

The Chuvannathadi in Kathakali: An Evaluation of the Character Type (Vesham)

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ABSTRACT

The paper brings out the importance of the chuvannathadi in Kathakali, a character type which for many years earlier did not receive the importance it inherently possesses. It analyses the costume and the characters from the MahaBharatham and the Ramayanam who are linked to a chuvannathadi and then goes on to analyse how GuruNanu Nair who rightfully considered as the master of this role in modern times, gave the chuvannathadi the importance it deserved. The paper also looks at the concept of cognitive contradiction (a term I have coined) and makes references to Shakespeare's Shylock from the play The Merchant of Venice. It goes on to discuss the when discussing the concept of the anti-hero, a role in which Guru Nanu Nair specialized.

KEYWORDS: *type characters, Kathakali costumes, cognitive contradiction, rhythms in a performance, heroes and anti-heroes, role interpretation*

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is primarily meant for those who like Kathakali and are familiar with the dance drama and also by those wish to know something about the costumes and characters. While an in depth knowledge of the dance drama is not essential, a familiarity with the dance form will help the reader while going through this paper. A familiarity with all main stories in the MahaBharatham and the Ramayanam will also be of use. This is however as we said only a value add to the reader.

This paper is an evaluation of the chuvannathadi in Kathakali – the vesham, that is the costume which is worn by the characters appearing as a chuvannathadi. Chuvannathadi literally means 'red beard' i. e., a costume where red is predominant and the beard which is worn is prominent and is part of the items worn by the actor in order to give the character a predominantly overall fierce and angry look. We have seen a number of instances where people refer to this character as a 'red beard' – this has no meaning at all and we will not be using this term in this paper. There are two other types of thadivesham in Kathakali, the karuththathadi and the veluththathadi (black and white). The former is meant to represent good characters such as Shri Hanuman and Nandikeswaran, and the latter to represent evil characters such as the hunter in the story NalaCharitham. The karuththathadi is closely aligned in terms of the costume to the karivesham – kari in Malayalam is 'coal'. These usually are the demonesses who abound in the stories.

Kathakali costumes represent 'type characters'. In this they are very like the English morality plays which too had 'color

coded' costumes and make up with black standing for evil, white for purity and so on. In Kathakali, black stands for evil, green for peace and nobility and red for anger, the kaththi for arrogance and royalty blended, and so on. The main types in Kathakali are Pachcha, Kaththi, Minukku (a plain pale yellow/creamcolor), Thadi (different types) and Kari. There are also other types but these need not concern us as they are mainly for minor characters. There is of course the 'sthreevesham' that is, the costume donned by women characters. We will now look at the costume of the chuvannathadi. Zarrilli (2000) says that 'these characters are generally evil, vicious, and vile. Characters included in this type are epic characters like Dussassana of the Mahabharata whose evil is manifest in the act of disrobing Draupadi at court, and demons such as Krodhavasa who appears in the full version of the story KalyanaSougandhikam. The eyes are encased in black, and framed by a white serrated border which extends up to the ears. The black lips set off the ferocious mouth, while the nose and forehead knobs are even larger than those of the 'kaththi' characters. Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of the chuvannathadi is their huge crown, called the kuttichamaram. [The size of the headgear is five to six finger-sizes larger than the size of the normal circular shaped headgears (kireedam)]. Although the same basic shape and style as the crowns of 'green' and 'knife' types, the red beard crown is much larger and framed with red on its border. While the accessories and colors are similar to the 'green' type, the upper garment is a heavier, furrer material, suggesting the gross and unrefined nature of the type. Exceptions to the general type are Bali and

Sugrivan, the two great monkey chiefs of the Ramayana. Although costumed as red beards since they are part animal, part human, they are basically good and serve Rama's just cause'.

On a personal note, the reasons why I am focusing on the chuvannathadi and not on any of the other characters types in Kathakali have their origins in my childhood. But before I do so, I will have to tell the reader something about the magic of this dance drama; let me begin by describing what the setting of a Kathakali performance was and there is no better way to do this than by looking at the state of Kerala which is its home.

The Kerala government's website has a picturesque description of the state. 'Keralam, the land of kera or coconut, is a never-ending array of coconut palms... sun blached beaches... kettuvallams (catamarans) on the enchanting backwaters... magical monsoon showers... silent valleys vibrant with flora and fauna... misty mountains of the Western Ghats... fragrance of spices... evenings reverberating with the rhythm of a thousand art forms. . . fairs and festivals. . . as far as Kathakali performances were concerned, these were in the early days closely linked with temples, which doubled up as auditoria. In the evenings the sound of the percussion instruments and the cymbals would herald to the nearby villages that a performance was to be held that night. There were no loudspeakers advertising a Kathakali performance. It was just a soothing audio-visual communication that somehow blended with the environment. The scenery, temple, lamps, setting sun and the sounds of the percussion instruments combined into a unified whole which was an apt and sophisticated setting for the Kathakali performance that was to follow. It is difficult to describe this experience on paper but once felt and heard, it is difficult to forget'. We have to view (literally and metaphorically) the dance drama against this setting which is a combination of pristine beauty and peace.

The limitation of this paper is that I could not visit Kerala because of the prevailing pandemic and talk to people, both actors and people who have a good knowledge of Kathakali. As it is I had to rely on my own knowledge of the dance drama and also draw on my associations with people who shared a common love for Kathakali.

If I may be permitted to be nostalgic for a moment, I first watched a Kathakali performance in Kerala when I was just over three years old, maybe nearing four. My father was a lover of the dance drama and he used to take me to the performances when we were in Kerala; he was in the government service and used to get leave once in two or three years – I forget now. My mother was against his taking me for overnight performances, but he managed to take me along much to her dismay. During the period of the leave we stayed in Cherpulassery, then a small but typical village in Kerala with my mother's parents. It was the 'Kathakali season' when my father got leave and there were performances held in nearby villages fairly regularly. These were usually in a temple or a Namboodirimana (household). My father along with his friends (and I) used to go in a bus in the evening and reach the venue by 10 p. m. or thereabouts. My aunt (mother's sister) also had the same experience as I did and she would also go (barefoot in many instances) along with my father and his friends. My father used to find it most pleasurable to be able to explain what was happening on the stage to her and to me. Or else we would hire cycles and go

and we used to take reed mattresses to sit on and my father had with him a thermos flask of strong coffee. If we were lucky and knew someone in the Namboodirimana, they used to invite us to sit in the veranda and watch the performance. The hissing sound given out by the petro maxes are always in my mind when I think of those days and when we used to go to a nearby shop to buy something. My father knew most of the performers (dancers, singers, percussionists etc. and we used to go to the green room (aniyara) and talk to them. And in these actions and interactions were embedded the roots of my first friendships with the artists. Friendships which survived the decades and I could meet and talk to them when I was in my mid-twenties and studying in college in Delhi and they visited Delhi from Kerala for a performance. I still remember the pleased surprise which came over the face of Nanu Nair asan (a word meaning guru and is placed immediately after the name of the person), when he met me in Delhi after a gap of 18 years or so. To backtrack a little, the watching of the performances with my father symbolized and culminated in the love I have for the dance drama which lasts strongly even now.

So Nanu Nair asan who specialized in the role of the chuvannathadi was the guiding force behind writing this paper.

Vellinezhi Nanu Nair was a Kathakali actor and was born in the village of Vellinezhi in Palakkad district in 1910 (died 1986). He was the son and disciple of the eminent Kariyattil Koppa Nair and started his Kathakali career as a performer of feminine roles. I knew him well since my childhood and remember him as a soft spoken, caring human being – the very antithesis of a chuvannathadi.

The main chuvannathadi characters in Kathakali are Dussasanan, Thrigarthan, Jarasandhan, Bali, Sugreevan, Bakan, and Virabhadran. I am focusing only on the chuvannathadi characters though actors such as Nanu Nair asan were also experts in portraying related characters (not chuvannathadi) such as Simhika, Nakrathundi, Kattalan (hunter in Nala Charitham) and so on. There were and are other actors who have specialized in this role. Before Nanu Nair asan there was Champakulam Pachu Pillay, who was well known for his fierce portrayals of the characters. Today we have Nelliode Vasudevan Namboodiri who trained under Vazhengada Kunju Nair who is the most senior actor of today specializing in this role; there are other actors also who focus on this role but Nelliode asan as I said is the most senior of all of them and a gifted and highly intelligent actor who has the ability to bring out the character he is portraying in all its nuances. Both he and Nanu Nair asan were when out of costume gentle and quiet people; but in costume the transformation was remarkable. The word for this in Malayalam is veshaprakarcha which literally means that the person had the inherent gift of transforming himself into someone else while in full costume. This quality is something the person is born with and cannot be imbibed in any other way.

In the earlier days, the role of the chuvannathadi was not considered a significant one in the repertoire of Kathakali roles. Perhaps this was because it did not have the elegance of a pachchavesham or the sophistication of a kaththivesham. It was a role which was more a diversion from the more classical ones and usually (during all night performances) made an appearance towards the end of the performance and the sky was showing the glimmerings of

dawn. The accompanying songs were also basic in nature by which I mean that it was fast paced (along with the accompanying rhythm) and was mainly aggressive in tone and substance. There is, to dwell briefly on the structure of all-night Kathakali performances, a fundamental rhythm which percolates through most of them, especially the traditional all night ones. We will see that it begins on a softer note, with a pachcha or a minukku character on the stage (usually a husband and wife); this is mostly followed by the coming on stage of a kaththivesham past-midnight. The performance ends with a physical conflict, when the chuvannathadi comes on stage, to awaken members of the audience who are asleep. This is the standard pattern though of course there will be variations. Usually when the chuvannathadi came on stage, the main singers would hand over to secondary singers in order to take a well-deserved break in the green room. It is to Nanu Nair asan's credit that he changed all this without demanding it and so it came about that the main singers and the big names for percussion would continue to perform while he was on stage. What he did was to give the role an importance which it did not have and make it amongst the most enjoyable roles for an audience to see. What he did was to make the role three dimensional and he did this through the use of what I have come to call 'cognitive contradiction'.

Cognitive Contradiction

What exactly is this and how is it of relevance to a Kathakali actor? To give an example, of this from Shakespeare, we should examine Mark Antony addressing the Roman citizens after Brutus has made the 'Friends, Romans and countrymen' speech. We would have expected Antony to violently decry the conspirators. We would have expected him to dwell on the atrocity of the crime just committed. We would not expect Antony to address the highly charged crowd by appealing to their 'humane' instincts. But he does this and this approach has the effect of convincing the crowd that he is right and Brutus was wrong. Antony's approach is unusual. He does not exhort the crowd to take revenge on Brutus. He does not tell them that Brutus is a wicked person. In fact, he does just the opposite. Marlon Brando in this role gives a stellar performance in this speech scene. My term for this type of acting is cognitive contradiction, meaning that the viewer will usually have a predetermined notion of how the actor will portray a particular character, and if what the actor portrays is completely different from this, cognitive contradiction has come into play. There is an intellectual disconnect between what is being shown by the actor and what the viewer thought he would hear/ see. The viewer is therefore, surprised and intellectually stimulated. To take this one step further, the contrasting effect that the actors bring out - juxtaposing - is also a type of cognitive contradiction. It makes the viewer/reader say, 'I never thought that this person would behave in this manner'. The element of surprise which this brings out makes the character more interesting as a new perspective is exposed. Juxtaposition in this case is useful in the development of characters. It is more complicated as the two juxtaposing elements are seen in the same person. An egoist becoming scared or a villain suddenly becoming good and showing a different side to his or her nature is an interesting feature to watch. It brings out the depth in the character sharply.

Cognitive contradiction, in the context we are writing, is not merely putting two opposing feelings side by side. What this also means is that writers employ the literary technique of

juxtaposition in order to surprise and evoke the interest of readers by means of developing a comparison between two dissimilar things by placing them side by side. The comparison adds vividness to a given image, controls the pace of a poem or a narrative while providing a logical connection between two vague concepts. In literature, juxtaposition is a useful device for writers to portray their characters in great detail to create suspense and achieve a rhetorical effect. It is a human quality to comprehend one thing easily by comparing it to another. Therefore, a writer can make readers sense goodness in a particular character by placing him or her beside a character that is predominantly evil. Consequently, the goodness of one character is highlighted by the evil of the other.

Cognitive contradiction is also noticed when a character such as Kali in NalaCharitham (fierce, evil and arrogant) suddenly goes 'out of character' when he is describing the beauty of Damayanthi to the gods he has met on the way and who are returning from the marriage. The feminine gestures are unusual coming from such a character but makes the scene and the character more entertaining and meaningful. The gestures are unexpected and so the impact is much more felt.

Again, in the final court scene in The Merchant of Venice, Shylock has just been vanquished by Portia in court and he is now a broken man. The portrayal of Shylock by Sir Laurence Olivier is one of the most compelling we have seen and as he stumbles into the wings and off the stage, the heartrending cry which seems to go on and on is heard by the audience (they cannot see Shylock - only hear the cry). This is purely an instinctive reaction from the actor as there are no stage directions in the play for this. This is cognitive contradiction coming in again as we do not expect the tough and ruthless Shylock to display any sign of weakness. It leaves the audience uncomfortable as they feel that Shylock has in fact been wronged throughout his life. We see a different side of Shylock's character which we did not expect to exist.

Interpretation of the Role

It is therefore, entirely up to the individual to put his personal stamp on a character and make it stand out from the way other actors portray it. This will be a combination of a) the interpretation of the role (the intellectual part of it) by the actor, and b) the way it is enacted on stage (the abhinayam part). It is the blend of these two factors along with some amount of creative imagination that can make or break the dancer. If this is not done, and he continues to perform the role as he has been taught in his formative years, he will end up being dumped on the heap of average dancers who have to eke out a precarious living on the peripheries of the Kathakali discipline. This putting of the personal stamp on a character is not as easy as it sounds. The intellectual interpretation of the role should blend completely with the story. What I am saying is that in order to be different, the actor should not delineate the character in a way that will detract from the story. It has to be within the confines of the story and at the same time be unique. Therein lays the use of brain power by the individual actor.

To perform this act of 'blending' for a chuvannatadi is more difficult. A Nalan or a Rugmangadan (pachchavesham) are susceptible of different interpretations by an actor quite easily. Well, not quite that easily, but the complexity of the character can give a better scope to the actor to portray the character in different ways. A Dakshan can be interpreted in many different ways and offers the maximum scope for a

pachcha character. The hurt father, the egotistical human being, the compassionate father – the possibilities are endless. The same also holds true for an actor in the role of Hamlet or Shylock. These are complex characters and how Sir Laurence Olivier brings nuances to the characters may be in total contrast to how Richard Burton or Sir Anthony Hopkins will portray them. A Shylock can be made deadly serious, slightly comic, greedy, etc., depending on the comfort level of the actor in terms of the role he is portraying as well as on what he feels the writer of the play meant to convey via the character. An Iago can be portrayed as wholly evil or as someone who masks his evil under the garb of friendliness. The latter is in fact more frightening. A chuvannathadican also be portrayed in a way that the character wins the hearts and minds of the audience. To do this, the predominantly evil aspect of the character has to be softened and both Nanu Nair and Nellyodeasans had the ability to do this. This aspect should be viewed in the light that the very nature of the costume makes it easier for the actor to portray only the evil and angry side of the character. The costume and make-up naturally tend to pull the actor to this interpretation. To this extent it is more difficult to put a personal stamp of the actor to a chuvannatadi.

And this is where the genius of Nanu Nair comes out. He makes an antihero into a hero.

This phenomenon is made evident when one looks at the two characters this artiste depicts; as Trigarthan (UttaraSwayamvaramm) and Kali (NalaCharitham). But let us first take a look at what an antihero is, and how sometimes the antihero can become the hero in a story.

The Antihero as Hero

In literature and movies, an anti-hero is a character that possesses some of the personality traits and weaknesses that are traditionally assigned to villains, outlaws and those that either are shunned by society or do not live up to their status, but nonetheless have enough heroic qualities and intentions to align them with the heroes in the readers' minds. Anti-heroes can be awkward, obnoxious, passive, pitiful, obtuse, or just normal; but they are always, in some fundamental way, flawed, unqualified, or failed heroes. When the anti-hero is a central character in a work of fiction the work will frequently deal with the effect their flawed character has on the other people they meet. Additionally, the work may depict how their character alters over time leading to punishment.

In modern times, heroes have enjoyed an increased moral complexity. From this, one could say that the popularity of the anti-hero has seemingly boomed but this is part of the continual evolution and redefinition of the hero. Mid-20th century playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Tom Stoppard showcased anti-heroic protagonists recognizable by their lack of identity and determination. Pulp fiction and noir detective stories of the mid-20th century saw characters such as Sam Spade, who lacked the glorious appeal of previous heroic figures, become popular. Influenced by the pulps, early comic books featured anti-heroic characters such as Batman (whose shadowy nature contrasted with their openly 'heroic' peers like Superman) and Sub-Mariner (who would just as soon conquer humanity as try to save it). Sergio Leone's spaghetti westerns showcased a wandering vigilante (the Man with No Name played by Clint Eastwood) whose gruff demeanour clashed with other heroic characteristics.

Many modern anti-heroes possess, or even encapsulate, the postmodern rejection of traditional values symptomatic of Modernist literature in general, as well as the disillusion felt after World War II and the Nuclear Age. It has been argued that the continuing popularity of the anti-hero in modern literature and popular culture may be based on the recognition that a person is fraught with human frailties, unlike the archetypes of the white-hatted cowboy and the noble warrior, and is therefore more accessible to readers and viewers. This popularity may also be symptomatic of the rejection by the avant-garde of traditional values after the counter-culture revolution of the 1960s.

The values surrounding the characterization of an anti-hero have arguably changed. In the postmodern era, traditionally defined heroic qualities, akin to the classic knight in shining armour-type, have given way to the gritty truth of life, and authority in general is being questioned. The brooding vigilante or noble criminal archetype seen in characters like Batman is slowly becoming part of the popular conception of heroic valour rather than being characteristics that are deemed unheroic.

The antihero is therefore as important as the hero of the story.

Let us now very briefly examine the way Nanu Nair asan interpreted the role of Thrigarthan

Two Antiheroes

Thrigarthan in UttaraSwayamvaramm is the archetype chuvannatadi, and antihero. He is a machine dispatched by his boss to create havoc in the kingdom of Viratan. In fact there is a close parallel in this with Ian Fleming as it reminds us of how James Bond is dispatched by his boss 'M' on some subversive mission or other. This is exactly what happens in the Kathakali story also. A boss dispatching a junior on a mission, with clear instructions on how the subordinate was to act and what the boss expected as the outcome of the intervention.

However, what uniquely put the stamp of Nanu Nair on the character of Trigarthan was the aspect of humour he brought to the scenes. This is symptomatic of the wealth of imagination he put into the delineation of the character. A standard and conformist delineation of the character would have been to merely show him as a creator of havoc and destruction, in other words, as a one-dimensional character. This would have been entirely in keeping with the behaviour expected from a chuvannatadi. By depth of character I mean that the characterization has the capacity to build on a base which is the quintessential chuvannatadi, but at the same time surprise the audience with actions it will not normally expect from such a character. For example, the initial interaction with Duryodhanan and his court is vintage Nanu Nair. As are the scenes in which Thrigarthan is creating pandemonium among the cowherds and the description of the way he has to pacify an angry herd of cows.

If one were to look for a Shakespearean parallel, it would be the scene from *The Merchant of Venice* when the Jew, Shylock discovers that his daughter Jessica has run away with his money and a Christian boyfriend taking with her the money that he had been hoarding.

To elaborate on this last point further, as the Jewish community follow the matrilineal system, Jessica represents a continuum of his ancestry. Thus, holding on to Jessica and his gold is Shylock's way of ensure his lineage. In fact,

Solanio (a minor character in the play) makes this connection between daughter and money abundantly clear when he tells us that Shylock ran through the street of Venice crying:

"My daughter! O, my ducats! O, my daughter!

Fled with a Christian! O, my Christian ducats!

Justice! The law! My ducats and my daughter!

A sealed bag, two sealed bags of ducats, "

To Shylock the simultaneous loss of his daughter and his money was a great tragedy, but how he went about moaning for this bereavement is quite comical.

As far as our analysis is concerned, what is to be noted is the other side of the 'basic' Shylock. The audience will be surprised (and no doubt amused) at this behaviour of Shylock. It is something that is not expected from the ill-tempered moneylender. And from this unexpectedness of behaviour, we are made to see the character of Shylock in a new light.

The same holds true of Nanu Nair's portrayal of Thrigarthan.

Summing up

If I had to elaborate on the qualities that made this artiste stand out as an actor, I would say that it was his ability to portray the antihero as a respectable character who the audience sympathised with. And this required and presupposed that he had given a lot of thought to their interpretation and how they blended into the storyline.

In this article I have deliberately not touched upon the technical aspects of Nanu Nair's veshams. This is because I do not feel a discussion of this aspect is relevant to portray glimpses of the person, which is the purpose of this article. Neither do I feel that I am competent enough to attempt this – I will leave that to the experts. I will however, elaborate on one point that has remained in my memory; it is the deliberate way in which he performed kalasams and especially the 'softer' way he did this when he was portraying a character such as Simhika (a demoness). This aspect was emphasized when he did a cholliyattam. This aspect of his acting has remained with me over the decades.

As a finale I would like to mention how much this artiste is revered by the lovers of this dance form even today. As an example, in his birthplace of Vellinezhi, the VellinezhiNanuNair SmarakaKalakendram organised an unusual event in December 2008, in which 15 ChuvannaTadi artistes, representing three generations, including a lady artiste, came together to perform an all-night program. It was a tribute to this great artiste whose legacy was being immortalised through this offering. The event was spearheaded by Dr AchuthanKuttyMenon, who was instrumental in opening a Kathakali training establishment in Vellinezhi in memory of Nanu Nair.

A gentleman, a gifted actor, and an intelligent and caring human being. These words sum up Sri Nanu Nair for me.

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