

On Translating Trickster: Ugrani and Umbrassan as Tricksters in Kavalam Narayana Panikkar's *Kallurutty*

Reshma V. R. & S. Angelin Sheeja

Abstract

Malayalam drama and theatre has established a distinctive niche among the regional drama and theatre of India. The Malayalam theatre of the nineteen seventies is acclaimed for its artistic experimentations, inventiveness and use of myths and tribal lores that construct the identity of indigenous groups. Folklore and myth, around the world are imbued with accounts of tricksters who hoax people with their sly, manipulative nature. Kavalam Narayana Panikkar's 'Kallurutty', is one such play which can be read in the light of trickster myth. The play is based on a myth that exists among the *Mavilar* tribe of North Kerala. The story centers around a tribal girl Kallurutty and her twin brothers who were ill-treated, duped and tricked by the characters Ugrani and Umbrassan. Ugrani, an agent of ruling class and Umbrassan, a wizard, manifests trickster's typical modes of behaviour. They appear as fundamental factors in this mythical tale. The paper delves into the ways in which Ugrani and Umbrassan in the play 'Kallurutty' befits the various criteria that William J. Hynes and other scholars have identified as the similarities or shared characteristics of tricksters.

Keywords : Ambiguity; Bricoleur; Deception; Metamorphosis; Situation inversion; Trickster.

The trickster is a popular figure that appears in mythology, folklore and literature. As the name implies, trickster is one who tricks or deceits those around them in order to commit a malicious act or to break a taboo. Paul Radin, a distinguished American cultural anthropologist and folklorist of the early twentieth century, in his book *The Trickster: A Study in Native American Mythology*, states the defining characteristics of the character

type “trickster is one who dupes others and who is always duped himself...He possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites...” (ix). For William J. Hynes, a Professor of Religious Studies, “the trickster is cast as an ‘out’ person, and his activities are often outlawish, outlandish, outrageous, out-of-bounds, and out-of-order” (34). Lewis Hyde, a cultural critic, in his book *Trickster makes this World* (1998), defined tricksters of myth as “lords of in-between” (6), observing their ability to cross boundaries. Michael P. Carroll, a Professor of Sociology, calls trickster a “selfish- buffoon”- “selfish” because so much of the trickster’s activity is oriented toward the gratification of his enormous appetites for food and sex, and “buffoon” because the elaborate deceits that the trickster devises in order to satisfy these appetites so often backfire and leave the trickster looking incredibly foolish”(105). According to Franchot Ballinger, a Professor of English, trickster represents a “Comic cautionary social image of potentially dangerous human behaviour” (20). Thus, definition of trickster is complex, for the reason that, “every generation occupies itself with interpreting Trickster anew” (Radin 168).

Though it is tricky to comprehend the nature and role of trickster, since it is a cross-cultural figure, William J. Hynes, in his essay, ‘Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide’ identifies six characteristics common to trickster figures (34). They are i) Ambiguous and Anomalous, ii) Deceiver and Trick-player, iii) Shape-shifter, iv) Situation Invertor, v) Messenger and Imitator of the Gods, vi) Sacred and Lewd Bricoleur. For Hynes, most trickster figures exhibit these characteristics, but some may occasionally have only one or two. In the play *Kalluruttu*, the characters Ugrani and Umbrassan “perform in trickerish manners, without being explicitly tricksters according to particular formal definitions” (Doty and Hynes 24). They can be seen as trickster figures with evil and destructive qualities who disturb and destroy the natural, social and moral order.

When Ugrani first enters in act one, scene one, of the play, he speaks of himself with excessive pride and vanity and calls himself the right hand of overlord Dorasamy. He is described by Singers as ‘extremely greedy’, which is one of the fundamental characteristics of the trickster archetype. Ugrani, is an imperious person who does everything illicit. He manifests ambiguous, ambivalent and capricious identity which complements with Hynes’ description of trickster as “fundamentally ambiguous, anomalous and polyvalent personality and the living embodiment of coincidence of opposites . . . (34). The trickster, for many scholars, is the incarnation of binary opposites. Lori Landay, a Professor of Cultural Studies, in her

book *Madcaps, Screwballs and, Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*, perceives trickster as “a symbol of doubleness” (11). Ugrani displays his trickster traits from the moment of his first appearance. His manner apposes both arrogance and cowardice. He is portrayed as a cunning swindler who took advantage of Panchurulis, the tribal sibling pair and as a foolish rake who is inept in dealing with Panchurulis’ dauntless sister Kallurutty. Thus, he encapsulates what Lewis Hyde points out as classically trickster: he is “the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox . . . a boundary-crosser” (7). Ugrani’s actions and words are so ambiguous that Panchurulis are unable to apprehend them. He is an unpredictable master of wiliness and duplicity who cleverly manipulates Panchurulis to his advantage and acts in the most abusive manner towards them. Though Ugrani is devious and hubristic, Kallurutty often mortifies and frightens him using her supernatural or magical powers.

Ugrani exemplifies the trickster’s flair to “appear on the edge or just beyond existing borders, classifications and categories . . . move swiftly and impulsively back and forth across all borders with virtual impunity” (Hynes 34). He is not bound to any particular space. He is depicted as moving around in space, from town to forest. He crosses an array of physical boundaries- roadway, river and cliff to set foot in the forest and once he has accomplished his mission in the forests he appears at the town. Thus he is in constant motion. It coordinates with Hynes’ assertion that trickster is a “Visitor everywhere, especially to those places that are off limits, the trickster seems to dwell in no single place but to be in continual transit through all realms marginal and liminal” (34-35). Thus Ugrani is an ambivalent figure shifting back and forth from town to forest, breaking borders and transgressing boundaries. Ugrani crosses not just the geographical boundary but the physical, moral and social boundaries. Due to this constant transit, he is maliciously an icon of disruption, a pivotal mark of the trickster.

Disruption is a quintessential trickster trait, and Ugrani typifies it, as Hynes notes:

The trickster is a consummate and continuous trick player and deceiver . . . the trickster acts as the prima causa of disruptions and disorders . . . His lying, cheating, tricking and deceiving may derive from the trickster being simply an unconscious numbskull, or at other times from being a malicious spoiler (35).

Panchurulis' sister Kallurutty is infuriated by Ugrani's disruption of their customary life. All three siblings were leading a joyous life in the forest, feasting on honey and millets and indulging in catching fish. Ugrani's sexual appetite brings forth complete disorder. Ugrani exhibits sexual propensity, which is another characteristic feature in trickster myths. No woman is free from the threat of Ugrani's sexual passion. His sexual rapaciousness drives him to violate moral order. He tricks the innocent Panchurulis to satisfy his sexual urge towards their sister Kallurutty. Ugrani begins his trick on Panchurulis by luring them into ganja cultivation, by offering money for quaffing arrack. Ugrani cultivates ganja in the forests and uses Panchurulis for his trade of ganja. He is indeed a thug preying on naive Panchurulis. The sibling pair pluck and process the ganja plants for Ugrani and carry the load on their heads and deliver it to ruling class agents. The frail sibling pair never realizes that they are growing a prohibited plant. The villainous trickster, Ugrani, believes that the Panchurulis are destined to carry loads like donkeys and he intentionally sends the sibling pair away to town and attempts to seduce their sister Kallurutty but she intimidates him. Thereupon, the ego bruised Ugrani seeks Umbrassan, the wizard's aid to fulfil his libido towards Kallurutty.

Umbrassan is another trickster figure who appears about halfway through the play. He is a catalytic figure who uses his supernatural powers to help people to beat their adversaries. Due to his magical prowess, mastery over rituals and possession of divine spirit, he enjoyed social respect. It complements Radin's contention that "a trickster can be connected to divinity either by being a deity or by having relationships with deities or can be a mortal animal or human" (155). Umbrassan represents a melange of divine, human and animal features. He uses magic and disguise in the attempt to subdue Kallurutty. But his tricks backfire on him leaving him humiliated and devastated. As Hynes claims, "a trick can gather such momentum as to exceed any control exercised by its originator and may even turn back upon the head of the trickster, so the trick-player is also the trickster-tricked" (35). Umbrassan's and Ugrani's attack sets the scene for Kallurutty to display her supernatural abilities. In the end, Ugrani and Umbrassan become victims of their own tricks. The fight between Kallurutty and Umbrassan can be seen as a fight between good and evil. Kallurutty possess power legitimately whereas Ugrani and Umbrassan takes advantage of their socially superior status to hide their evil intentions. As Mary Douglas remarks "beliefs which attribute spiritual power to individuals are never neutral or free of the dominant patterns of social structure" (139).

Ugrani's repudiation of the sibling pair and the rejection of ganja sack relates him with the trickster as deceiver which in accordance with Hynes, the second trait of tricksters. In the town, the Panchurulis have to confront Chunkakkaran (tax collector), who humiliates their integrity and innocence and accuses them of evading law and confines them to a fort. Though they have told him that the sack belongs to Ugrani, the tyrannical Chunkakkaran did not spare them. In that paralyzed situation, the sibling pair expect Ugrani to come and rescue them. After a while, much to the sibling pair's solace, Ugrani appears but he wittingly disowns the ganja sack and Panchurulis. It reveals the duplicitous and manipulative nature of Ugrani who acts more like a malevolent trickster who cleverly plotted against Panchurulis so as to gratify his sexual appetite towards their sister Kallurutty. Thus Ugrani dupes and tricks Panchurulis to further his own ends.

Hynes points out "shape-shifting" (36) as the third attribute of tricksters. A trickster is not obliged to exist forever in the physical form into which he was born, he can switch "form to take on another identity or sex or become an animal or inanimate object" (Allen 50). Tricksters are endowed with unusual abilities of which their metamorphosis stand out. It is another sort of ambivalence directly expressed in trickster figures. As Hynes claims, "as shape-shifter the trickster can alter his shape or bodily appearance in order to facilitate deception...the trickster is the master of metamorphosis" (36-37). As part of the trick-playing, tricksters often transmogrifies into non-human forms. Like Puck, a popular shape shifter, who could transform himself into an ass, a horse or an eagle, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Umbrassan uses his shape shifting ability to oppose Kallurutty. He displays the polymorphic qualities of the trickster by transforming himself into a venomous snake to defeat Kallurutty. It indicates his menacing side- the extremely aggressive, enraged and diabolic persona.

The fourth trait described by Hynes is that of "situation-invertor" (37).

As situation-invertor, the trickster exhibits typically the ability to overturn any person, place or belief no matter how prestigious... No order is too rooted, no taboo too sacred, no god too high, and no profanity too scatological that it cannot be broached or inverted.... What prevails is toppled, what is bottom becomes top, what is outside turns inside, what is inside turns outside, and on and on in an unending concatenation of contingency" (Hynes 37).

Ugrani and Umbrassan are situation inverters. They can transform calm occasions into treacherous occurrences and convert guiltless situations into accusation and oppression. They express their darkest and most intense desires, no matter how taboo they may be, by engaging in unacceptable behaviour. They can turn "a bad situation into a good one and then back into a bad one. Bad becomes good, good becomes worse, worse becomes better and so on, tranquility can become disaster and vice versa" (Hynes 37).

The fifth trait, according to Hynes, is trickster's role as "messenger and an imitator of the Gods" (39). "Admixing both divine and human traits, he can slip back and forth across the border between the sacred and profane with ease... He may bring a message, punishment, an essential cultural power or even life itself" (39-40). Though Ugrani and Umbrassan can be entitled as evil tricksters, they are to a fairly significant extent unlike. Ugrani's character does not possess any magical or supernatural powers whereas Umbrassan holds these powers that often enable him to attain his evil desires. Despite all of his moral flaws, including malice and idiocy, he also exhibits the opposing qualities. He acts as the saviour of Ugrani. He mediates between God and humans and lives in the realm of betwixt and between. He professes that he is in possession of Goddess 'Thrikanyapurathamma.' To that, Kallurutty replies that she comes from Kalluruttyamma's abode and affirms that Thrikanyapurathamma and Kalluruttyamma are one and the same. In the play, the mythical goddess is endowed with contradictory attributes. Umbrassan and Kallurutty represents two extreme variants of the very same Goddess- detrimental to mankind and favourable to mankind. Umbrassan battled Kallurutty with incantation and invocation of Thrikanyapurathamma and uses his supernatural powers to cause great chaos. However, Umbrassan's supernatural powers do not protect him from harm.

The final characteristic of trickster, according to Hynes, is that of "sacred and lewd bricoleur" (42). "the trickster manifests a distinctive transformative ability...he can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd, and a new life from both...he can transform lewd acts or objects into occasions of insight, vitality and new inventive creations" (42). Though Ugrani and Umbrassan do not exactly fit into this criteria, yet to an extent Umbrassan shows himself to be a bricoleur, defending and transforming every troublesome situation, to make Ugrani victorious, even if its outcome is often failure. As noted by Hyde, "Tricksters are inventors of ingenious stratagems and their notable invention being the trap which is a "central trickster invention" (18).

Ultimately, the play demonstrates the tricksters' essence and moral code. Ugrani and Umbrassan gained status through social and magical power respectively. They exploit the social structures to satiate their voraciousness. Ugrani epitomizes the trickster tactics of lying, duplicity and deception. His actions are sacrilegious and against the nature's laws and social order and causes absolute pandemonium for himself and others around him. He seems to be the "selfish- buffoon" who makes devious plans to satisfy his sexual appetite. Amoral, deceitful, egotistical, gluttonous, bragging, lascivious, lily-livered and wicked are some of the features that make him look like a trickster. Umbrassan's metamorphosis, mediation, imitation of divine mark him as a trickster. Through trickery he is capable of defeating adversaries and gaining mastery. But at the end, their tricks go dreadfully wrong and have fatal consequences. Thus Ugrani and Umbrassan can be associated with the traits which Hynes and other scholars consider as the common characteristics of most of the trickster figures.

Works Cited :

- Allen, Paula Gunn. *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*. Modern Language Association of America, 1983.
- Babcock-Abrahams, Barbara. "A Tolerated Margin of Mess: The Trickster and his Tales Reconsidered." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* vol.11, no.3, 1975, pp. 147-86. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3813932>. Accessed 17 July. 2021.
- Ballinger, Franchot. *Living Sideways: Trickster in American Indian Oral Tradition*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Trickster*. Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2010.
- Carroll, Michael P. "The Trickster as Selfish-Buffoon and Culture Hero." *Ethos*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1984, pp. 105-31. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639961>. Accessed 11 Mar. 2021.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Praeger Publications, 1996.
- Erdoes, R., & Ortiz, A. *American Indian Trickster Tales*. Pantheon, 1998.
- Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*. Farrar-

Strauss&Giroux, 1998.

Hynes, W. J. "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide." In W. J.Hynes & W. G. Doty (eds.) *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* University of Alabama Press, 1993.

Hynes, W.J., Doty G. W. *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*. University of Alabama Press, 1993.

Landay, Lori. *Madcaps, Screwballs and, Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.

Macey, D. *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Penguin, 2000.

Pelton, Robert D. *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*. University of California Press, 1980.

Radin, Paul, Karl Kerenyi, & C.G. Jung. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. Schocken Books, 1972.

Robinson, Gail, & Douglas Hill. *Coyote the Trickster: Legends of the North American Indians*. Crane Russak, 1976.

Vizenor, G. *The Trickster of Liberty: Native Heirs to a Wild Baronage*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.