



Subverting the Patriarchal Matrix: A Critical Analysis of Gender Archetypes, Martial Autonomy, and Matriarchal Agency in Vadakkan Pattukal

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Abstract

The Vadakkan Pattukal (Northern Ballads) of Malabar constitute a vital segment of Kerala's folklore (nadan pattu), serving as repository charts of the medieval social, political, and caste dynamics of the region. While traditional epic poetry frequently relegates female figures to passive tropes of victimhood or divine abstractness, the ballad tradition of Malabar constructs a radically subversive space for female agency. This paper explores the pluralistic manifestations of female power within the folklore tradition by drawing a comparative analysis between the dominant martial archetype of Unniyarcha and the lesser-analyzed models of moral-ethical resilience (Thumbolarcha) and structural-matriarchal strategy (Kunjunnooli). By examining the linguistic, spatial, and visual politics embedded in these texts, this study argues that Vadakkan Pattukal presents a sophisticated, indigenous framework of feminist resistance that predates modern gender theory.

Keywords: Vadakkan Pattukal, Unniyarcha, Thumbolarcha, Kunjunnooli, Kalaripayattu, Matriarchal Agency, Subversion.

1. Introduction: The Folklore Landscape of Medieval Malabar

Folklore and oral traditions serve as cultural barometers that reflect, and occasionally disrupt, the socio-political hegemonies of their respective eras. In the context of Kerala's literary history, the Vadakkan Pattukal (Northern Ballads) emerged out of the unique socio-cultural landscape of medieval Malabar. Unlike the elite Manipravalam literature or Sanskritized court poetry that catered strictly to feudal upper-caste patriarchs, these nadan pattukal (folk songs) belonged to the subaltern and intermediate martial castes—predominantly the Thiyyar and Nair communities.

The structural uniqueness of Vadakkan Pattukal lies in its grounded, earthy realism. The heroes and heroines of these ballads are not celestial deities or royal monarchs; they are flesh-and-blood human beings bound by the laws of Kalaripayattu (martial arts), feudal codes of honor (Ankam), and kinship networks. Within this historically specific setting, the portrayal of women departs dramatically from the wider Indian epic landscape. Where classical epics emphasize the Pativrata (chaste, submissive wife) ideal, the Northern Ballads present women who claim physical spaces, command weapons, dictate familial strategies, and challenge the male gaze with linguistic and physical authority.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study adopts a multi-disciplinary framework combining Feminist Cultural Materialism, Spatial Politics (Spatiality),

and Oral Historiography. Joan Wallach Scott's conceptualization of gender as a "constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" and as a "primary way of signifying relationships of power" is utilized to dissect the power dynamics within the ballads.

The methodology involves a close textual analysis of standard oral transcriptions compiled by researchers like Percy Macqueen and local folklorists. By isolating the linguistic patterns, performance contexts, and behavioral choices of three distinct female figures—Unniyarcha, Thumbolarcha, and Kunjunnooli—this paper maps how gender roles are negotiated, subverted, or reinforced. The analysis is split into spatial claiming, physical subversion, and structural-matriarchal governance.

3. Unniyarcha and the Archetype of Martial Autonomy

Unniyarcha, hailing from the celebrated Puthooram Veedu clan, stands as the most prominent symbol of female physical autonomy in Malayali cultural memory. To understand the radical nature of her subversion, one must analyze the text through the lens of spatial reclamation.

3.1 Spatial Reclamation and the Defiance of the Male Gaze

In medieval societies, the domestic sphere was designated as the safe, feminine space, whereas the public sphere (roads, markets, arenas) was fiercely guarded as masculine terrain. Unniyarcha's narrative begins with a direct violation of this spatial segregation. Upon expressing her desire to witness the

festival at Anathalavattom, she is met with systemic resistance from both her mother-in-law and her husband, Chanthu (Kunhiraman), who warn her of the predatory male spaces outside:

"The paths are full of rogue elements, O Yarcha,

The Jonakan thugs rule the markets,

A woman of beauty should not tread the open roads."

Unniyarcha's response is a systemic rejection of this protective patriarchal framework. She explicitly states that her security is not contingent upon male chaperonage but is inherent to her own physical training. Her journey to the festival becomes an intentional act of political reclamation, establishing her right to occupy public geography.

3.2 The Aesthetics of the Battle Wrap: Textual and Visual Analysis

The climax of Unniyarcha's primary ballad occurs at the Allimalar market, where she is surrounded by thugs. The text meticulously describes her transition from a domestic woman into a lethal combatant

In the oral fragments, this transition is marked by the act of Kachakettal (the tight wrapping of the cloth around the waist):

She untied the fine edges of her mundu-neriyathu,

Bound it tight across her waist like an iron belt,

With eyes flashing like burning embers,

She drew her flexible urumi from the sheath.

This act is highly significant both textually and visually. By tying her traditional attire into a battle wrap, Unniyarcha strips the garments of their passive, decorative function. The visual tradition in Kerala art preserves this dichotomy: she retains her cultural markers—the kasavu accents, the traditional kondetta hairstyle, the classic gold ornaments—yet pairs them with an extended, lethal weapon. She does not approximate a man to gain power; she weaponizes her existing identity.

4. Thumbolarcha: The Paradigm of Ethical Endurance

While Unniyarcha occupies the position of the active combatant, Thumbolarcha offers a counter-archetype that is equally potent but fundamentally different in execution. Thumbolarcha's narrative moves away from physical violence, operating instead within the framework of moral-ethical warfare.

4.1 The Violence of the Domestic and Psychological Fortitude

Thumbolarcha's ballad deals with themes of systemic betrayal, false accusations regarding her chastity, and subsequent exile. In patriarchal societies, an accusation against a woman's virtue is often used as a tool for total social erasure. Where an ordinary character might succumb to despair or rely on a male protector to clear her name, Thumbolarcha deploys psychological resilience.

Her power is linguistic and ethical. Throughout her trials, her dialogues remain unyielding, exposing the hypocrisy of the

patriarchal judges and elders who seek to condemn her. Her strength is defined by an absolute refusal to break under isolation.

4.2 Ethical Truth (Dharma) as a Subversive Weapon

Thumbolarcha's ultimate victory is not achieved via the sword, but through the systematic exposure of structural corruption. Her endurance acts as a mirror to the moral decay of her community. By surviving her exile and returning to claim her rightful position through sheer moral authority, she redefines the parameters of heroism. Her story demonstrates that within Vadakkan Pattukal, resistance is not restricted to those trained in weaponry; ethical stance can effectively destabilize corrupt authority structures.

5. Kunjunnooli: Matriarchal Governance and Strategic Diplomacy

To view the Vadakkan Pattukal solely through the lens of individual duels is to overlook the complex institutional structures that governed medieval Kerala. Here, Kunjunnooli emerges as the structural archetype—the matriarchal strategist.

5.1 The Clan (Tharavadu) as a Political Space

In the matrilineal (Marumakkathayam) context of medieval Malabar, the tharavadu (ancestral household) was not merely a domestic dwelling but a vital political, economic, and military unit. Kunjunnooli, as the senior matriarch and mother of heroes like Kannappanunni, wields immense power within this institutional framework.

While male warriors like Aromal Chekavar or Chanthu are caught in cyclical, destructive loops of blood feuds, Kunjunnooli functions as the stabilizing intellect. She manages the estate, controls the treasury, and makes critical alliances:

5.2 Preservation of Historical Memory

Kunjunnooli's most revolutionary act is her role as the keeper of the clan's historical memory. When the patriarchal history attempts to distort or erase the treachery that led to the downfall of her ancestors, she preserves the truth. She passes this history down to her children, ensuring that justice is pursued not out of reckless anger, but as a calculated political restoration. Her authority is intellectual and systemic, proving that the ballad tradition respects tactical governance as highly as physical combat.

6. Comparative Discussion: Typology of Female Agency

By comparing Unniyarcha, Thumbolarcha, and Kunjunnooli, we can map out a complex, multi-layered typology of female power that challenges standard patriarchal narratives. Unniyarcha acts as the disruptive storm that shatters the myth of female physical vulnerability. Thumbolarcha serves as the unyielding anchor that resists moral erasure. Kunjunnooli acts as the architect who designs the systemic survival of her community. This diversity suggests that medieval folk audiences engaged with a nuanced understanding of gender roles that allowed for multiple expressions of female authority.

7. Socio-Cultural Impact and Contemporary Relevance

The enduring popularity of these figures in Kerala's contemporary cultural landscape indicates that they continue to serve as vital reference points for gender performance. In a society that frequently struggles with balancing deep-rooted traditions and modern feminist values, the archetypes of the Vadakkan Pattukal offer a powerful alternative. They demonstrate that strength, autonomy, and strategic intellect are native, historical components of the region's folklore.

By analyzing these figures within academic discourse, we rescue them from being viewed merely as nostalgic performance pieces, repositioning them as active text models of subversion and resistance.

8. Conclusion

The Vadakkan Pattukal provides a rich, multi-dimensional alternative to the monolithic, patriarchal frameworks found in classical Indian literature. Through Unniyarcha, Thumbolarcha, and Kunjunnooli, the oral tradition of Malabar constructs a nuanced defense of female autonomy. Whether through the flash of an urumi, the quiet dignity of ethical endurance, or the calculated strategy of matriarchal governance, these women refuse to be reduced to passive victims or background characters. They command their narratives, dictate terms to their societies, and remain foundational symbols of empowerment in the cultural history of Kerala.

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