

The Foul Game, Everyone Plays It

Annie Kezia Raj

Guest Lecturer

Chellammal Women's College of the Pachaiyappa's Trust
Chennai

“Next month at least I must get a pair of slippers, from the evening bazaar,” gaspingly murmured Malar, as she reverently rang the door bell. For a few moments as she waited sincerely for the door to be opened fervently praying, for a smile on “Amma’s” face, standing restlessly on the red tiled, semi furnished portico, lined with bushy indoor crotons, with the dazzling slant of sunrays kissing her face, she kept signaling to the two little fawn, wrinkly pugs that peeped out of its kennel, promising to play with them after work. The faithful creatures in turn wagged their tails in approval. Malar was overjoyed at the gesture. She always found pleasure and deemed it a bounden duty to please everyone and everything that belonged to Amma, her mistress.

The tall etched glass double door opens.

“Get in you lazy tortoise.”

Malar hurriedly steps into the house and stepping inside the house, she goes...

“Sorry Amma, I had to bathe our owner’s children and feed them as well... you know Rajamma is terribly sick these days and moreover her children are so attached to me, they never...”

“Oh enough, for 340 days madam will have excuses to make...” raged Amma.

“Amma, isn’t it 365 days? I mean, a year has 365 days right? That’s what you told me when you chided me last time for my absence on account of our Chella Chithi’s death...I remember you telling me that I have people dying almost 365 days in a year.” said Malar breaking into a loud laughter..

‘Oh, stop it.... I’m talking about the days you finally manage to come for work...’ replies Amma dropping her plump self into her candy red bean bag.

Malar playfully bites the tip of her tongue for the blunder and hurtled into the kitchen. She starts picking up the dirtied vessels and drops them into the sink one by one, humming her all-time favorite folk song.

From the living room, “Ohh, Malar...Malaaaar.... look around for my bathroom slippers.” whooped Amma as she shut her laptop and was about to rise.

Malar comes racing to the living room, “Straight ahead, Amma”, Malar runs saluting Amma for the newly generated job.

Under the sofa, under the shoe stand, under the tea foil, under the bed Malar goes crawling, but in vain. It suddenly dawns on Malar...

“Yes, it must be in the bathroom, I am sure...”

She scampers to the bathroom and gleefully picks the slippers with both her hands, while her face twinkles with a deep satisfaction of completing her task. She then runs back to her mistress.

“Lay it down fast, you hopeless! How long do you keep me waiting?”

“Wait, Ammaaaaa”

Malar sacredly wipes the partly wet slippers with the ends of her pallu and places it with utmost reverence, careful enough not to produce a thud that would turn Amma, furious.

Gazing at the pink cushioned crocs that had a tiny, flashy bunch of green plastic grapes fixed at the suede, Malar tells Amma... “What a showy pair of slippers, Amma?”

“Why? Are you planning to carry them home some day?” Amma retorts in a stern tone.

“Aiyoo, ammma” Malar laughs it off...

“My Chithi is coming home this afternoon, wash all the vessels quickly and start preparing lunch for the two of us.”

Malar cheerfully dashes to the kitchen and continues her chores...

Suddenly she comes shouting, “Amma, Amma. Would you need this or can I take this fancy, colour paper home for my little one to play with..?It carries a smell of a new note though; (taking a crushed colour paper close to her nose) I found it peeking out from under the carpet in your room, Amma.”

Malar takes out a crumbled piece of mauvish-crimson coloured paper from her waist and hands it to Amma.

“Heights of illiteracy” boiled Amma as she savagely snatched it from Malar’s hands and carefully unfolded it...

“This is the new 2000/- rupee, you empty headed.”

“Aiyoo, Amma. Is it so? (Stroking her chin)My husband told me about this last week. He saw it first when the sarkari engineer sir, who lives at the end of our street gave it to the pot-bellied

shopkeeper who sells logs and ropes. He was talking of its pleasant colour all night, though his unskilled brain couldn't nail the exact hue. True some things need to be seen with our own eyes to be experienced."

Malar paused for a few moments and cleared her throat as if she was getting ready for something sober...

"Amma, May I feel it again, just once?"

"Why, madam? Are you planning to make any further changes to it? Hurry, go, get working..."

Leaning backwards on the beige embellished pillar behind her Malar philosophically goes in a sober tone, "Changes? What changes, Amma? What changes can I make to it? It is only these coloured papers that change lives of people like us. All, I know is that it is the very root of all our worries. Someday I wish all these notes lose their value. What a joy that day would bring to all mankind?"

"You unschooled idiot, what joy are you talking about without these coloured papers? Brute..., if not for these papers would you be working here? Tell me..."

Malar smiles at Amma and ambles to the kitchen as if she was in total disagreement with what she just heard from Amma. Probably, the lack of education hindered her from putting her deep, truthful thoughts into crisp and eloquent lines like that of Amma's.

"Listen. Malar, I want some paneer curry, coconut rice and thogayal for lunch done in an hour."

Amma ordered in a loud voice looking in the direction of the kitchen.

"Paneer..?? Those spoilt milk cubes..."

"To hell with your scholarly definitions and don't forget to keep milk for the dogs."

"Amma, Amma" in a panicky voice calls Malar scratching her head.

"Uh-huh... What now?"

"My tea, Amma"

"Water is on the table and tea dust on the shelf. (Pointing towards the kitchen from her cozy bean bag) What more do you want?"

"Amma, Milk..." asked Malar in a feeble voice winking playfully.

"Malaaaaarrrr.....don't you think you are getting a little overboard these days? Last time I couldn't keep the excess glass of milk in the fridge, as it was under repair...how dare you make it habitual to demand milk?" Amma spluttered.

“Aiyoo, Amma please forgive me...” Malar responds in a cuddly voice, giggled childishly, wringing the pallu of her sari, as if to hide her embarrassment.

She continues, “Anyway, my brother-in-law has promised to bring fresh cow milk for all of us, from the dairy he works, Amma. Our house would turn into a fair, with the three litres of thick milk he brings. I would make pal payasam for all my kith and kin.” Malar narrates in a voice overloaded with joy.

“Hmm...hmm...” nods Amma unable to comprehend the overwhelming happiness Malar and her people find in milk and payasam...

“May I get some for you as well, Amma?”

“No, no. I will ask you, when I feel like... Hope lunch is almost ready?”

“Getting to it right away, Amma”

Malar speeds to the kitchen and opens the tall double door refrigerator that glistened in berry red to feast her eyes and senses with the sight and aroma of the garden-fresh cherry red tomatoes, green peas, broccolis, huge red cabbages, the moist coriander, bushy bunch of mint, fleshy, purple brinjals, the juicy, ripe apples, oranges, shiny grape bunches and lustrous strawberries that she found almost all the days of the month in Amma’s fridge, in contrast to the dry onions, drier potatoes and the decoloured curry leaves in her faded green vegetable basket in her cramped so called kitchen, that lay beside her earthen stove.

She quickly finishes the cooking and hurries to wash the rest of the vessels.

“Malar, why aren’t you sweeping the room as soon as you come? Why do you always keep it to the last...? Oh... how you exhaust all my energy and find pleasure turning my throat dry...” cried Amma as her fingers ran through the touchpad and eyes carefully scanned something on her laptop screen.

Malar’s face suddenly lights up.

“Coming, coming Amma...and yes for your dry throat can I make some fresh juice, Amma?” innocently responded Malar in a loud voice that showed sure signs of a kind of stealthy excitement.

She washes her hands in a hurry and bends down to wipe them in her worn out in-skirt that always hung below her saree. She wipes her damp face with her pallu; she runs both her palms over either side of her head, tightens her bun and finally runs her pointing finger in between her eyebrows to press her bhindhi twice and hurries to pick the broom and the winnowing tray.

“It’s really getting late, you silly woman” howled Amma.

“Yes, yes ...I am heading straight to your bedroom...” the excitement in her voice further increasing, Malar responded.

Her hairs rise just at the thought of something exciting that’s awaiting her inside Amma’s well furnished, cozy, air-conditioned bedroom that exhibits heights of indulgence with its sumptuous bedding to glorious bedroom chandelier. With coyness of a bride, Malar enters the room. She looks around and quickly dusts the curtains, folds the bed sheets, tidies the bed and finally sweeps the floor collecting fine dust in the winnowing tray. She then very softly leaves the broom and the winnowing tray down, beside her on the aesthetically pleasing, shimmering white marble floor.

Now as she raises her head she looks into her much coveted, fancy, life size mirror that stood opposite to Amma’s extravagant king-sized cot. In the mirror stands a woman in her late twenties, with chapped legs, ornamented with thick metal anklets and battered toe rings, her faded orange in-skirt, that preceded her pink, floral, crushed voile saree that looked as worn out as her palms, well worn though, her sculptured waist, that flowed down from her almost flat bosom clothed with loose, bright yellow blouse, dangling on her with pins all over, her visible collar bones by itself detailed the poverty of her class, bony shoulders that hoisted the scrawny neck adorned with sparkling, wine red beads and a thick yellow sacred thread, the continuity of which was respectfully hid under her saree cloth that ran over her chest, a sleek narrowed chin, those bee stung, bow like, bloated lips that never failed to glow with its merry smile, thin pointed nose that complimented her wheatish complexioned, oval face held a floral nose stud, her dreamy blue eyes, best loved and boasted about by her beloved husband smeared with jet black kajal that almost elegantly concealed her puffy under eyes, the corner of those intoxicatingly innocent windows to her soul lustered with virtuousness, ignorance and integrity. Yes, ignorance is, indeed such bliss. There was surely something more than alluring about those sea blue pupils that had infinite stories to shed down/ bucket down. Her wild, bushy, curved eyebrows screamed a kind of untamed elegance/charm. Her sun kissed forehead that held a round tweeny weeny piece of the blue sky went perfectly with her silky brownish black locks that fell on it. There was something truly magnetic about her looks. Malar experiences ecstasy as she is actually able to behold herself from head to toe and even beyond... in contrast to the cracked, blurry face mirror hung in her mud wall, in her tiny abode that hardly mirrored even her face as a whole.

The rich, chocolate brown, antique pendulum that hung above the mirror struck, twelve. Malar untied her bun and brought her hair to the front on both the sides, from her waist takes out a small crushed newspaper in which madam has managed to bring some talcum powder from home, brought by her husband to be used as a luxury cosmetic while attending big functions of their close friends and relatives, touches a shred of it and carefully applies it all over her face and cautiously crushes the paper and puts it back safe to use it in the following days, she then stood erect, folding her hands as one in authority, holds her head high (something she can never do in the presence of anyone in Amma's house), nodding her chin gently, in a bossy voice Malar starts..

“Chinnu, have you delivered the bag of rice to my Chella chithi's family?”

“What? See don't you think you are a little slack these days? O.k. it's quite common for man to have excuses once in way.” she winks at herself in the mirror.

“Fine, my boy doesn't forgot I have employed you only, because with these weak, crippled legs of yours you can't fetch yourself a well-paid job such as this anywhere else in the town and of course because your mother, my periamma implored me to...”

“Appa, (calls her father-in-law so, as she lost her own dad when she was too young to remember) yesterday I gave you a bundle of the new two thousand rupees to buy yourself and all our relatives and Rajamma's kids some new and dresses. Hope you have used it up completely?”

“Oh, a balance of three new notes? Why didn't you spend them completely, Appa? Hope you haven't forgotten anyone? Now what will your son think of me? I can't take it back... You offer it to the first three people whom you see when you go out to inspect our fields.”

“No, no, not now Appa...sit down. You can do it tomorrow morning.” She says, slightly stooping down, and gesturing as if she was asking someone seated opposite to her not to rise.

Pretending to open her hand bag and picking a bundle of notes in the air, she offers it to someone on her left gleaming with a generous smile and commands, “Tomorrow, I am throwing a feast for everyone in town as I do every Saturday and Sunday...get some garden-fresh vegetables from the fridge of an Amma who stays at the entrance of our town.. Pay here some amount and on the way go to Anbu's dairy that I recently purchased for him from the government and buy 20 litres of fresh milk and return home in a taxi, you want to know the numbers of these taxi drivers? Ask the amma from whose fridge we regularly buy exotic fruits and vegetables.”

“Yes, yes. I will tell you our menu for tomorrow: we are offering a leaf full of coconut rice, with hot vegetable sambar on it, thogayal... huh, huh, (showing her right palm and signaling someone to stop) not those spoilt milk cubes.”

“Ya, ya don’t worry. This week as my husband and I had already promised: a jug full of pal payasam and another jug full of creamy tea will be given after the feast, for everyone to carry back home.”

“Oh ya,(holding her forehead) not all would have two huge jugs at home...well, ehhhhh?” strokes her chin and looks at herself in the mirror and snaps...and goes, “Well, My kids are playing with a handful of crushed colour papers get them, carefully unfold them and buy as many as good jugs as you can get for tomorrow.”

Flicking her chin and smiling brightly she again starts, “Oh, yes, yes.... Chinnu, they would feel bad, of course, kids after all, they wouldn’t obviously like to part with their play things, hmm ..., but yes tell them they are only notes and the poor need them badly and that you would let them play outside with their other street friends in exchange.... they will gladly part with it... Kids after all...Deal with them gently...” she instructs.

Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven...How true; our very earth would turn into a little heaven this way.

“Malar, Malar....It’s 12.10 and Chithi will be here anytime. What keeps you in for sooo long?” raged Amma from her bean bag.

With this rude awakening Malar’s role in her world of extravagance receives a sudden jolt, with jerk Malar lands into reality from her divine and ecstatic realm of sheer bliss much earlier than the preceding days.

As she hurriedly bent to pick the broom and the winnowing tray her heel accidentally rubs against the handle of the winnowing tray, sprinkling the fine dust on the spotless, shimmering white marble floor. In a hurry, terrorized Malar sweeps the fine dust under the grey carpet spread in the room and whizzes out of the room.

“I feel that walking has become another chore

I don’t think I can go on walking anymore

Forgive me for those words; I know they’re but a cliché to you

But life is tiring, my feet are feeling sore

I wish that I could have a bit of time

To heal the ache that's growing stronger all the time" rang Amma's mobile.

"Hello, sir...Yes, sir...I will surely mail it tonight, sir....There are dense patches of trees around, it's quite windy here and the towers are little far away, sir. And so, the signals are too poor, sir. Oh yes, sir... no, no...sir. Oh sir, extremely sorry for the delay sir. Eh... Today I'm off of work, but I will resume work tomorrow morning sir...Sir, Sir please sir. Its breaking sir, I'm moving to another room, sir. Sir, it's totally inevitable sir, my maternal aunt is coming home after a long time, sir. I do understand sir, but I too need a break sir. Oh! That comes once in two or three hours, sir, but we have frequent trains to the city; the station is a bit far though. But mostly we take taxi or use our personal vehicle. O.K., sir. Thank you sir, really kind of you, sir.

Amma hangs the phone with a sigh of relief. Malar walks in through the main door from outside carrying two loaded travel bags and places them on the tea foil. Chithi amma has arrived.

"Come, come Chithi..." lovingly invited Malar.

"Chithi???? How dare you? Call me Chithi Madam..." sneered Chithi.

Running to the sofa and wiping it with her pallu, Malar requests Chithi Madam to make herself comfortable.

Malar hastens to the kitchen to get the table ready for lunch...

Meanwhile, Amma who had moved to another room that was right beside the kitchen in search of signals comfortably sits on the ivory coloured regal dhiwan, lost in thought.

Chithi enters the room with open arms crying, "Oh, my little one."

Amma removed her black narrowed framed computer glasses and drops her legs down in veneration and starts to rise, "Come, Chithi, come...Welcome to our humble cottage..."

"I have already come in, my little daughter..." laughs Chithi.

"Sorry, Chithi, my mind is completely occupied with the reports that have to be sent by tomorrow." Cribbed Amma.

"Oh, am I here at the wrong time, my dear..?"

"Oh! No, no Chithi, it is only for you that I am off from work, today."

"Oh, you little angel... you still haven't changed...The same gentle little you"...Saying so Chithi pinches Amma's cheeks and kisses her on her forehead...Patting her on her shoulders, Chithi sits beside her lovingly.

“See, I’m able to see all you facial bones. How chubby you used to be before marriage, just like granny, doesn’t you find time to rest these days?”

“All I used to do was to take rest and wait for my beloved husband to come home, till I deliberately chose to work, since the beginning of this year to keep myself a little busy.”

“Are you really happy with things, my little princess? You were the apple of your dad’s eye. How he used to keep you in the palm of his hands...” said Chithi wiping her eyes with her silk pallu.

“Oh Chithi, I still am the apple of my dad’s eye.” Malar smiles with a bewildered look on her face.

“The point is... are you the apple of your husband’s eyes too, my silly little girl?”

“Today is Friday... just watch, when he would come home with tickets for some good movie and would have booked a table for both of us in some good hotel in the city... Tomorrow we both would drive all the way to the city, enjoy ourselves and be back home late in the night...”

“Oh, really... These are sure signs of an ideal couple”, giggled Chithi in a strange manner.

Amma rises and walks towards the French windows in the room and as she opens them she continues, “Five years of married life, and I must say I feel I am aging into youth. Paradise is the word I can give this house.” She breathes in the free air from her lush backyard...

“Oh, that sounds filmy... but yes I am really happy for you my child... but how I earnestly wish you both had a little one to make your lives complete.”

Amma’s abrupt tears that rained down let slip the whirlwind swirling in the dark chambers of her heart. She discreetly managed to hide her tears from Chithi. She then picks herself up and in an attempt to divert Chithi Amma screeches at the vulnerable creature at home.

“Malar, what on earth are you up to?”

“Getting the table ready, ma... Can I cut some fresh raw mangoes as well..?”

“First, get Chithi a glass of water, you manner less...”

“Yes, amma, I’ll get some warm water for Chithi Madam”, replies Malar in a dutiful manner.

Chithi Madam and Amma are now comfortably seated on the overstuffed, cozy dhiwan, as they hold each other’s hands and discuss the maid.

“Chithi, Malar hardly obeys me.”

“Is it? I will handle her for the next few days, you just watch me do it.”

“Oh, thanks Chithi. She keeps sweeping to the last and spends ample time in my bedroom; I am stuck with work and hardly able to watch her activities...”

“That sounds strange...What has she to do in your bedroom, besides sweeping and mopping?”

“She also dusts the things in the room and folds my bed sheets, Chithi.”

“You silly little girl, how ignorant your mother has brought you up...”saying so Chithi Madam walks towards the bedroom.

“Wait, let me inspect your room once and then proceed with further course of action.”

Chithi opens the room and steps in... She is amazed at the opulent interiors and the cozy ambience.

“Any human... (Chithi thought to herself,) would covet this space.”

Tucking her pallu in her waist and fixing both her hands on either sides of her bloated waist, Chithi scans the room with an air of authority and reckoned self-righteousness. Her oversized eyes stop at the life size portrait of Amma’s husband: A tall, dashing young man, who was a class apart...

Chithi made herself comfortable on the fluffy bed and then hastily pulled a purple coloured, plush pillow to thrust under her heavy thighs.

In a rather wicked tone Chithi speaks to the portrait... “What’s the point of your massive wealth and remarkable good looks, when you were not prudent enough to choose my own little daughter who’s fair, fecund and worthy enough as your bride? You... have literally ruined your own life. Whom does destiny spare, after all?”

She then beamed a diabolical grin and walked around the room peeking into the wardrobes and softly banging the walls, with the ferocious face of a feline, at the peak of hunger.

Meanwhile, Malar stands in the kitchen hopelessly rubbing her hands, sweating profusely like blood oozing out of fresh wound as a result of overhearing their conversation on her long stays in the bedroom.

“Chithi Madam is a retired H.M, her education would help her sniff the truth somehow...I am finished, my surge for momentary pleasure is going to cost me my very sustenance. What if Amma fires me?” Malar thought to herself, with her crossed arms gripping her biceps.

Firmly clutching and turning the richly designed golden handle of the bedroom, Chithi opens the door and walks straight towards Amma and begins her report. Holding Amma’s hands and in a

caring voice Chithi goes, “Keep all your valuables safe, she is probably plotting to loot your jewels someday soon and sketching it on the live map everyday..”

“Chithi, don’t scare me” Amma presses Chithi’s hands like any frightened little girl would do.

“Wait, baby...I predict something worse than your worries.”

Petrified Amma sincerely pleads, “Chithi please come straight to the point... I feel really disturbed...”

“Didn’t it even strike your lifeless brain once that she could be coveting your husband, standing for long before his portrait fantasizing, worse... devising to take him away from you some day.”

“Is Malar capable of all this, too?” cried Amma looking helplessly at Chithi Amma, holding her hands to her chest, panting deeply.

“You, just relax”

“Malar...., oye..... Malar” yelled Chithi Madam.

“Come here and sit down” she ordered terrorized Malar.

Malar turned unusually quiet. She hesitantly sat beside Chithi Madam on the floor. She kept pulling her saree hard, tucking the end of it under her folded legs, nervously.

“I have seen enough of people like you. This is not how I will deal with you the next time. I know all your plans and have neared your venomous plots...You better be careful when I am around.”

“Buuuuut, Chithi Madam.” Malar spoke in a feeble voice as if about to faint.

“No. I want to hear nothing. Have gratitude. Learn to be humane. You will no more enter the bedroom alone and when you do, you will not be alone. I, Chithi madam will come along.”

Malar’s heart sank. It was, as if she was losing a part of herself... the thought of missing those moments in a world where she most loved to dwell and liberate herself turned Malar almost dead.

“Do, you get that straight.”

“Ye..., yee, yessss, Amma.” Malar stammered hesitantly.

“Now, get up and get working.”

Malar, though shattered within was partly happy that the interrogation did not have too many nor difficult questions, in fact the interrogation was a farce in the real sense.

She trudged to the kitchen and reached for her white, crushed polyethene cover that she brings along to take the left over rice that Amma gives occasionally.

“Malar, Malar...”

“Yes, Amma.”

“Sweep, the backyard and burn all the twigs and the dry leave as usual and then leave.”

“Yes, as you say, Amma” Malar replied in a plain voice that was almost lifeless.

She tucked her pallu, slightly lifted her saree and started to work, after sweeping the backyard clean and heaping the dry leaves and twigs and a few wilted flowers, she comfortably sits on a slightly sticky rock that is usually used to break coconuts and strikes the match stick and throws it over the heap, it does not ignite right away, because of the gloomy weather, but Malar who is able to spot a small spark blows it into a flame and keeps kindling the fire.

The orange yellow flames burn vigorously; Malar could suddenly feel the heat on her face especially on her eyes, though the crackling sound it rendered was pleasing to her ears. The tiny burnt grey particles were gradually rising in the air, while some flew towards Malar’s face, her eyes brimmed with tears .It would be difficult to tell if her tears were caused by the flaring flame that soared high in the air, in her physical world or from the brightly burning gruesome flame within. As the flames were slowing diminishing a sudden scent of fresh, damp jasmine breezed into Malar’s nostrils. A sudden feeling of pleasantness, the smell of weddings, festivals and fares clothed Malar’s interim gloomy world.

What Malar started off with a small sapling of a jasmine shoot, had now turned in a brilliant bushy jasmine corner, at the farthest part of the scrubby, serene backyard of the undeterred and quiet abode, and it was, in fact the envy of the locals.

Malar briskly gets up dusting herself, walks through the garage and gets almost close to the lofty, imposing main gate that stood between two lengthy stretches of walls that held two huge dooms. A horrendous voice intrudes.

“Malar, remember all my words, I have passed on my enlightenment to thousands like you...”

Malar whispers in the air, “Poor Chithi Madam, in the process has dimmed her own luminosity/light.”

“Malar, come early tomorrow, my weary and swollen legs need a good massage, but don’t even dream that you can massage your way into the bedroom again...” she tells Malar from the balcony of the duplex Villa, sitting in a cushioned bamboo chair, sipping a steaming hot cup of creamy cardamom tea.

“Shall I do it the day after tomorrow, Madam Chithi?”

“But why?”

“You will certainly know, why?” Malar smiles mysteriously as she walks out and closes the gate behind her.

She walked down the street with a vibrant face, releasing her pallu from her waist, waving to almost everyone she sees on the road, known or unknown, declaring loudly in the air,

“Fishes and visitors stink in three days

and this one is sure to stink by tomorrow morning...

Oh, my people deep fry the scaly, fleshy fishes before they stink

or let them into the deep waters, I tell you all, this: as a forewarning...”

And laughs uncontrollably while trying to playfully keep pace with a tiny little stray puppy.

Malar’s voice fades as she advances to the end of the road.

