indicate a woman who is lecherous. Though originally the *Yakshi* is ethereally beautiful in appearance, no one uses the term to pay a compliment in Malayalam, only the *modus operandi* of *Yakshi* has filtered down the timeline – to allure someone for personal gains, then suck them dry financially or emotionally or in some other way. This is interesting, because, the concept of *Gandharva* is also associated with luring innocent victims, preferably young virgins, with divine music and then discard them after ‘deflowering’ them, but now it is used widely in a positive sense, especially to mean someone who can sing well, as in *Gaana Gandharvan* or *Gandharva Gaayakan*.

The earliest reference to *Yakshi* and her sort-of-masculine pair, *Yaksha* in recorded history is traced back to 1st Century BCE, in sculptures found in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In *Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana* (JUB) the oldest known, but forgotten Upanishad (Maheshwari), *Yakshas* are mentioned as “wonderous things” (The MAP Academy), with absolutely no negative connotations.

By the time that epics such as the *Ramayana* were composed, *yakshas* were referred to as spirits or a group of figures similar to, but elevated and distinct from, ghosts and demons. In early Buddhist literature and sculpture, *yakshas* frequently appear in subordination to the Buddha; sources such as the *Therigatha* refer to them as guardian spirits who impart good morals. (The MAP Academy)

It is common to find sculptures depicting *Yaksha* and *Yakshi* as figures in attendance, and also “in Jainism through the early and late medieval periods,

starting in 500 C.E. and up until the 15th century, where they are portrayed as attendant figures to the twenty-four Tirthankaras, with the *yaksha* on the left and the *yakshini* on the right side” (The MAP Academy).

The *Yaksha* has retained his positive semantic associations, and has not gained much negative associations. His partner, *Yakshi*, also known as *Yakshini* or *Yakkini*, on the other hand, has undergone several phases of semantic and cultural metamorphoses, and is now associated with something that evokes fear. In Buddhism they can also be seen as the *salabhanjikas*, who attended Maya, mother of Sidhardha, the future Buddha, during her child-birth, breaking the branches of the Sala tree, beneath which the Buddha was born. Travelling across time and geographical borders, when they reach the beautiful petit land of Kerala, they assume the form of angelic ladies who turn into blood-sucking vampires, who haunt lewd men, preferably from the upper class.

Fig 1. shows a photograph of the sculptures of a *Yaksha* and a *Yakshi* dating back to c. 50 BCE, now kept at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

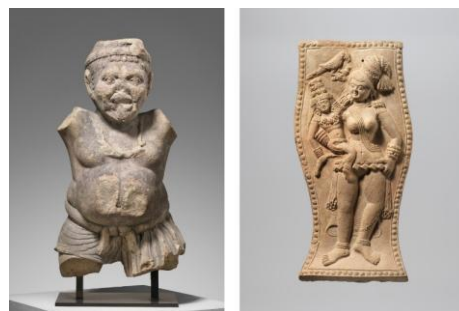


Fig 1. Sculptures of *Yaksha* (on the left) and *Yakshi* holding a child (on the right) c. 50 BCE (The MAP Academy)

As can be clearly seen from the photographs, *Yakshi* is depicted with a very positive and sensitive tone, and there is nothing to suggest fear or terror or scare. Fig 2. gives the illustration that is used by Devdutt Pattanaik for his article “*Yakshi’s Solicitation*”, clearly indicating extended claws and an eye that suggest cunning, rather than innocence or vulnerability.



Fig 2. Illustration of *Yakshi* (devdutt.com)

Pattanaik says that only in Kerala this happens, where both *Yakshi* and *Gandharva* undergo semantic and cultural alchemy, and “is very different from the way they are typically presented in Puranic, Buddhist and Jain lore” (Pattanaik). He goes on to say that elsewhere, the *Gandharvas*, for instance, are “harmless fairies” but “in Kerala, they transform into fierce monsters: the succubus who sexually charms and destroys men, and the incubus who sexually charms and destroys” (Pattanaik).

Sukesh attributes “the devolution of *Yakshis*” to the marginalisation and usurpation of indigenous belief systems by the dominant religious systems such as Buddhism or Hinduism. She also holds responsible popular literature of those days and popular culture of current days such as movies and series, for the cementing of this devolution (Sukesh).

III. PONTIANAK IN MALAY LORE

When one looks at the concept of *Pontianak* in Malay lore, the points of similarity with *Yakshi* are rather astounding. Though not much recorded data could be found regarding the exact point of time of origin of *Pontianak*, or whether the spirit was an object of worship and had positive associations previously, it is said that the Pontianak Sultanate might have been named after the vampiric *Pontianak*, because the founder of the Sultanate successfully drove away demons from a place, and built a worship place as well as a palace there. The term *Pontianak* might have originated from two terms, *ponti* meaning “dead” and *anak* meaning “young person”. In Indonesian legends they are called *Kuntilanak* (Mojikal). Legend has it that Pontianak is the vengeful spirit of a pregnant young woman who died at childbirth, perhaps due to a lover’s betrayal. Whatever the cause of death, she is transformed into a vengeful spirit, roaming the earth for eternity, “seeking retribution” (Rasmusson).

IV. YAKSHI AND PONTIANAK: PARALLELS DECRYPTED

While looking at the two concepts, it is impossible to miss the similarities between the two. *Pontianak* is rather an urban legend, and is a fascination with the people, as evinced by the works dealing with Pontianak strewn across popular culture, which is exactly the case with *Yakshi* too. The appearance of *Yakshi* as a scary vampire is, of course, an evolved feature, and probably black and white movies played a major part in reinforcing the dress code of *Yakshi* as white – so as to be visible in a black and white frame, and also during night time shooting. Innocent beauty,

flowing untied black hair, lips reddened with beetle chewing, intoxicating smell of *Pala* flowers and ethereal music are all set as props for *Yakshi*. Curiously enough, *Pontianak* scores practically ninety percent on the scale of similarity in almost all these points.

Table 1. enlists the points of comparison between *Yakshi* and *Pontianak*.

Table 1. Points of Comparison between *Yakshi* and *Pontianak*

Points of comparison	<i>Yakshi</i>	<i>Pontianak</i>
Cause of death	Betrayal by lover/ elite class man	Betrayal by lover/ during childbirth
Target victims	Lecherous men of any age, especially elite class	Men who cheat on their lovers or wives
Time of appearance	Night time, middle of the forest	Night time, middle of the forest or sea
Abode during day time	Big trees, usually <i>Pala</i> or <i>Karimpana</i>	Banana trees
Appearance before assault	Young and beautiful, long hair, white dress (in movies)	Young and beautiful, long hair, white dress
Appearance during assault	Fangs and claws, sucks blood	Fangs and claws, disembowels
Method of control	Iron nail driven through the trunk of the tree	Iron nail driven through the trunk of the tree or the neck of the <i>Pontianak</i>
Accompanying smell	Smell of <i>Pala</i> flowers	Floral scent
Accompanying sound	Eerie laughter, melodious song	Eerie laughter, cries of baby

V. DISCUSSION

Yakshi of the old times has no parallels with *Pontianak*, at least not in the materials available for study. Every material affirms that *Yakshi* was in every sense a positive being. However, the “devolved” *Yakshi* (Sukesh), as enthroned in popular imagination by books such as *Aithiyamala* by Kottarathil Shankunni or *Neelavelicham* by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and its original movie

adaptation *Bhargavi Nilayam* (1964), or the innumerable horror movies that embalmed *Yakshi* as a synonym for *Rakshasi* (female demon), has a lot of similarities with *Pontianak*.

More than the similarities, the ultimate purpose of these legends should also be discussed. A wronged lady dies as a result of betrayal, but transcends into immortality, though not in a positive sense, but rather as a cursed being, doomed to haunt this earth, looking for retribution. Therein lies the first contradiction in both the concepts. The second contradiction can be found in the description of the *Yakshi* and the *Pontianak* as heavenly beauties after their death, before their transformation resulting in the annihilation of their victims. Beauty is used as a weapon to entrap the victims seeking aesthetic pleasures. The third contradiction is more important – why are the victims libidinous men alone? Any number of articles have highlighted the aspect of gender discrimination and exploitation of women, especially in the Kerala context of feudalism. Thus, the ultimate aim of these lore can easily be seen to be instilling a fear in the minds of the predators. What Greek mythology projected as Phobos, the offspring of Aphrodite and Ares, of love and conflict, whose siblings include Deimos and Eros, is clearly present in the lore surrounding *Yakshi* and *Pontianak*. Through the props for generating fear, the lore eventually targets to evoke terror in the minds of wayward men who are out to prey on vulnerable women. It is probably the community's way of reigning in the exploitation of its weak and vulnerable members.

F R Ellison points out that repetitive patterns are discernible in folklore and fairy tales, and that attempts should be made “to consider the relation of myth to folklore” (Ellison, 131). Thus, it is common to find similar elements in mythologies and folklore across cultures, such as an adventurous hero facing superhuman hurdles or the lovers having to face innumerable challenges and being separated, or on the philosophical realm of victory of good over evil. In the case of *Yakshi* and *Pontianak*, repeated patterns of encounters on lonely forests at night, enamouring the victims with beauty and music, and then transforming into terrifying creatures who finish off the victims, evidently point towards repeated patterns. But, whether the victory of good over evil is satisfied here is a question of manifold ramifications. That is the most important contradiction that lies at the heart of *Yakshi* and *Pontianak*. Who represents good here, and who represents evil? Is killing a lecherous man who is out to exploit a vulnerable woman or cheat on his wife, good or bad? Is *Yakshi* or *Pontianak* then demons, or angels who resort to violence for delivering justice? These are crucial contradictions at the centre of these narratives that ought to be taken up for detailed studies.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the study, it becomes clear that *Yakshi*, as found in Malayalam folklore and *Pontianak* of the Malay folklore have more similarities than differences, despite geographical and cultural variances. *Yakshi*, as a concept has evolved in quite a tangential semantic and cultural association than the original ones found in records, but the *Yakshi* as found in Malayalam folklore and *Pontianak* in Malay lore have contradictions grooved into them that are to be taken up for deeper philosophical discussions and analyses.

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