

## The shape-shifting figure of Odiyan in select works: A new venture

Jisha V. G.<sup>1\*</sup>, J. Chriso Ricky Gill<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Thuckalay, Tamil Nadu, India; jishavg.eng@outlook.com (J.V.G.)

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Noorul Islam Centre for Higher Education, Thuckalay, Tamil Nadu, India.

**Abstract:** As far as Indian soil is concerned, there is no shortage of myths and mythical figures who can always create different feelings such as devotion, love, fear, etc. in people's minds. Indeed, the formation of culture in each place is deeply influenced and adhered by these myths and figures. Mythical tales and figures are often selected for fictional as well as film narratives which are mostly used by the concerned regional writers who bring them forth as wonderful works. One such fabulous figure is Odiyan who is very popular collating with the other mythical figures in Kerala mythology. The age of Odiyans reminds dark innings and the people from Kerala advocate that Odiyans are real, not a myth because they are a group of people allied to the most subverted community the Paraya. It has been claimed that Odiyans existed during the 1950s and 60s at that time the caste system was at its zenith in Kerala. As the saying goes that Odiyans performed a kind of black magic that is known as Odi which was performed by most of the downtrodden people but commonly effectuated by the Paraya Community as a defence and for survival. They were commonly known as Odiyans and they were also capable for shapeshifting. There are not so many literary works that are articulated on Odiyans in the regional Malayalam literature then not to speak of English literature. Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair became famous as regional writers in English from Kerala who were born and brought up in the same era when Odiyans were believed to have existed. Roy is from Kottayam and Nair is from Palakkad and both the districts were popular with Odiyans. The hints about the Odiyans can be read as indirectly from Roy's *The God of Small Things* and directly from Anita Nair's *The Better Man*. The present study relocates how the Odiyan myth is beautifully incorporated in both novels.

**Keywords:** Black magic, Literary narratives, Regionalism, Supernatural figure, Women writers.

### 1. Introduction

Indian women writers, particularly novelists, have established a strong foundation in the field of Indian English fiction that will not be challenged by the dominant male writings. They have constructed a wonderful building of literary works from that foundation. The novels that have been produced by women writers always maintain a standard level, both quantitatively as well as qualitatively. To list all the women novelists in this single paper is impossible, nevertheless brings forth some notable writers among them. They are Arundhati Roy, Sudha Murthy, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. In most of the novels that came out of them, the element of regionalism can be seen apart from the main themes such as male dominance, the search for identity, a quest for love, etc., and through these themes, they clearly show what real feminism is. As indicated earlier, the element of regionalism can be seen in most women writers who cannot avoid it because regionalism has been mixed into their blood. The present article focuses on two such writers, Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair, and their works, *The God of Small Things* and *The Better Man* respectively. From these works, the present study analyses Odiyan, who created a mysterious world in the 1960s Kerala society, and how he is depicted in these two novels.

Indeed, both novels discuss the element of regionalism. The novel *The God of Small Things* was penned by Arundhati Roy, who has become world-famous with this single piece of work, and Anita Nair, who wrote *The Better Man* as her maiden novel. Though both are Keralites, they were born and brought

up in different regions in Kerala: Roy from Kottayam, and Nair from Palakkad. So, obviously, the background of Roy's novel is Kottayam, where the novel was set on the banks of the Meenachal River and its surroundings, whereas in Anita Nair's novel, she set her story in the soil of Palakkad, where she specifically located places such as Pattambi and Shoranur. Regionalism has not been avoided in these writers' works because it gives them their own identity among the universal writers. Both the writers come from different regions where different cultures and customs are practiced, certainly reflect in their works. Katz and Timothy opine that A regional identity then, is a sense of belonging, an awareness of similar conditions, or not coincidentally, of how their cultural patterns are distinctive in comparison to other regions or places (Katz & Timothy, 2008).

Though Roy's novel is quasi-autobiographical, she discusses the pathetic condition of downtrodden people, female subjugation, and sociopolitical aspects. Apart from these elements, she discusses several historical references as well. In Nair's novel, she narrates the story from the male perspective of a retired employee who returned to his village after his retirement and then stayed in his ancestral home, where he was invited by many haunted memories. Nair discusses many superstitions and their related practices in this novel other than Odiyan, but all these old wives' tales are familiar to everyone. Unlike the other tales, the mythical figure Odiyan stands out as curious, though she does not give more details about Odiyan, and this is the same in Roy's novel too. Roy indirectly gives hints about Odiyan, who in this novel can be seen through the character of Velutha, a subdued member of the Paraya community, which is believed to practice the black magic *Odi* commonly. Shahul Hameed notes that in the novel, Roy circuitously signals the potency of the Paraya community and their mythical practices. As bearers of regionalism in their blood, these writers cannot omit the Odiyan reference from their literary works, but they have not given more details on this (Hameed, 2015). This article tries to locate the hints about the Odiyan in the select novels.

## 2. The Myth of Odiyan

The myth Odiyan was popular during the 1950s and 60s in Kerala where at this time the caste system was dominant. T. P. Nijeesh quotes from the *Kerala Folklore Dictionary* which was edited by Vishnu Narayanan Namboothiri says that *Odi* was a custom that had been practised in almost all the marginalized communities as well as tribal clans (Nijeesh, 2018). In fact, comparing to the other subverted communities the black magic *Odi* was commonly practised by the Paraya community as this was the most marginalised people in the rigid caste system to escape from the torture of the upper caste communities and to earn money as a livelihood. Orna Krishnankutty opines that the Parayas are excellent in *Odi* (Krishnankutty, 2018). *Odi* is a kind of black magic that needs four or five-month grown-up foetus, *mantras* (magical spells), and some medicinal plants from which they prepare a kind of oil that they apply on the back part of the ear make ready them for shapeshifting into various animal forms such as owl, cat, dog, snake, buffalo or can be changed in inanimate objects like a gate, stone etc. according to their wish. Odiyan waits for his enemy in an animated form on the way where the enemy usually treads and when the enemy comes Odiyan appears in front of him and breaks the bone of the neck or spinal code of the enemy. Probably, in many circumstances enemies die either with psychic shock or he will be bedridden for a long time. The animated form of Odiyan has certain malformations that as a two-legged dog, one-eyed cat, tailless buffalo etc. and from this malformation, people can easily identify the Odiyan. Nevertheless, the stories about the Odiyans are still believed by the people who are even afraid of getting out during the night times because the black magic *Odi* is performed only at night. Odiyan returns to his home after the occult practise and revolves around his home where either his mother or wife pours hot water which is boiled with some medicinal plants or pours the cow dung water on him to regain his human form.

*Odi* was a traditional practice that passed over from generation to generation, and it was an asset to the subverted communities. In addition, people from marginalized communities acquired the secret of *Odi* for self-resistance and the safety of their kith and kin from the cruel clutches of the upper castes. Additionally, the black magic *Odi* has completely vanished from the earth after the electrification, yet people from certain localities, notably Palakkad, still believe in the existence of Odiyans as this soil is witnessing many such horrible incidents.

Human-animal transformation is relatively not a new phenomenon that can be seen in mythologies, legends, folklore, myths, etc., and all these transformed figures have extraordinary powers. Moreover, shapeshifters can also be traced in fantasy and children's literature. The common shape-shifting animal forms that can be seen in folklores are werewolves and vampires. The term that is used to denote shapeshifting is Therianthropy ("Shapeshifting," 2020). The hints of shapeshifters can be traced in classical literature like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Homer's *The Odyssey* etc. According to Greek mythology, animal transformation is quietly considered a part of punishment, whereas in Hindu mythology, the Gods often changed their forms into animals to kill the devils. For instance, the ten avatars of Lord Mahavishnu, Lord Ganesh, etc.

Communities construct their identities with the support of some symbolic and abstract elements like mythical, spiritual, religious, and cultural elements. Various mythical symbols are unconsciously reflected in everyday life. The Paraya community's identity is constructed around the mythical figure of Odiyan. Conversely, Odiyans were a group of people from the Paraya community, though they were included in the mythical figures' list because the tales about them compelled the people to believe that Odiyans were myths. The lack of written documents about Odiyans also accelerated people to consider them as myths. The folktales and oral stories of the Odiyans caricature the fearful figure of them. Nastaran Valipoor observes that mythical origination solely depends upon the judgement of social structures, the influence of nature, and human psychological reflections (Valipoor, 2016). Myths are culturally collaborated, and their cultural influence would diminish as time passed. In the modern era, mythical figures and their related concepts are in the metamorphical stage. Though the active role of myth in everyday life would be less, it is constantly active in the collective memory.

Moreover, Odiyans were believed to have supernatural powers that they gained with the support of mantras and medicines. The society's exaggerations and retellings of Odiyan attributed them to supernatural power, which gave them the identity of myth. The retellings of Odiyan stories later became blood-frosting novels as well as short stories. Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair are contemporaries whose birthplaces were once haunted by Odiyans, and obviously such fearful stories filled their collective consciousness too. This study examines how these two writers bring their memories of Odiyans into their novels.

### 3. Indirect Approach to Odiyan in Arundhati Roy's Novel *the God of Small Things*

Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is portrayed with numerous powerful characters but the pivotal character Velutha can be truly categorised as a protagonist of this novel and that is why Roy describes him as "God of Small Things" because of some mysterious powers secured by the Paraya community to which the Velutha belongs. One of the main themes of this novel is the conflict between the touchable and the untouchable but Roy supports the untouchables though she belongs to the upper caste the Syrian Catholic. Roy had spent her childhood days in her homeland Kottayam where the Paraya community and their cultural traditions had existed so Roy might have heard about the secret sorceries the community. Moreover, Mrs Francesc Collins, a lady missionary who penned the novel, *The Slayer Slain* which was set in the background of Kottayam, notably on the banks of the river Meenachal, indirectly put forth the reference of Odiyan though the central theme of the novel is the conflict between the Pulaya community and the Syrian Catholics. In this novel, Roy gives some indirect hints which reveal that the character Velutha knows the black magic *Odi*.

Velutha always keeps a mysterious behaviour that can be seen in many contexts. When the character Rahel saw Velutha in Communist Party's march he was wearing a mundu and shirt and Roy says "He never usually wore a shirt" (Roy, 1997, p.71), normally the Odiyans never put on shirts and the words of Roy is a shred of evidence. Velutha has a brown coloured leaf-shaped birthmark on his back part that he considers a lucky leaf so he believes that this birthmark brings monsoon on time. Roy describes the birthmark of Velutha but she ends with a secret note is "An autumn leaf at night" (Roy, 1997, p. 73) because Odiyans were the 'king of darkness' at that time they were active, powerful, and cold-blooded but during day time they were calm and silent.

Vellya Paapen, Velutha's father has always been worried about Velutha for his way of living but Roy does not reveal which way of his living style frightened his father. Roy says that "Vellya Paapen feared

for his younger son... It was not *what* he said, but the *way* he said it. Not *what* he did, but the *way* he did it" (Roy, 1997, p.76). The secret of *Odi* is handed over from generation-to-generation, grandfather to father, father to son and so on but here the Vellya Paapen might have known the secret of *Odi* and its consequences so he is afraid of that whether Velutha wanted to learn that powerful occultism. Roy gives a small description that shows that Vellya Paapen knows the *Odividhya*. She writes that "...History would choose him for its deputy, ...perhaps he would not have strutted like a young cockerel in the Ayemanam bazaar, bragging of how he swam the river with his sickle in his mouth... (Roy, 1997, p.199) Odiyans had an unimaginable power of speed which helped them to run or jump or climb like Ninjas. Their body would easily flexible for all these actions which helped Vellya Paapen to "picked up his sickle, whirled around and sickled the smell that fixed the ghost forever. All in a single, fluid, athletic motion" (Roy,1997, p. 200). Velutha has been missing from Ayemanam for four years which indicates that he might have gone to some other place to learn the black magic which he might have expected from his father. Roy does not mention where he has gone for all these four years. Roy's description of Velutha's physical structure and strength and his courage indicate that he is an Odiyan because they have good physical stamina and all these factors might lead Ammu to attract Velutha.

Normally, Odiyans were cruel people whose actions affected their following generations but all the Odiyans are not so. For instance, Pradeepan Pambirikunnu's Malayalam novel *Eri* presents a noble Odiyan named Eri who is considered as the reformer of the Paraya community. Pradeepan narrates Eri like this "He can drop any running objects by throwing a stone with chanting some mantras. He can stay in a drowning position in the water for a long time. He can run in the darkness without the support of light. He can say the qualities and powers of all the plants. He can predict the time of rain, and the time of birds' singing. He always sits on the brim of a canal and looks into the water. He sings songs using small drums at night. Soothing voice. Eri is an excellent boy" (Pambirikunnu, 2017, p.45). Velutha spends his nights on the banks of the Meenachal River. To cross the overflowing rivers at night is only up to the people who have some extraordinary powers. Roy says that "Further downstream in the middle of the river, Velutha floated on his back, looking up at the stars... So he was free to lie in the river and drift lowly with the current" (Roy, 1997, p.333). Pradeepan describes Eri in the same way "Only the extraordinary courageous people could imagine crossing the rivers at night. The people who know the over brimmed river's way of flowing and its route could reach the destination. Others would float at the sea" (Pambirikunnu, 2017, p.79).

Roy unusually describes Velutha on the day of Sophie Mol's death and she does not explicitly say anything about the real cause of her death. Usually, Odiyans go to perform the *Odi* in a naked form. Roy describes Velutha like this "... a young man sitting on the topmost of thirteen stone steps that led into the water... In a while, he stood up, took off the white mundu he was wearing, squeezed the water from it and twisted it around his head like a turban. Naked now... Then he began to swim with easy, powerful strokes... where the Deep began...It took him only a few minutes to make the crossing... He left no ripples in the water. No footprints on the shore" (Roy,1997, pp. 289 – 290). While analysing all the renditions about Velutha gives a clear picture that he is an Odiyan.

#### 4. Direct Approach to Odiyan in Anita Nair's Novel *the Better Man*

Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man* is set in a fictional village named Kaikkurussi which lies in the Palakkad from where most of the Odiyan stories came out. The Palakkad comes under the Valluvanad region which was once the controlling division of the Chera Kingdom. Moreover, the geographical structure and culture of the Valluvanad region act as fertile soil to grow superstitions, colourful myths, and folklore in the southern part of Kerala. Modernity is crawling in these regions even in the twenty-first century and still, people are living under the hold of such myths, particularly the myth of the Odiyan who is at the same time believed that real and myth. Arundhati Roy gives the description of Odiyan in a camouflaged way but Anita Nair openly says about Odiyan who to some extent acts as a major theme because the protagonist Mukundan often suspects that "when my mother died, the villagers said the Odiyans had murdered her. I didn't know whether to believe it or not. I chose not to" (Nair, 1999, p. 174).



Nair presents only one character as an Odiyan in this novel that is Kampan, a postmaster but her description of the death of Mukundan's mother is due to Odiyans and this indicates that there were other Odiyans in Kaikkurussi village than Kampan. The feudal and matrilineal systems were prevalent in Kerala where most of the upper caste people owned acres of land hence most of the rivalries are for lands and positions. In addition, to exterminate such enemies, the Odiyans were assigned as contract killers who killed the enemies with their black magic *Odi*. Mukundan's father Achuthan Nair did not like his wife Paru Kutty since he had an affair with another lady named Ammini whom he later married and began to live just opposite Paru Kutty's house. The villagers say that Mukundan's father assigned an Odiyan to kill his wife. Nair describes this "I am responsible for her death as much as the Odiyans. As much as my father who the villagers claimed paid the Odiyans to get rid of her" (Nair, 1999, p.175). A blogger Anu Joshy described an incident that had happened in her family that was her great grandmother's death. She says that "she had enmity with a distant relative. One day she had gone to the temple pond at 4 am for took bath but on the way to the pond she saw a calf that was following her and she had a suspicion in her mind so she returned home hurriedly without took bath but the calf too was pursued her and it started to grow into a huge size and then the calf brushed against her and vanished from there. She became frightened and died off that evening" (Joshy, 2010).

The tales of Odiyan reveal that they were cruel people who killed the pregnant women for making oil for the sorcery of *Odi*. They chant some special mantras that attract the pregnant woman, who wakes up from her sleep in the zero hours and comes to the spot that is predetermined by the Odiyan. When the pregnant woman comes to the site, Odiyan rips up the womb with a sharp bamboo knife and takes the three-or four-month-old growth embryo out. After that, the woman returns to her home with some medicines applied to the womb. The next morning, she died without any sign of a wound on her body. So, to avoid Odiyans "pregnant women wore black amulets so that they were not lured out of their houses at midnight by the Odiyans" (Nair, 1999, p.168).

According to Orna Krishnankutty "The Paraya community grasped the black magic as their daily bread" (Krishnankutty, 2018, p.102). Kampan was not a professional Odiyan like his uncle Chathu "who was the most powerful of Odiyans" and "In the village, Chathu's powers as an Odiyan were still whispered about" (Nair, 1999, p.168). But Kampan was exceptional when compared to his community because he did not like to learn black magic and "Kampan had allowed none of the dark gods to dwell in his heart" (Nair, 1999, p.168). Additionally, in those days, the upper caste people treated the lower caste in a bad way and humiliated them among other people, so as part of a cultural resistance, the downtrodden communities used the *Odividhya*. Though the black magic *Odi* was a cruel practice, to some extent this occultism gave protection to the lower caste people. Correspondingly, Kampan was a harmless man, and he was a postmaster as well, so he did his duties sincerely, but the arrival of Philipose as a senior postmaster negatively affected Kampan, who was humiliated several times by the words and deeds of Philipose. This tempted Kampan to learn the secret practice of *Odi* from his uncle Chathu for "the secrets of the dark world his family had once chosen to reign over" (Nair, 1999, p.168).

Odiyans are shape shifters who can transform into animal forms that they wish to be like a cat, dog, bull, owl, buffalo etc. In fact, this shapeshifted animal form has certain deformities, such as the absence of a leg, tail, eye, or horn. Here Kampan shape-shifted into a cat "which did not have a tail" (Nair, 1999, p.165). Kampan entered Philipose's room every night in the form of a cat, even if the doors and windows were closed, and it is believed that Odiyans could enter others' rooms even if the doors were closed. Nair's description of Chathu gives a clear picture of how an Odiyan was. Nair says "Of the innumerable virgins he had seduced, creeping into their rooms in the guise of a cat. Of men he had paralyzed for life, appearing as a snake as they climbed a tree. Of homes, he had wrecked. Of families, he had destroyed. Of people, he had turned into blabbering lunatics" (Nair, 1999, p.168). Philipose's nights were sleepless due to the attack of the cat and finally, he realized that "Kampan and the cat are connected in some way" (Nair, 1999, p.166). At last, Philipose decided to leave the village, he said to Mukundan that "This is not a good place. It has strange and dark secrets" Nair, 1999, p.166).

## 5. Conclusion

With all this in mind, the Odiyan and his stories still fill minds with more fear than any other mythological figures like *Gandharva*, *Takshi*, *Chathan*, and *Marutha*. Modernization has faded the glamour and colour of these figures, but Odiyans disport freely in people's minds even today. Arundhati Roy could bring forth the secrets of Odiyan not in an open way but covertly, whereas Anita Nair overtly narrated his mysteries. Only women writers like Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair could experiment with this type of theme in their novels. It is very essential to state that fiction on Odiyan has yet to come out in its full swing.

## Copyright:

© 2024 by the authors. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## References

- [1] Arundhati Roy. (n.d.). *BIBLIO.COM*. <https://www.biblio.com/arundhati-roy/author/2907>
- [2] Bhagirath. (2018, April 20). Odiyan: The Myth. Art of Story Escape from Reality. <https://artofstorylitfictionalterreality.wordpress.com/2018/04/20/Odiyan-the-myth/>
- [3] Bloggerk. (2009, December 25). Odiyan. Valluvanad Times. <https://valluvanadtimes.com/2009/12/25/Odiyan>
- [4] Hameed, S. (2015). The Myth of Odimarichil and the Cultural Resistance of Paraya Community in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 3(4), pp.329-332 [www.rjelal.com/3.4.15/329-332%20SHAHUL%20HAMEED.M.P.pdf](http://www.rjelal.com/3.4.15/329-332%20SHAHUL%20HAMEED.M.P.pdf)
- [5] Joshy, A. (2010, July 20). Odiyan: A Mallu Animagus/Hitman. Secret Recipes. [Ofthelesserknown.blogspot.com/2010/07/Odiyan-mallu-animagus-hitman.html](http://ofthelesserknown.blogspot.com/2010/07/Odiyan-mallu-animagus-hitman.html)
- [6] Katz, W. J., & Mahoney, T., (Eds.). (2008). *Regionalism and the Humanity*. United States of America, Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.
- [7] Krishnankutty, O., (2018). *Parayar: Kulam – Gothram – Samoohikajeevitham* [The Parayar: Ancestry – Race – Community life]. Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages.
- [8] K.S. Dhema., S. Shalini., Nair, A.J. (2020). Study of Magical Realism in Odiyan through the Collective Conscious of Paruthipully. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*, 5(1), pp.330-331 <https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.51.54>
- [9] Mishra, A. (2020, January 1). *Anita Nair*. The Indian Authors. <https://theindianauthors.in/novelists/anita-nair/>
- [10] Nair, A. (1999). *The Better Man*. Haryana: Penguin Books.
- [11] Nijeesh, T. P. (2018, December 30). The Odiyan was no Superstition, It was a Means for Marginalized People to Hit Back at Their Oppressors. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>
- [12] Pambirikunnu, P., (2017). *Eri* [The Eri]. Kottayam: DC Books.
- [13] Roy, A. (1997). *The God of Small Things*. New Delhi: Penguin B
- [14] Roy, H. (2019, September 20). *Indian Women Novelists in English*. English Literature for Students and Researchers. <https://www.englitmail.com/2019/09/indian-women-novelists-in-english.html>.
- [15] Shapeshifting. (2020, September 11). In *Wikipedia*. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shapeshifting&action=history>.
- [16] Valipoor, N. (2016). The Impact of the Myth on the Creation of Identity and Sense of Place. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 7(2), 209-214
- [17] Latha, V. (2019). Anita Nair's Handling of Regionalism in the Novel *The Better Man*. *American Journal of Humanity and Social Science Research*, 3(4), pp.122-129 <https://www.ajhssr.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Q1934122129>