

Cyanide Mallika : In Search Of India's First Female Serial Killer

Fuel for a new – and much-ignored – character in popular culture?

On December 31, 2007, the police arrested a middle-aged woman loitering near the Bangalore Interstate Bus Terminus. She was dressed in a traditional kanjeevaram sari, had flowers in her hair and a sweet smile. KD Kempamma, aged 45, appeared to be selling second-hand cell phones and the police had received an anonymous tipoff that there was something amiss about the woman's background and identity.

Indeed there was. KD Kempamma had several aliases : Jayamma, Lakshmi, Santramma and the most commonly used, Mallika. She was also a cold-blooded criminal who had committed six murders by poisoning her victims with cyanide and then robbing them of their valuables.

This was, as the police dubbed her, Cyanide Mallika.

India's first 'official' female serial killer.

She sits today in an anonymous jail cell in the women's barracks near Mysore, Karnataka after a court ruling in 2012 commuted her death sentence to life imprisonment.

I'm a writer and the character of Cyanide Mallika fascinates me. It compels me more than the bored, almost predictable, psychosis of Ramanna in Anurag Kashyap's **Raman Raghav 2.0** or the countless male criminals in India who routinely kill out of desperation, sexual perversion, vengeance or deranged machismo.

Criminality, of course, is not gender-specific. But Cyanide Mallika's story and the reactions of disbelief that it throws up uncover a larger myth within our social and popular culture : the myth that Women Do Not Kill. Unless they've been violated or abused or are trying to protect themselves or their children, they just don't take lives.

And cinema – with a whole lot of other fiction – upholds this tradition.

Remember the once-soft-but-now-angry-and-self righteous **Zakhmi Aurat** of the 1980s? The pitiful gang-raped Phoolan Devi who had no choice but to become the big screen's **Bandit Queen** in the 1990s? Sure, these were good films with a strong message, but there **had to be a reason** for the audience to empathize with the female protagonist. She was never evil for the sake of being evil. She was a goddess, channeling her inner Devi / Kali for some sense of justice, and in this way, the audience always rooted for her victory.

The same is true for the parade of hot female knife-throwers and karate-choppers in Quentin Tarantino's **Kill Bill** saga. It's a sexy, wild feminist fantasy, with tough women declaring war on the men who have wronged them. The main character, The Bride, is avenging the massacre of her very own wedding party.

I remember a de-glam Charlize Theron as lesbian murderess Aileen Wuornos in the Oscar-winning **Monster**. Wuornos killed seven men between 1989 and 1990 and was executed by lethal injection in Florida State Prison in 2002. She claimed, right up to her end, that she'd been a victim of rape and sexual abuse and that the killings were all in rage and self defense. Somewhere, somehow, **Monster's** Wuornos is justified. Right?

Closer to home and a century ago, Indian feminist Rokeya Hussain wrote ***Sultana's Dream : A Feminist Utopia***. Published in the Indian Ladies Magazine in Madras, 1905, the text spun a peaceful, but politically violent vision of the future. Here, there were no men, only women in a kind of Planet Of The Apes setting, enjoying full power as was their right.

Of course, Sultana's Dream – a pure, just and crime-free universe – would have no space for Cyanide Mallika, a career criminal whose emotional journey was set within a universe of sheer greed and inhumanity and nothing else.

In her youth, Mallika had been married to Devraj, a working class tailor in a village in Karnataka. She bore three children. According to her confession, domestic life was not for Mallika, who was always ambitious for 'a better life and material wealth'. After she was accused of fraud in a local chit fund scheme, Mallika abandoned her home and family. She worked a series of low-paying jobs as a maid, then became an assistant to a goldsmith, and finally realized that robbery and murder would be a lot more lucrative.

Mallika took to dressing piously and hanging around the temple complexes of Karnataka, on the outskirts of Bangalore and Mysore, as well as Tamil Nadu. Her MO was to befriend the women devotees who came there, all of whom had problems. Childlessness, trouble at home, depression, illness. Mallika would convince each of these women to undergo a religious 'cleansing' to ward off bad energies. For this ritual, the 'target' would come dressed in all her finery and would have to eat a special prasada. This prasada was laced with cyanide, and a few minutes later, the hapless victim would

fall dead. Then, Mallika would take off with her cash, expensive clothes and gold jewellery.

Mallika's sixth and final victim was a rich woman called Nagaveni, and her disappearance (and death) led to the police opening an investigation into the mystery temple killer. Upon Mallika's arrest, Dr Rajni, a prison psychiatrist in Karnataka state, made the conventional observation : "Most women who commit murder in India have been married before the age of 18, and have endured bad marriages, sexual abuse, violence and poverty".

And yet this is only a half truth. Cyanide Mallika admitted that she'd endured none of the above. Robbery and killing her victims was simply a means to an end.

In 1999, I co-directed a television crime series called ***Agnichakra***. Our first story was on the infamous child murders of Pune, Maharashtra, masterminded by two of India's most chilling female criminals, the Gavit sisters. The Gavits would abduct orphaned children between the ages of 1 and 4, use them for begging, and then casually kill them when they stopped being productive. In this way, the Gavits murdered nine children, most of them babies.

The Gavits received the death sentence in 2001. The Kolhapur district judge pronounced the crimes as "most heinous" and added, "the sisters seemed to have enjoyed killing the children". It seemed particularly shocking to the judge that these two women – themselves mothers – could go against their natural instincts of nurturing and protecting life, and be so brutal.

And yet, the Cyanide Mallikas and the Gavit sisters of the world are real, not fantasy, and it's ironic that they exist in life, but do not become characters on celluloid.

As a writer, I'm often told to make my characters more 'likeable' – even the characters that are 'bad' and that do wrong. This applies particularly to female characters. There always has to be a reason – whatever reason – for empathy.

Roxane Gay makes this point in her collection of essays, ***Bad Feminist***. She writes :
“The rules are different for girls. There are many instances in which an unlikeable man is billed as an antihero...he is interesting, dark, tormented, even when he does distasteful things...but when women are unlikeable, it becomes a point of obsession in critical conversations. We need to uncover life, in all its possibilities. An unlikeable woman may or may not arouse empathy, but the question should be : Likeable or not, is this character alive? Is she real?”

To hell with the rules being different for girls. They should make a movie on Badass Cyanide Mallika. Exactly as she is, or was. I'll be the first one in line for a ticket and popcorn.

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