

Nimisha. K. Jayan “Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of the Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival.” Thesis. Research & Post Graduate Department of English, St. Thomas’ College (Autonomous), Thrissur, University of Calicut, 2020.

Introduction

The Kodungallur Sreekurumbha Bhagavathi temple in Central Kerala is illustrious for its singular annual festival called Kodungallur Bharani Festival observed at the asterism of *Meenam-bharani* (in the month of March-April) drawing international enthusiasts and intelligentsia alike. For several decades, on this day, the temple inherited by the erstwhile royal family of Kodungallur is thrown open to the subaltern sects for a unique ritual called *Kaavutheendal* ‘polluting’ the coveted sanctity of the temple and the residing Goddess Bhadrakali herself through every imaginable mode. This abrasiveness is further augmented by drunken dancing to the tunes of traditional percussion instruments, recital of *theripattu* (“ribald song”) using ‘vulgar’ or ‘acrid’ gestures directed towards the Goddess, spilling of blood by smiting the crown using ritual swords and the legally banned animal sacrifice.

This unequaled fest is famed for its ‘aberrant’ behaviors, animated features, and theatricality essentially proclaiming a definitive slot in the cultural make-up of Kerala. In this performance, temple premises along with the performers undergo a massive transmutation and the whole area is infused with vibes that emanate from the freewheeling ebullient oracles in vermilion costumes, thick streams of blood on their foreheads, the heavy jingling of ceremonial swords, *aramani* (“waist let”) and *chilanka* (“anklet”) and the sprayings of turmeric powder. Ransacking the past reveals that though held mainly as a religious ritual, Bharani has a foundational socio-political link with the history of Kodungallur and has extended into the current terrains through several aggregations and realignments. Bharani is generally reckoned as a loud and violent

celebration of a particular segment of subalterns and by articulating the repressed desires and cravings, the performers attain a state of higher ecstasy and transgress the human boundaries thereby progressing towards a catharsis.

The caste system in Kerala differs from that found in the rest of India. While the Indian caste system generally modeled the four-fold division of society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras, in Kerala, the Nambudiri Brahmins acceded as the priestly class and stigmatized Sudras and untouchables arraying them outside the caste system entirely. Ajay Sekar in his article “A Broken Padmasana: The Fissured Buddha of Pattanam” etches out this dark period in Kerala history when grave and material violence was used to convert and modify the ethical and egalitarian spiritual practices and instructive places in Kerala during the early middle ages by Brahmanic Hinduism and its strategic appropriating tropes like Saivism and Vaishnavism. The Brahmanic henchmen belonging mostly to the Maravar and Kallar clans demolished and buried all the traces of Buddhism and its non-violent culture in Kerala with true Sudra allegiance and slave-like fidelity to their caste- sovereigns, the earthly gods or *Bhudeva* (Alexander 15). The lower castes or Avarnas were treated as sub-humans and they were exploited, abused, and abjected in ways that transcend our imagination.

Glancing across history, we can see the barbarity of certain sects which claiming themselves to be the refined and pure class, helmed primitive and pagan rituals and practices, robbing the lower castes of their essential dignity and self-respect. Women, including the upper castes women were the muted, acquiescent group and being ‘doubly-marginalized’ were reduced to the status of mere pleasure objects. The elitist groups ceremoniously practiced and followed elaborate rituals to proclaim their superiority over other classes and

the patterns of chagrin subjugation were apparently more psychological than physical. These rituals unflinchingly served to condition the mental make-up of the lower castes and ensured that they resignedly accept their inferiority as an unalterable truth of nature. Egregious practices such as untouchability, approachability (maintaining specific distance from Savarna), and irrational tax systems such as *thalavari* (“head-load tax”) and, *mulakkaram* (“breast tax”), restriction on covering of breasts, *sambandham*, etc. reveal a dodgy pattern. Language played an accommodating role in these rituals of discrimination as power is encoded in its symbolic significations. The language was used to establish gender identities in addition to demarcating the upper castes from the lower castes. In articulating this language, the ‘other’ had no other choice than steeping into circumlocution or self-derogation. Any undertaking aimed at transgressing that rooted boundary was severely culpable. Thus, even the language of the stigmatized acquired the frame of the language of servitude and the linguistic signs and codes became the carriers of the germs of ‘shame.’ They seem to have resisted these humiliations through their recondite and abstruse rites and rituals. But the history of mankind has shown that one cannot live in shame forever. Abuse one for long, they will retaliate, for shame demands to be expressed. As noted earlier, in Bharani Festival we see the synergy of various caste groups from high to low which is questionable in the context of Kerala society. Low caste people were considered as untouchables and touching them or rather coming into any kind of physical contingency with them was weighed as an act of pollution. This forces us to ask the question: Whose goddess is Kali? Whether she is a tribal deity or subaltern goddess or a deity included in the long pantheon of Hindu-Brahminical worship is dealt with in detail in this dissertation.

Social reality is constructed by performances-actions, behaviors, and events. Much like a performance, in Bharani, we see a metamorphosis of the inner being of the performer. He is actuated to a higher state of intensity and there follows an intercommunication of performers and a smoldering communion with the divine. And it consists of a whole sequence of behaviors prior to and after the main event on display. This dissertation titled *Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of the Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival* reviews the 'performative' components that transform Bharani to a performance as well as aims to analyze the dramaturgy of *Kaavutheendal*. As Richard Schechner notes, "Performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships" (*Performance Studies* 30). Bharani is paradigmatic of a composite series of complex behaviors that took shape in a particular moment of history and were gradually imbibed and acculturized into the social milieu. Conflating at a common notch, that is, Kodungallur, its diffused roots have penetrated deep and far into the fecund soils of Kerala. Exploring such relationships will be one of the main concerns of this study. This study also intends to throw some light upon the exchanges and connections that Bharani has forged over years and inquire how such a tradition took birth.

Bodies do not themselves possess or lack meaning. The meaning is imparted by gendered and racial performances in particular socio-cultural contexts. Largely, people from lower caste groups such as Pulaya, Thiyya/Ezhava, Vannan, Kanakkan, and Mannan partake in this fest and it is in the scope of the study to learn how the attitude and sentiment towards Bharani vary in consonance with differences in performer's caste and place. Each group renders their exclusive tradition but on the day of Bharani, every devotee merges with the encompassing totality of *Kaavutheendal*. Over time, substantial

revisions have ensued in the temperament of the performers as well. With the incursion of modernization and education into these groups and eventual boom in their standard of living, it is a question to ponder whether Bharani has now been essentially commodified.

This dissertation *Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of the Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival*, thus, is an attempt to understand and analyze how Bharani functions in the socio-political context of Kodungallur. The study looks into the factors that helped to construct such a tradition, the mechanics of the Bharani, and the variations that have crept in overtime. Grounded in the context of performance studies, ritual studies, gender studies, visual culture, linguistics, and spatial studies, this study focuses on rituals of Bharani as a form of celebration as well as resistance within the cultural fabric of Kerala. No aspect of human expression-religious, artistic, political, physical, and sexual is fixed and anchored. Instead, they constitute an accumulative continuum that is shaped and reshaped in particular social and historical junctures. Thus every human activity appears to be a series of performances, behaviors which are “learned, rehearsed and presented over time” (Schechner, *Performance Theory* 15). This study approaches the repertory of several rites of passages involved in the transformative ritual performances of Bharani.

Concepts in relation to performance studies such as, ‘social drama,’ ‘efficacy and entertainment,’ ‘liminality and communitas,’ ‘body,’ ‘visuality,’ ‘space,’ ‘abuse and language’ are incorporated to give a theoretical framework for this study. Critical approaches by theorists such as Richard Schechner’s performer-centered notions of ‘trance and ecstasy,’ Victor Turner’s anthropological concepts of ‘social drama, liminality and communitas,’ J. L Austin’s ‘performative utterances,’ Arnold Van

Genep's celebrated notion of 'rites of passage,' Judith Butler's ideas on 'body, gender and gender performativity,' Michel Foucault's 'power and hegemony,' Gayathri Spivak's views on 'subaltern,' Catherine Bell's in-depth analysis of 'ritual,' Mircea Eliade's ideas on 'sacred and profane,' Max Gluckman's influential category of 'rites of rebellion,' feminist writers Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Linda Alcoff's perceptions on sexuality, Edward Soja and Henry Lefebvre's concept of space as a 'social product,' Philip Auslander's 'liveness,' Nicholas Mirzoeff, Paul Virilio and Martin Jay's concepts on 'visuality and visual culture,' Michel de Certeau's 'city and space,' Timothy Jay and, Steven Pinker's studies on cursing behavior etc. are made use of in this study.

A functional and performance approach is adopted to analyze the rituals apart from the historical approach. A systematic approach combining functional, performative, and historical approaches along with intensive ethnography and methodologies are deployed. The study is conducted placing the performance and performers at the center, and hence due importance is attached to the real experience of the performers than the textual information. To gain this knowledge, data is collected from the performers, the spectators, historians, scholars, and natives from all strata. Basically, three methods are employed in the study; a participant observation is primarily employed, both in Kodungallur and the native place of oracles to have a comprehensive view of the festival. The festival was viewed from two angles; initially as an outsider and then as an insider that necessitated intensive fieldwork in their performative realms. Further, ethnographic methods as interviews and personal discussions, over the phone and in-person were carried out to have a conceptual understanding of the rich and complicated ritual web of Bharani. The whole festival along with the rituals of oracles was recorded over three

years for a deeper analysis. For the sake of analysis, the performative space of Bharani has been divided primarily into two realms: Kodungallur and its premises and secondly, the native space of participants. A historical approach usually gave stress to the space of Kodungallur and understood other performances as secondary or proceeding from this ‘primary’ space. This position is inverted in this study, which considers the native space of the oracles as the commencing point, which is also intricately connected to their lives and belief systems. The myths, legends, tales, Bharani songs, personal narratives, rituals, and performances served as primary sources as they unconsciously unfolded their worldview and culture. Manuscripts, journals, gazetteers, district manuals, census reports, scholarly articles, and books served as the secondary sources. Admittedly, there was a shortage in secondary sources, owing to the dearth of authentic studies in this field, however, the studies of V. R Chandran, M. J Gentes, and Adarsh C. served as useful parameters.

The dissertation *Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of the Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival* is divided into six chapters apart from Introduction and Conclusion. The first chapter is titled ‘Kodungallur Bharani: History, Rituals and Narratives.’ In this chapter, a detailed description of the Kodungallur Bharani Festival is given, elaborating on the rituals of the festival. A historical approach is mandatory, as the festival has a very long tradition and past. To appreciate the significance of the festival, it’s rich and conflicting history must be undermined. The history of the temple, along with the history of Kodungallur, is traced down to provide a complete perception of the festival. Different narratives are at play in the festival, each participant offers their version of the story, adding to its polyphonous nature. An analysis

of these popular narratives is made, but any attempt to find the truth behind these tales can be exhaustible as they form the material of myths and legends. A study of the performance of oracles is undertaken, tracing their history, evolution, methods, practices, and lives. Two major archetypal cults fuel the festival, namely, the Kannaki/Pathini Cult and the Kali Cult, and they are studied in detail.

The second chapter is titled 'Performance and Conflict.' This chapter establishes the major theories that form the backdrop of the study. An attempt is made to trace the evolution of performance studies as a major discipline, and its various definitions and concepts, its ongoing relationship with ritual studies. In this chapter, an attempt is made to differentiate the three aspects of performance. Ritual and performance have a significant bearing on society. The chapter traces the interconnectedness of these two elements. In discussing the performance, I have drawn inspiration from the notions of Richard Schechner, who is a major theoretician who has contributed much to the field of performance studies. Along with it, the concepts put forward by Victor Turner, another notable anthropologist, as 'social drama,' 'liminality' and 'communitas' and 'rituals of rebellion' by Max Gluckman are detailed to establish the relationship of ritual to society and the role it plays in forging the identity of a community. Bharani is perceived in the backdrop of these notions of performance; besides, the element of 'conflict' in the festival is identified.

The third chapter of the dissertation is titled 'Bodies in Performance: Gender and Power.' The chapter details the congruity of gender studies in today's world, along with its evolution and propositions. The body is a key element in gender studies and performative bodily practices of Bharani participants are one of the focuses of this study.

One's gender is not a status or a fixed entity. How the body carries gender and devises identities, how it gets transformed under the imperious power structures is touched upon. A separate section is devoted to the study of Butler's idea of body and gender performativity. Her notion of gender as a fluid variable is immensely significant to the approaches of gender in the Bharani Festival. Her notions are used to analyze the bodies in performance in Bharani, and how they handle their gendered identities. The idea of pollution and taboo plays a leading role in contriving certain rights and privileges of the society, which works mostly in favor of a patriarchal norm. These restrictions that play a decisive role in shaping the general stigma towards sexuality and menstruation are the central concerns of this chapter.

The fourth chapter is titled 'Visuality and Space: The Politics of Seeing and Being.' In this chapter, how visuality affects our perception of the world, its credibility and validity is studied. Vision more than any other sense has been subjected to various technological innovations and manipulations. Visual elements are not the only ingredients important in a spectacle; other senses are duly important as we know that the sense of smell and sound is very powerful in evoking memories and experiences. The chapter is an attempt to develop a comprehensive analysis of how the body with all its dimensions constructs and occupies space. It explores the web of space, performance, the city, ritual, and the body, understanding how the premises of the temple create a lived space for its performers during Bharani. In contemporary discourse, there has been a considerable shift in the view of space; visual perception is stressed as fragmentary and unreal. To have a holistic view, it is necessary to bring the whole body into focus, what Lefebvre calls as 'rhythmanalysis' bringing the whole body into focus. Vision indeed is a

complex phenomenon. It cannot be hailed as true, authentic, and real as once it had been. In this chapter, how the experience of seeing a real, and a mediated performance is analyzed. In the section on spatiality, a detailed study is conducted on the performativities in the city, premises of the temple, bodies of performers, *avakashathara* (“Rightful platform of pilgrims in Kodungallur Temple premises”), and the pilgrimage paths or routes during Kodungallur Bharani Festival in the light of concepts of Henry Lefebvre, Edward Soja, and others. A pilgrim’s actual experience of space is markedly different from the geographical dimensions, and an attempt is made to trace the cartography of this human geography.

Chapter five is titled ‘Language, Abuse and Ribald Bharani Songs.’ The science of language is witnessing spectacular changes; new phenomena are being added to it every day. Humans are constructed in language, and simultaneously construct the world around them. Jacques Lacan considers language to be pre-existent, developing his theory from language. Further, Butler’s gender performativity views language as crucial in linking it to the higher levels of pain, trauma, and censorship. Abuse is yet again a prevalent trait of human language but one which has been ignored by serious academic disciplines of language. In the chapter, the study of abuse is made in the backdrop of various theories of curse and taboos by Timothy Jay and Steven Pinker analyzing the origins and effects of cursing behavior in human beings. Steven Pinker views language as an ‘instinct’ inverting the popular belief of language as a cultural invention. Language is a human model of reality reflecting space, sex, gender, and a multitude of emotions. Thereby any study of language can give an insight into human nature and temperaments. This view takes into account the curses, licentious jokes, and casual talks into serious

study and places them as a natural component of language. In another section of the chapter, an analysis of Bharani songs is carried out, and for the reader to have a better idea of the songs, some popular Bharani songs are translated into English and appended.

Concerning the songs sung in Kodungallur Bharani, varied terms have been used by scholars in the past to designate it. V. T Induchudan uses the term “obscene sexual songs” (128) whereas M. J Gentes makes use of the labels “explicit sexual songs” (296) and “obscene songs” (305); further, the act of singing the songs are tagged as “ridiculing,” “scandalizing,” and “insulting,” etc. Sarah Cardwell also refers to the songs as “obscene songs” (*Oh* 166) in her reading of Bharani. Also, Venu Menon in his documentation of Bharani of 1991, preferred the term “profane songs,” “scurrilous songs,” and “obscene songs” while cataloging the whole festival as “ribald rites” (32). A recent study by Swetha Radhakrishnan on the songs of Bharani translates *theripattu* to “songs of expletives” (203). She also uses the terms “filthy” (203), “obscene” (204), “vulgar” (206), and “abuses” (208) to indicate it. As evident, all the terms stress the sexual and invective nature of the Bharani songs; the songs generally mock the dominant groups and the authorities accuse the performers to be abusing the sexuality of the Goddess through these songs. For the upper castes, it is a verbal abuse, concurrently being a ‘ritual of worship’ for its ardent performers. According to *Wiktionary*, the term abuse has its roots in “Middle English *abusen*, then from either Old French *abus* (“improper use”), or from Latin *abūsus* (“misused, using up”), perfect active participle of *abūtor* (“make improper use of, consume, abuse”), from *ab* (“away”) + *ūtor* (“to use”).” It can mean: 1) Improper treatment or usage [from around 1350 to 1470] , 2) Misuse; improper use; perversion [from mid-16th c.], 3) (obsolete) A delusion; an imposture;

misrepresentation; deception [from mid-16th c. – mid 17th c.], 4) Coarse, insulting speech; abusive language; language that unjustly or angrily vilifies [from mid-16th c.], 5) (now rare) Catachresis [from late 16th c.], 6) Physical maltreatment; injury; cruel treatment [from late 16th c.], 7) Violation; defilement; rape; forcing of undesired sexual activity by one person on another, often on a repeated basis [from late 16th c.]. In the dissertation, the abuse being discussed is essentially verbal and placed in the ambit of language; signaling its precarious nature, the term abuse in relation to Bharani songs is placed in inverted commas. Though sexuality is a predominant feature of the songs, they are not inherently sexual; there are songs lamenting the pilgrim's agony, prayers to the Goddess, songs describing their journeys and rituals, etc. Besides, there are groups among pilgrims that do not sing *theripattu* at all.

Cambridge Dictionary defines 'obscene' as "offensive, rude, or shocking, usually because of being too obviously related to sex." Similarly, 'vulgar' is defined as "not suitable, simple, dignified, or beautiful; not in the style preferred by the upper classes of society." In this dissertation, I have used the term 'ribald songs' against the traditional and widely used term of "obscene sexual songs" or "vulgar songs" to denote *theripattu* sung in Bharani. Firstly, obscenity and vulgarity are subjective phenomena, varying according to the ideological positions one takes. Secondly, the songs are not exclusively sexual as in the case of Rabelaisian songs identified by Victor Turner; apart from celebrating the carnal aspects of life, the songs are also vehement denunciation of the oppressive societal norms. *Wiktionary* defines 'ribald' as "coarsely, vulgarly, or lewdly amusing; referring to sexual matters in a rude or irrelevant way." It is a Modern English word having its etymological roots in "Old French *ribaude*, *ribaude*" ("rogue,

scoundrel”) (English *ribaudo*), from Old French *riber* (“to be licentious”), from Frankish **rīban* (“to copulate, be in heat,” literally “to rub”)....” Clearly, the terms as ‘ribald’ and ‘bawdy’ while suggesting its sexual nature, acknowledge the playful design of Bharani songs; incorporating its comic as well as contemptuous tendencies. The terms do not approach the songs from the ‘above,’ thereby not trying to ascertain its value by applying the confined parameters of morality and decency.

Much has been studied and written on the rites and rituals of the Bharani festival. It has been analyzed from religious, artistic, political, and social perspectives. This study endeavors to approach Bharani as a ‘social drama’ unconsciously enacted by its performers as they share many elements with the performing arts. It seeks to see the whole setting of the festival from a fresh perspective and thereby ask new questions and seek new answers. It attempts to go deep into the grass-root level and analyze its impacts on the psyche of the performer or ‘other.’ The rituals of Bharani have a profound history and perhaps due to various renaissance dynamics these rituals have lost its sting, abdicated, and retreated but they still exert their influence and have sought for themselves new modes and means of expression. These experiences remain the same throughout the world in essence though its outward manifestations may vary. They constitute a multitude, a shared experience, and produce a kind of swarm intelligence or a common body of knowledge. This research thus aims to give a globalized outlook and connectivity to heretofore unidentified rites and rituals of this unique festival of Kerala.

