

# Female Victims, Necrophilia and Necropornography in Lajo Jose's *Hydrangea*

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## Abstract

*Crime fiction is an emerging genre in Malayalam literature. Earlier it was considered as a part of pulp fiction, looked down on by cognoscenti of serious literature due to the excessive presence of eroticism. In the majority of the crime fiction novels, female victims' bodies are depicted as objects for men to satiate their sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic Scopophilia. In Lajo Jose's *Hydrangea*, the readers are witness to the murders of several women and the narrative style of the work reveals the sexualized bodies of these women from a third-person point of view as well as from the criminal's angle. The female corpses become objects to be looked at during various points of the storyline such as the video sent by the criminal to the police and on the autopsy table.*

*Necropornography constitutes a pillar of modern crime fiction. It frequently manifests itself not only through the presentation of sexualized female cadavers and dissections but also through sensational descriptions of the murder of women. As the gendering and sexualization of the cadavers of the female victims are the fundamental aspects of Necropornography, many twenty-first-century crime fiction works make the deaths, especially the deaths of women as much more compelling and lucrative. This article attempts to trace the elements of Necropornography, analyze the erotic dimensions of the living and dead female bodies and the psycho-dynamics*

*of the killer in the novel Hydrangea.*

**Key Words:** *Female Victim/Female Corpse, Voyeurism, Necrophilia, Necropornography, Objectification*

“The death... of a beautiful woman is,  
unquestionably, the most poetical  
topic in the world”

—Edgar Allen Poe,

*The Philosophy of Composition, 1992, 59*

Malayalam detective fiction was inaugurated by the publishing of Bhaskara Menon by Ramavarma Appan Thampuran in 1905. This genre got perfected through the works of Kottayam Pushpanath, Neelakandan Paramara, and Batton Bose. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have a handful of young writers like G.R. Indugopan, Rihan Rashid, Sree Parvathy, and Lajo Jose to nurture this genre. Lajo Jose is a successful writer of crime thrillers and mystery novels in Malayalam. His works include Coffee House (2018), Hydrangea (2019), Ruthinte Lokam (2019), and Rest in Peace (2020). The journalist turned private detective Esther Immanuel once again appears in this investigative thriller Hydrangea after Coffee House. The novel reminds us of born-chilling western Stalker Crime thrillers like Watching You by Michael Robotham, The Night Stalker by Robert Bryndza, and A Stranger in the House by Shari Lapena.

Hydrangea opens up a mysterious crime story that revolves around a ‘Romantic Killer’ and the female sleuth Esther Immanuel. This brutal serial killer is vehemently threatening the city with his maverick crimes targeting mainly females. The female victims of the psychopath include Chaithra Madhavan, Liya Fathima, Ovia Krishnan, Haritha Menon, Isha Teresa Francis, Ria Mathew, and DYSP Sharon Thomas IPS. All these women were attacked in a similar method.

The *modus operandi* of the psychopathic killer includes sexual assault, rape, maiming all over the body of the victim especially repeated stabbing in private parts and strangulation. He shoots a short video of his victims nearly before the actual act of crime by secretly stalking

them and sends it to the city police chief, virtually challenging them to stop the crime from being committed. But since the videos don't leave much information about the victims except for a flashy image of them in their rooms, the police also find it nearly impossible to derive anything crucial about these ladies. Private Investigator Esther and the detective firm 'AAA' in which she is working for, headed by Ali Imran also get entangled in this quagmire and their task is to stop another murder being committed as the criminal is on his killing spree to establish his delinquent identity.

### The living female body, Scopophilia, and Objectification

The Female body as an object of the 'male gaze' is a notion that Laura Mulvey delineated in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Mulvey talks about the gaze of the camera lens, which is unique to cinematic narratives. But her analysis can also be used to describe the system of viewing power in textual fiction. In several passages of *Hydrangea*, the narrator offers ecstatic and erotic descriptions of victims' living bodies. The living body of the victim Haritha is described elaborately and even the minute aspects of narration contribute to the erotic experience of the readers through the voice of the narrator. The descriptions of characterization and the depiction of female bodies indicate the elements of objectification and voyeuristic scopophilia.

“Haritha stepped down from the treadmill. Her body was drenched in sweat. Taking a towel, she gently wiped off the moisture on her face. Canals of perspiration channeled through her neck towards the middle of her sports bra to cross her navel and wet her panties to make her disturbed.”  
(28-29)

Here the female body is introduced in an objectified way and is being looked at by both the narrator and the reader. Another example is that the victim Haritha enjoys her image in a mirror and the narrative style brings in erotic Scopophilia. Here, linguistic structures act as a camera lens to capture the sexualized living body to turn into a pleasurable object

to stimulate the libido of the reader. The narrative aspects sexualize the living female body by creating an erotic word picture. Here the female body is an erotic object for the narrator as well as for the reader. The narrator continues,

“She looked at the mirror to enjoy the beauty of her perfectly toned and sculptured body which is the result of daily exercise for a period of seven months. She found her loosened arm muscles got strengthened and her protruded tummy got flattened. On moving sideways, she observed her hips got curved, breasts turned fuller and spherical, and her bums and thighs became tightened. Her full body beamed with beads of sweat.” (29-30)

The narrator of *Hydrangea* is the bearer of the reader’s gaze. These narrations focus on the ‘close-ups’ of female body parts and the narrator serves as a surrogate for the reader’s look. The detailed narration investigates the female body and tries to demystify its mysteries. The killer’s gaze at the female body has sadistic elements in asserting control, judging, and punishing his victims. All these images of female body parts, enactment of male power and male gaze stand as representations of eroticism. In an introduction to Georges Bataille’s *Story of the Eye*, he details the increasingly bizarre sexualizing of the female body.

“The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact... The woman displayed as a sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle... she holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire.” (33)

For Mulvey, the camera allows male viewers to experience pleasure through ‘Scopophilia,’—the pleasure in looking. Ladelle McWhorter in her essay ‘Bataille’s Erotic Displacement of Vision’ opines that Pornographic literature is “visual in that [it] conjure[s] up images of women, body parts, scenes in the enactment of male power” (119). In *Hydrangea*, the male

gaze operates through the visual qualities of a literary work to generate this pleasure in looking at female bodies. The narrative style invites the reader to identify with both the first-person account of the killer and the third-person angle of the narrator.

### Female Corpses, Necrophilia and Necropornography

Every short video sent to the City Police Chief before the crime was shot in a manner that indicates stalking and filming of women without their consent indicated the voyeuristic tendencies of the culprit. The crime scene looked strange in its appearance as the female dead bodies of the victims were kept in their bedrooms completely decorated, near to it burnt two big perfumed candles, pink hydrangea flowers sprinkled all over the bed, floor and doorsteps. The overall appearance of the homicide scene looked like an installation art that is staged with utmost care. As Elisabeth Bronfen states in her book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), female corpses were displayed as artworks.

The equation between femininity and death is such, that while in cultural narratives the feminine corpse is treated like artwork or the beautiful woman is killed to produce an artwork, conversely, artworks emerge only at the expense of a beautiful woman's death and are treated like Feminine corpses. (72–73)

The criminal uses sophisticated technology to record videos of his victims bathing and undressing. His voyeuristic behavior has an underlying coercive sexual interest and his covert observations of females took place in the context of preparing for coercive sexual acts and rape planning. The criminal's unnatural satisfaction of sexual instincts upon the female victims includes extreme narcissism, sadism, and fetishism. He tries to assume his power and control over his victims by introducing infliction of pain, humiliation, and suffering. This sexual sadist engages in bondage, cutting/stabbing, and ligature strangulation of his victims.

The criminal at times loses his erection when the victim was put to rape and he withdrew from raping them while they are alive. Once

he killed them, he engages in necrophilia and shoots the video. Later he simply chooses to masturbate to thoughts and visuals of his actions. His paraphilic activities are a result of transient necrophilic fantasies. The murders he committed were necrophilic homicides to obtain corpses to fulfill his sexual desires. This serial killer finds sexual gratification in smelling the private parts of the corpses and neatly arranging the bed, dresses, and other things of the next victim. Necrofetishism of the criminal is evident as he engages in conversing, bedding, and eating together with the corpses. The imagery he wishes to fondle in his mind is the dominant male perpetrator and the helpless female victim.

The novel narrates the female corpse just like an object that is displayed in a showcase. The disfigured female body was kept stark naked in a clean white bedspread, its eyes made wide open using transparent glue, its hands spread out towards two sides, and the corpse was covered with another clean white cloth. There were deep wounds all over the body but the amount of blood dried and stuck to the body was very little. It was evident that the deep cut wounds and blood were cleansed with Hydrogen Peroxide to destroy all shreds of evidence. The female corpses were arranged as showpieces after engaging in violent sexual intercourse with them. Etienne Du Toit in his work *Commentary on the Criminal Procedure* (2005) opines that,

“Crime novels are either narrative of investigators or narratives of criminals—rarely are they narratives of victims. While the murderer and, subsequently, the detective in some sense write their stories on the victim’s body, the victim, often conventionally female, seldom gets the chance to tell her story. If she does, her tale risks being hijacked by the audience as a pornographic spectacle, especially if it is one of sexual violence” (Du Toit 2005, 257–258).

In *Hydrangea*, the killer writes his story on the victim’s corpse and his monologues reveal the working of his psychopathic-paraphilic mind. He uses the body of the victim as a canvas to express his mental frustrations triggered by sexual dysfunction and disorders. He remembers the erectile

dysfunction he faced during his first sexual encounter with a lady named Sini. She ridiculed and made fun of him for his sexual inability. The humiliation poured out by her mockery created stress and anxiety in him. His feelings of guilt, lack of confidence, concern about sexual performance, and body image resulted in extreme misogyny and sexual complexity.

Once he committed his lust-murder, the criminal wanted that to be acknowledged by the public, waits for the public to discuss the brutality he committed, and if his necrosadism goes unnoticed by the police, he gets frustrated. Extreme narcissistic tendencies of the criminal are visible here. This violent necrophile gets a sexual charge out of mutilating dead bodies, enjoys the act of killing, and copulates with the warm fresh corpses. In their article titled, “Necrophilia: A Study of the Psychoanalysis in the Characteristics of the Offenders Who Sexually Molest the Dead”, Anand Kumar Vasudevan *et al* states that,

“One central theme in necrophilia is a profound lack of self-esteem and deep-seated feelings of inferiority. Unusually sensitive to rejection, they seek out a safe sex partner who is permanently incapable of rejecting them. At first, they are fearful of the dead. However, through the defense mechanism of reaction formation, whereby an unacceptable emotion is replaced by its opposite, they become enamored of the dead and obsessed with them. They develop elaborate fantasies involving corpses, and when environmental or occupational circumstances cooperate, they will act on their hidden desires.” (16)

The victims rarely get a chance to speak or react when all these atrocities were happening to them. The criminal silences them by inserting cloth materials inside their mouths and subjecting them to brutal physical violence. The novel gives the point of view of one of the victims named Ria in the form of a monologue—only once. She was tied to the legs of the cot, unable to utter even a single word as her mouth was filled with clothes and was terrified by the presence of the ferocious criminal. Her

monologue goes on like this, “Oh, Look! he sprinkles flowers - pink hydrangeas. What next?! Oh my God! He will rape me then. This filthy creature! It is better to get killed. My God...” (175). The acts of human inflicted violence, even an unwanted gaze can degrade the victim from the status of a subject to that of an object, while the pain resulting from such injuries reduces her to flesh. Unfortunately, all these victims underwent such a mental trauma of gaze before they were put to excruciating physical atrocities.

### Psycho-dynamics of the killer

The intimate and complex inter-relationships between birth fantasies, coprophilia, and sadism, regarding necrophilic tendencies, were first described by Sigmund Freud in his article “Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness” (1908). Freud said that the ‘perverse’ part of libido is caused by a disturbance in development. The repression of sexual instincts can lead to internal conflicts and can result in perverse drives. Some psychoanalysts claim that the need to overcome the primal scene trauma is responsible for causing later necrophilia.

This psychopathic necrophile has a significant motive to possess an unresisting and submissive partner. He always preferred sex partners who are helpless, unresisting, and completely at his mercy, or who are immobile, to avoid critical remarks about his performance, the fulfillment of which gives him a sense of power and control over the women whom he considers as a sex object. The criminal continues his acts, as he believes, that the dead ‘lover’ never rejects him, makes no demands, does not compare his love-making skills with others, and will never file a complaint against him. He is often reminded of Sini who compared his love-making skills with his father’s and made critical remarks about his performance. He strangled her to death and then showed his ‘masculinity’. This incident was his first murder and necrophilic activity.

The childhood experience of this serial killer was another important aspect. His father used to torture him physically and mentally while his mother refused to help him from the attacks he had to bear. After the death of his father, his mother engaged in illicit relationships and



prostitution by neglecting her child. The lack of love, empathy and care in the family created hatred and revenge in his mind and ultimately resulted in matricide. He tried to identify this parental figure in his victims and it is evident that he selected victims with the same facial symmetry as that of his mother to torture and murder. The unconscious suppressed hostility towards parental figures and sadistic impulses to explore the mother's body is a concept associated with necrophilia. In their article titled "On Certain Neurotic Equivalents of Necrophilia", Calet and Weinshel (1972) hypothesize that the bizarre mutilations sometimes found in sexual killings indicate that in some of these cases "the wish to re-enter and to explore the interior of the mother's body may be an important ingredient" (67).

The necrophile sees the perverse act as the use of hostility in converting a childhood trauma into an adult triumph, the fantasy of revenge being crucial and risk-taking an essential part. A triumph is celebrated and the sex object is dehumanized each time the perverse act is performed. On killing each of his victims, he receives a pleasure that is equal to orgasmic pleasure.

### Tales from Autopsy table

An autopsy is commonly associated with the examination of bodies or fragments of bodies in forensic anthropological procedures. Autopsy is a word derived from the Greek language and is a combination of 'auto' and 'opsis' which means 'to see with one's own eyes.' The dissection of dead bodies for the post-mortem examination is a systematic visual investigation that is exactly a penetrating gaze to extract medical information. The necropornographic fictions centering on the scene of autopsy and the exhibition of corpses are common in crime fiction. It has sexual attributes and serves to stimulate erotic feelings in the reader or viewer through this public spectacle. In *Hydrangea*, the post mortem process of the victim Haritha was explained and the autopsies of Chaitra, Liya and Ovia were mentioned. The scene centers on

the examination of corpses by forensic medical technicians and their scientific gazes. The autopsy scenes “featur(ing) the most graphic, abject images of the victim’s ruined corpse” (Pierson, 197) and can be conceived of anatomical dismemberment as a pornographic spectacle for the readers.

The narrator invites his readers to enjoy the anatomical fantasy as he proceeds to stage the woman’s autopsy as a brightly illuminated and eagerly attended erotic glance or spectacle, and he immediately focuses narrative attention on organs of prime pornographic interest. The display of the victim’s body on the autopsy slab, the way in which the naked bodies were kept straight, and the appearance of wounds in the breasts, stomach, and thighs were specified in the novel. The autopsy is a site in which the naked female dead body is exhibited as an object of the gaze and the sexualization of this body ends only when it is buried. In *Hydrangea*, the killer even attends the funeral and visits the burial places of his victims by tricking the entire police force and detective agents.

## Conclusion

Necrophilia is often acknowledged as a very rare and poorly represented phenomenon in crime fiction, especially in Malayalam. The writer succeeded in weaving such a cold-blooded murder series in a terror-stricken manner by using a catchy narrative style and peculiar plot-line. The novel reveals sexual deviancy in a necrophile-turned slayer from the point of view which helps the reader to critically analyze the psychodynamic aspects of him with an in-depth inquiry into the nature of the criminal. On observing the nuances of *Hydrangea*, one could understand the embedded Scopophilia and objectification of the living female bodies and the necrophilic approach of the criminal towards the dead bodies of the victims. The interpersonal dynamics of the killer reveal that his bizarre sexual behavior is rooted in his antecedents of humiliation and misogyny. The gaze of the killer and the narrator facilitates the occurrence of necropornography to sexualize female bodies as erotic spectacles.

## Glossary

1. Coprophilia getting sexual arousal from compulsive consumption of feces.
2. Necrofetishism deriving sexual gratification from corpses or parts of the corpse.
3. Necrophile a person who is sexually attracted to corpses.
4. Necropornography pornographic visuals or writings depict sexual acts with corpses or people pretending to be dead
5. Necrosadism the propensity to murder in order to have sex with a corpse
6. Paraphilia any intense sexual arousal other than sexual interest in genital stimulation
7. Psychopath a person suffering from a chronic mental disorder with abnormal and violent social behavior
8. Scopophilia pleasure derived chiefly from watching others when they are naked or engaged in sexual activity.

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