

## **THE UNCANNY (WO)MAN: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF SANTOSH SIVAN'S *URUMI***

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Santosh Sivan's epic film *Urumi* is a confluence of fact and fiction. The movie recounts a story that took place after the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama set foot in Kozhikode in 1498. Set against the backdrop of colonisation, the film glorifies the patriotic spirit of Kelu and Ayesha. At the same time, it subverts the traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. The plot of *Urumi* is built on the idea that every human subject possesses both male and female traits. Each individual is a psychological hybrid. Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, says, Since the anima is an archetype that is found in men, it is reasonable to suppose that an equivalent archetype must be present in women; for just as a man is compensated by a feminine element, so a woman is compensated by a masculine one. [animus] (151)

The anima is the personification of all feminine psychological tendencies in a man, while the animus is the personification of all masculine psychological tendencies in a woman. The unindividuated man identifies with those personal qualities that are symbolically masculine. He does not recognise symbolically feminine qualities as part of his personality but rather projects them onto women. The same takes place in the case of an unindividuated woman too. In the movie *Urumi*, Jagathy takes the role of a man (Chenicheri Kurup) in whom anima dominates than animus. So, he is an effeminate character. He uses lipstick and walks like a lady. Kurup wears men's clothing but tricks the king into his way like a prostitute. He is a scholar in twelve languages and has strong support for Portuguese. On certain occasions, Kurup acts in a manly manner. He becomes angry with an Arab sailor; *Chirakkale charakku nallathanennu nischayamillennu! Nee njangale pattikkan vannathano?* Kurup instantly orders death sentences to Kelu and his friend as they were alleged murderers.

Kurup is depicted as a malcontent villain throughout the movie who supports the Portuguese for his selfish purposes. He is reckoned as the "other" of Kelu, who personifies patriotism. The masculinity of Kelu is set against the femininity of Kurup. Even though the latter is biologically a male, he embraces femininity. Thus, the identity of Kelu as the masculine "self" is asserted through the depiction of effeminate Kurup. The very idea of the "self" centres around the concept of "other". Hegel claims that it is only through recognising and knowing the "other" that the "self" can know itself.

It is ironic that Kurup, a confidant of the king and a powerful diplomat, is being "othered" based on ambivalent gender identity. He is biologically a man and psychologically a woman. Kelu says, *ninakkullil maayaathe kidakkunna oru pennundu. Swarna kothichiyaya, kusumbulla, adukkala purathu ninnu eshani parayunna oru pennu.* The reason for the marginalisation of Kurup can be traced back to the absence of a traditionally feminine character in the movie.

Molly Haskell defines two female character binaries called the "superfemale" and the "superwoman" in her book *From Reverence to Rape*. The "superfemale" is a woman character that is "exceedingly 'feminine' and flirtatious". This type of character will not relegate herself to the societal roles thrust upon her but will break free towards agency and autonomy via her sexuality. The next binary that Haskell offers is the "superwoman". This character type veers away from strictly using one's sexuality to gain agency and takes on the characteristics of men-what Haskell refers to as the "transsexual impersonators" and assume "male logic". Ayesha, the heroine of the movie, is a "superwoman". She is a brave warrior who fights for her country and her fellow women. Kurup says, *simhiyanu thamburane simhi.*

In the film, all the major male characters like Bhanu Vikraman, Vavvali etc., are also attributed with feminine qualities. Bhanu is a puppet in the hands of Kurup. He is obsessed with power and even murders his father for that. Kelu accuses Bhanu of his lack of manliness. Kurup advises him to be a man at least in bed; *kiapparayilenkilum neeyoru cheryathamburanaaku.* Vavvali is a shy man even in front of his lover Bala. Unlike Kelu, he is initially afraid to fight against the Portuguese. These portrayals are in accordance with the coloniser's view that the colonised is enigmatic and effeminate. According to Simone De Beauvoir, The category of the Other is as fundamental as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most antique mythologies, one finds a duality, that of the Self and the Other; this division was not originally placed under the sign of the division of the sexes, and it did not depend on what was empirically given: In the couples Varuna-

Mitra, Uranus-Zeus, Sun-Moon, Day-Night no female element is originally implied; not more than in the opposition of Good and Bad, fortune and misfortune, right and left, God and Lucifer; otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself without simultaneously positing the Other facing itself. (18)

The movie's binaries of masculinity and femininity are subverted by attributing effeminate qualities to males and masculine qualities to females. The performativity of gender roles is explored in the film. Gender is not something one; it is something one does. Judith Butler elaborates this idea in the first chapter of *Gender Trouble*. Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (33)

The title of the movie itself connotes the fluid nature of gender identity. *Urumi*, a long whip-like sword, is highly flexible. It is against all kinds of fixities. The characters like Kurup, Ayesha, Bhanu, Vavvali etc., have defined their gender roles in the movie. But a conventional viewer, who stands outside the realm of gender discursivity, may feel a kind of strangeness to these character portrayals. This can be viewed as the feeling of uncanniness. Nicholas Royle defines the "uncanny" as follows.

The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, particularly regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one's sense of oneself (of one's so-called 'personality' or 'sexuality', for example) seems strangely questionable. The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper, a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property, including the properness of proper names, one's so-called 'own' name, but also the proper names of others, of places, institutions, and events. (1)

In the movie itself, Kelu views Kurup and Bhanu with contempt. Kurup may be a familiar figure for someone working with an effeminate man in real life. But when such a character takes the role of a minister in a movie, it creates an "uncanny" feeling. Ayesha is also out of place in the realms of conventional femininity. Kelu tells Ayesha, *ee randachi vilayattom niruthu*. A man or woman may feel the anima/animus present in him or her as "uncanny". In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva puts it, Freud "teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves". Kurup himself feels a kind of contempt towards the "anima" present in him. He says, *ithuvare kettiyaadiya brahindala vesham azhikkukayaanu Kurup*.

Thus, whenever the anima in a man or the animus in a woman finds expression, it is viewed as something "uncanny". The "altered" gender identities of Kurup, Ayesha, Bhanu and Vavvali exemplify this notion.

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