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Chapter Three

Bodies in Performance: Gender and Power

Women's studies has entered into the new domain of gender studies where men's studies and transgender studies receive equal attention. It is footed on the notion that every 'body' is gendered and is a result of multiple agencies. In the post-structuralist analysis, 'women' and 'men' are regarded as constructions or representations achieved through discourse, performance, and repetition rather than being 'real' entities. However, some scholars feel that women's studies has lost its confidence and sense of direction and that gender studies is a dilution—a sign that feminist knowledge has been tamed and reconstituted by the academy (Pilcher and Whelehan xii). Nevertheless, the study of gender remains diverse and inter-disciplinary re-emerging and re-finding its position and power. Gender categories of 'masculine' or 'feminine' have been devised by the society to affirm the inferiority of female sex and create a consciousness among women that they are naturally better suited to 'domestic' roles. Simon de Beauvoir's statement in *The Second Sex* that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (295) stresses how the pressure of society necessitates this transformation. Tellingly, the concept of gender as performance brought forward by Judith Butler allows for 'gender trouble,' a conscious attempt to subvert the automatized gender equations thereby questioning the normalized meanings and institutions.

Today, 'body' is a seminal category not only for physical sciences but for Philosophy, Humanities, and Social Sciences as well. Within feminism and gender studies, the body has occupied a key position in a wide range of debates, including men's

control of women's bodies as a key means of subordination; critiques of dichotomous thinking; and in debates about essentialism and the theorizing of difference and diversity. This concept has been strongly critiqued or questioned. Women have been objectified and alienated as social subjects partly through the denigration and containment of the female body (Grosz xiv). The body has remained a 'conceptual blind spot' in western philosophical deliberations and contemporary feminist theory. In gender studies, the body is dealt in three ways: the body as nature, the body as socially constructed, and embodiment (Pilcher and Whelehan 6). The first approach that deals with the body as nature is a traditional approach to the body, in which it is seen as a biological entity that determines the difference between genders. Shulamith Firestone, a radical feminist, regards the reproductive functions within the body as the defining element and proposes that in order to eliminate the differences, the reproductive functions have to take place outside of a woman's body. However, other activists as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray consider reproductive activities as a source of power and superiority over men.

In the seventeenth century, philosopher René Descartes formulated a dualistic conception of the body as separate from the mind often known as 'cartesian duality.' The body, according to Descartes, was simply a machine, much like a car. It was driven intellectually and spiritually by the mind, hence Descartes's well-known dictum *Cogito ergo sum* meaning 'I think therefore I am' (46). This division between mind and body is patently gendered. Not all historical conceptions view the body as equally 'inescapable.' Susan Bordo attests that the Greeks viewed the soul and body as inseparable except through death. Descartes believed that with the right philosophical method we can transcend the epistemological limitations of the body (4). The mind has been associated

with positive terms such as reason, rationality, and masculinity whereas the body has been associated with negative terms such as irrationality, nature, and femininity. Men are thought to be able to transcend their bodies, or at least have their bodily needs met by others, whereas women are thought to be tied to their bodies because of their emotions, menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth (Johnston and Longhurst 97). Feminists have argued that dualism is frequently gendered, with women cast in the role of the body, in Beauvoir's words "weighed down by everything peculiar to it." In contrast, a man casts himself as the "inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit." In dualism, the body is the negative term, and if a woman is a body, then women form that negativity, "distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death" (Bordo 5). Linda Alcoff attests that mind-body dualism is a central feature of the male reason. She quotes Plato, "the god-like rational soul should rule over the slave-like mortal body" (14). "The body is mind, and the body, the personal and social, and more: in Freud's term, it *is body- ego*" (Pile 185). Thus, the body has multiple layers of meaning; the body is not only an individual project but has social and political connotations attached to it.

Furthermore, the body has an uncertain place in Deleuze's work. "It is its kind of Erewhon: simultaneously 'now here' and 'nowhere'" (Guillaume and Hughes 1). Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari proposed a vision of the unconscious as a factory and the body as an assemblage of machines producing desire. The human body, they note:

is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said the *id*. Everywhere it is machines—real ones, not figurative ones: machines

driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections (*Anti* 1).

They view ‘body’ simultaneously as perception and action. Body is seen as a unitary and dynamic entity deeply involved in the world. That is, any theory of body is at the very same time a theory of such a body into the world; there is nobody outside the world (Cimatti 3). Further, the body suffers from the imperialism of language (Deleuze and Guattari, *Thousand* 65). It is formed in signification and thus the body is always a spoken body, a signed body, a marked body. In particular, according to Deleuze and Guattari, a body is not the sum of its own somewhat ‘static’ properties, quite the contrary, a body is what it can do, it is what it actually does. They elaborate on a new concept to characterize the body, the concept of ‘virtuality.’ A classical body is such a body, which can do what it potentially can do. Every temporal body has a limited set of dispositions, attitudes, habits, and behavior. But every actual body also has a virtual dimension: plenitude of potential behaviors. They call the aggregate of such potentials as the “body without organs.” The full body without organs is “schizophrenia as a clinical entity” (*Anti* 310). That is, a body is somewhat trapped into the very Aristotelian couple of potency and act (Cimatti 6). Probably, what they “effectively do is to reconfigure the body as the sum of its capacities, which is not the same as reducing it to its functions...” (Buchanan 75). This idea of body views the human body to be in constant interaction with the larger abstract bodies, social and physical ever caught in the process of producing, produced, and becoming.

Seemingly, the contemporary Western view of the body views body and mind as braided together, affecting each other’s functioning. Further, the Indian approach of the

human energy system views the body as 'gross' and 'subtle.' This concept based on *chakras* ("wheels of energy"), subtle bodies and the aura views human beings as made up of layers of vibrating energy each of which has their specific vibration and purpose. The gross physical body is visible to us, whereas the subtle, energy-laden body is invisible. The Hindu yoga epistemology believes in seven *chakras*, Jaina scriptures mention nine *chakras* and Buddhist scriptures find dozens of *chakras* (Osho 1). Presumably, this notion views the body as a network of energy systems. At another level, the body has two dimensions: the phenomenal or subjective and the objective. The subjective side belongs to the individual realm whereas the objective body is located in society. The subjective body is visible and cognizable by the senses. The abstract states of mind as feelings, anxieties, and emotions belong to the objective body. The social world frames and constructs the objective body (Leder 131). Both these sides are linked, yet distinct. Mary Douglas explored the social body as "a highly restricted medium of expression" and a key to the relationship of self, society, and cosmos (173). Victor Turner pushed the primacy of the body further by arguing that it is the human organism itself, and not society, that is the *fons et origo* ("source and origin") of all classification ("Body" 123). Erving Goffman, in turn, examined the molding of the body into a nearly mnemonic encapsulation of the cultural principles that organize society. The body serves as a link between the interactions between individuals and society. The body also places itself as "the foremost of all metaphors" around which a society is organized (C. Bell, *Ritual: Theory* 118). Thus, if the physical body is the begetter of a larger social apparatus, then the complexities of society can be better understood by inspecting bodily configurations.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the distinction between sex and gender began to be questioned by feminist theorists such as Diana Fuss, Moira Gatens, and Elizabeth Grosz. They persuasively argued that the distinction between sex and gender (between biology and social inscription) does not hold. It is not possible to say where sex stops and gender starts or vice versa. The body can never be extracted from the social mesh; sex and gender are always inextricably linked. Gender writes itself not on but through bodies. Within the 'embodiment' theory, the body is seen "simultaneously both as a natural, physical and as produced through cultural, discursive practices" (Pilcher and Whelehan 9). R. W Connel identifies a set of cultural practices which, in combination, act to 'negate' (or minimize) the similarities between the bodies of women and men, by exaggerating their differences. Clothing and accessories are a means of achieving such a negation of the body. She vindicates the view that the "body, without ceasing to be the body, is taken in hand and is transformed in social practice" (Pilcher and Whelehan 9). This concept of equality takes us to the concept of difference that lies at the heart of feminism. Whether men or women are treated as same, irrespective of their differences or their differences be recognized and accepted is a central question posed before gender studies. Arguably, feminism is against essentialism which assumes "all manifestations of gender difference as innate and transcultural and historical" (Pilcher and Whelehan 41). Gayatri Spivak advocated a kind of 'strategic essentialism' as she posits that the essence of a thing can be 'positioned' and 'necessary to' understand the position of women in this world (43). Also, Judith Butler's model of gender as performative and perpetually in transition was unmistakably against the essentialist notion of identity.

The body is located in its socio-cultural context. Body and space are inextricably related and the bodies in action are an important key in understanding the space in which it is located. Drew Leder writes in *The Absent Body*:

It is through the bodily surface that I first engage the world. Only because my eyes and ears lie on the surface of my body are they capable of disclosing the events taking place around me. My hands, in order to explore and work upon the world, must extend outward from my corporeal “extremities.” My expressive face can form a medium of communication only because it is available to the Other’s gaze...The surface is where self meets what is other than self. (11)

She argues that each of our senses works in different ways and open to a world around us. She contends that “my being-in-the-world depends upon my body’s self-effacing transitivity.” Feelings as hunger, thirst, and sexual cravings are not only limited to internal forces, they have several manifestations in the external body as well. Thus, the body has the “power of transcending its confines” (Leder 15). She calls this phenomenon of projection of lived body ‘ecstatic’ meaning to ‘stand out.’ The lived body is not a definitive entity but a medium to sense the world. To incorporate a tool is to redesign one’s extended body until its extremities expressly mesh with the world (Leder 72). We reshape our bodily abilities according to the environment around us. This is true as people belonging to different physical environments have varied bodily activities. Thus, the interactions with the world make certain changes in the appearance and capabilities of our body. Drew Leder argues that even man and technologies and tools are designed to suit this interaction. One end of a tool is designed to suit human anatomy and movements and the other end is suited to fit the physical world. Elaine Scarry’s comparison of a

human dwelling to a body is poignant in this context. She points out, “the very house in which one dwells is both a reconstruction of the surrounding world to fit the body and enlargement of our physical structure” (qtd. in Leder 73). For most of our lives, our body goes unnoticed as it is always in a process of self-effacement.

Another question in this regard is how the body is perceived in this world. Feministic studies always link gaze to desire, as the body is felt like an accessory or rather a commodity. Rebecca Schneider affirms, “Desire must appear as unmarked, as human nature. But, like commodities themselves, it is nature designed, packaged, and sold—marketed, outfitted... as if by some great accident of God: desire is masculinized; the desired, feminized” (5). Since this desire is always placed as ‘insatiable,’ the female body is placed as ‘impossibility.’ Contemporary feminist thinkers insist that “women are the done to, not the doers; that men and their desires bear the responsibility; and female obedience to the dictates of fashion is better conceptualized as bondage than choice” (Bordo 22). Rebecca Schneider studies the explicit performances by female artists who use their bodies, both as a prop and a stage, through which they re-enact social dramas and traumas which have “arbitrated cultural differentiations between truth and illusion, reality and dream, fact and fantasy, natural and unnatural, essential and constructed” (5). They make a deliberate attempt to disrupt the conventional notions of viewing the body and aims at a re-scripting of the body. She alleges that it is not the content, but the frame within which it is set that decides the nature of a work of art.

For Michel Foucault “bodies, and the social organization of bodies, are immediately implicated in any scene or site of knowledge” (*Power* 22). The body was conceived as either an unsophisticated machine that took in data without interpreting it,

or it was considered an obstacle to knowledge in throwing up emotions, feelings, needs, desires, all of which interfered with the attainment of truth (*Power* 15). Foucault's theory speaks of the body as space where various discourses conflict as well as a site of power. Foucault holds that "bodies are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes" (*Power* 226). Foucault posits a history of the modern regime of social control, in other words, how the body is controlled by power. In the west, there occurred a shift in the patterns of punishment by the nineteenth century, it transformed into a 'gentler' punishment, more or less aimed at the refinement of the soul, which nevertheless included elaborate procedures to regulate the body making it docile. Foucault termed this new system 'discipline,' and argued that the move away from torture was "not to punish less, but to punish better; to punish with an attenuated severity perhaps, but in order to punish with more universality and necessity; to insert the power to punish more deeply into the social body" (*Discipline* 81). Professedly, three technologies enable the production of docile bodies: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination. The first is inherent in the model of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon; the second method of normalizing judgment is a compulsive and extensive ranking and rating. "The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes" (*Discipline* 182). The final means, examination, combines the first two into a "normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish...in it are combined the ceremony of power and the form of the experiment, the deployment of force and the establishment of truth" (*Discipline* 184). He terms these regulatory practices of modern states through

“an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” as biopower (*History* 184). Thus, discipline does not merely evaluate individuals according to norms; it also breaks individual bodies down into basic elements to better evaluate and train them to obey this norm (Punday 512). It seems that for Foucault, the formation of knowledge and the exercise of power are intrinsically linked.

Third-wave feminism realized the need to study men in a new way, so that gender roles and sexual relations would be seen in a new light and questions the naturalness of gender itself as a binary opposition and how one gender became dominant over other. It imagined the human body as itself a “politically inscribed entity, its physiology, and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control—from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy...” (Bordo 21). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the body as “the vehicle of being in the world” (82). Making any body explicit as socially marked, and foregrounding the historical, political, cultural, and economic issues involved in its marking is the agenda set by such feminist explicit body works. In other words, they aim at a “binary terrorism-or strategic implosion of binaried distinctions” (18). Furthermore, once the primary objective of feminist studies was the deconstruction of phallogocentric narratives of male-dominated disciplines, but new feminist criticism “turned to its narratives, finding them reductionist, totalizing, inadequately nuanced, valorizing of gender difference, unconsciously racist, and elitist” (Bordo 216). To suit this purpose, they are seeking new tools and penetrating fresher domains making the discipline retain its appeal and import even in the changed scenario.

Judith Butler, a sterling presence in the field of gender studies, is lauded for her avante-garde theories that dismantle the wonted ideas of sexuality and gender. She posits that a unified, whole and universal woman's experience is unfeasible as women do not compose a group with common interests and attitudes. Hence, feminism must aim at an open-endedness to embrace the multi-faceted nature of a woman's experience. Butler argues that feminist approaches have failed to an extent as they reinforced a strictly binary view of gender, dividing them into male and female, allowing no space for variant categories. Though they denounced the popular dictum 'Biology is destiny,' they inadvertently replaced culture as inevitable. Butler is clearly influenced by J. L Austin's theories when she defines performative acts in *Bodies That Matter* as forms of authoritative speech where most performatives are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power (95). She suggests that performance is "not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production..." (*Bodies* 96). Thus, for Butler, the ritualistic 'repetition' of 'gender performances' have an ongoing outcome. They contribute to the 'naturalizing' of bodies, making the 'cultural fiction' of gender appear credible and real, rather than being a corporeal (or bodily) 'style' or 'enactment,' a constitution of meaning (Salih 8). Evidently, it is a threat or constraint that fuels and validates a performance, and it is through repeated actions one achieve identity. This idea reinforces gender as an 'achievement' rather than an unalterable truth, synchronously ascribing an agency to the performer in fixing their identity.

Butler expounds on the performative aspects of gender employing phenomenology. She cites Merleau-Ponty's reflections *In the Phenomenology of Perception*, that the body is a 'historical idea' rather than 'a natural species.' She states that Simone de Beauvoir extends the very same idea when she in *The Second Sex* claims that "women, and by extension, any gender, is a historical situation rather than a natural fact" (qtd. in *Bodies* 98). For Butler, gender is a fluid variable that is relative and expeditiously evolving. She attacks the general notion of sex as a fixed biological entity and assumes it to be socially constructed. Butler argues that sex (male, female) is seen to cause gender (masculine, feminine) which is seen to cause desire (towards the other gender). This is seen as a kind of continuum. She writes, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" ("Performative" 25). If gender is "understood as constituted" it can be "constituted differently" (*Bodies* 98). Butler calls for a 'gender trouble,' a conscious subversion of gendered identities. Identity is not something connected to the essence, but that which develops gradually through one's actions and interactions, or performance; hence it is free-floating. In the notion of gender as performance, the performance creates the performer and has no existence before or outside the performance. And curiously, if gender is a performative it can be performed in different modes giving rise to diverse identities. This notion evidently unsettles the long array of discourses that presupposed an essential, authentic human temperament.

Judith Butler relies in *Gender Trouble* on Foucault's theory presented in *Discipline and Punish*, which challenges the relations of body and soul. Foucault argued that oppression imposed on prisoners is not internalized but is rather imprinted or marked

on their bodies. Methods of 'discipline' and 'punish' act on the body and form the image of the recalcitrant inner soul. This image regulates and justifies the actions of power upon the body. Foucault's argument, adopted by Judith Butler, is that the soul is the prison of the body, and not the other way around as was widely held in Western culture (Salih 50). By this Foucault means to argue that discourse formations that deal with the human soul and define it essentially operate through the body and on the body, shaping it and marking it with the traces of the alleged 'soul' which hides somewhere deep inside.

For Butler, gender has been a 'burning' issue at stake and attacks the general notion that women are always already punished, castrated, and is subject to penis envy. Gender is a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being' (*Gender* 25). It is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized (*Undoing* 111). She argues that sexual difference is not the primary difference and that it is no more primary than racial or ethnic differences. It is an acceptable idea that all humans must be born from a father and a mother, but feels that sperm donors, or one night-standers or even rapists put the category of "father" in crisis (10). Reasonably, for Butler, interpellation, action, and creation are cardinal steps in the gender constitution. And relying solely on sexuality to categorize humans would be primitive and illogical as we currently witness a proliferation of sexual identities and relationships. Further, if gender is the cultural meaning that the sexed body assumes, gender cannot originate in a linear progression from sex. If gender being constructed is independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body and vice versa (Butler,

Gender 9). She presumes that gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on pre-given sex, gender is also the very apparatus of production by which sexes themselves are established (11). Favorably, biological differences do not stand in the way of achieving gender; female, the male or transgender experience is no longer exclusive, but mutual drawing from a collective.

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, and agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where ‘doing’ and ‘being done to’ become equivocal. She argues that the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, “my body is and is not mine” (*Undoing* 21). Butler writes that Beauvoir feels that one ‘become’ a woman under a cultural compulsion, the body becomes either a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as an active instrument through which cultural meanings are produced for itself (*Gender* 12). Butler also underlines Luce Irigaray’s argument that women constitute a paradox, if not a contradiction, within the discourse of identity itself. Women are the ‘sex’ which is not ‘one.’ Women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence, and opacity. Within a language that rests on univocal signification, the female sex constitutes the ‘uncontainable’ and ‘undesignatable.’ Thus, Butler feels that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, and a construction that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler deals with the question of the materiality of the body. She feels that the notion of gender performativity is a confusing idea:

For if I were to argue that genders are performative, that could mean that I thought that one woke in the morning, perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night. Such a willful and instrumental subject, one who decides on its gender, is clearly not its gender from the start and fails to realize that its existence is already decided by gender. (1)

This calls into question the idea of choice in gender. “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, *Gender* 43). The category of ‘sex’ is normative; it is what Foucault has called a ‘regulatory ideal.’ In this sense, then, ‘sex’ not only functions as a norm but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs. It has the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, ‘sex’ is an ideal construct that is forcibly materialized through time (Butler, *Bodies* 1). Gender performativity is intrinsically related to this conception of materialization. In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. In this sense, what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material; materiality being the effect of power. As a locus of cultural interpretations, “the body is a material reality which has already been located and defined within a social context” (*Bodies* 28). Thus, for her, the material body can be apprehended only through discourse. The body, as Butler puts it in her introduction to *Bodies That Matter*, is “a process of materialization that stabilizes overtime to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and

surface we call matter” (5). Sarah Salih feels that Butler is not refuting the ‘existence’ of matter, but she insists that matter can have no status outside a discourse that is always constitutive, always interpellative, always performative (80). Thus, the body for Butler is a linguistic construction. It is for this reason that ‘sex’ is placed within inverted commas, in order to signal its status as signification and its vulnerability to resignification (Salih 80). Thus, there is no fixity to gender; it is open to change and re-change. The term ‘materialization’ encapsulates the idea that the body is a temporal process repeatedly taking place in a language that is itself material. “A boy/girl’s sex or gender is identified through a process of interpellation, mostly when it is born. ‘It’s a girl/boy!’” (Butler, *Bodies* 77). Biological organs as penis and vagina, that typically denote sex are present in the body while birth, but it is a performative interpellation that categorizes the gender. In the ‘mirror stage’ proposed by Lacan, an infant acquires the notion of its body as separate from the outer environment and its mother’s body. Till that point “the infant’s bodily self-perception has been chaotic, scrambled, in pieces, what Lacan calls a ‘homelette,’ but after seeing its reflection in the mirror it becomes aware of the margins of its body (Mirzoeff, *Visual* 90). Butler argues that it is the language that constitutes the body as the mirror stage coincides with the infant’s entry into language or the symbolic order. In other words, language does not simply name a body that pre-exists, but in the act of interpellation constitutes the body and its identity.

Further, Butler’s ideas have profusely inspired queer theorists; the major being ‘melancholic heterosexuality,’ which can act as the cause of ‘gender trouble.’ Butler posits that heterosexuality requires homosexuality in order to define itself and maintain its stability. She writes; “[H]omosexuality emerges as a desire which must be produced

in order to remain repressed, heterosexuality produces intelligible homosexuality and then renders it unintelligible by prohibiting it” (Butler, *Gender* 77). Sara Salih observes this idea that homosexuality is ‘produced’ in order to maintain the coherence of heterosexuality is attractive but problematic, since it risks pathologizing homosexuality and consigning it to a secondary position in relation to heterosexuality – a product of a heterosexualizing law (60). Again, sex is not the same as sexuality. Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, has changed the way world perceived sexuality, and it established homosexuality as an identity rather than a perversion. Homosexuality has long been condemned as pathology and ‘deviance.’ Foucault contended that sexuality should not be regarded as a force of nature that our ancestors censored and distorted, and which needs to be liberated within us but sexuality, like all other human states, is produced in discourse (During 185). Foucault’s ideas on sexuality have been greatly welcomed by queer theorists and his notion that the “body is immersed in discourse and given meaning by it” (*History* 129) led to its development. In addition, Foucault’s notion of ‘heteronormativity’ points to the fact that in our society the concepts of the normal and heterosexual are almost impossible to separate. It also indicated how heterosexuality almost invisibly supports several other norms; it is the key to social acceptance and remains one of the mainstays of family values. That is, heteronormativity as a concept makes it clear that compulsory heterosexuality is socially invisible because it has embedded itself into the culture’s sense of the normal across so many registers and formations that alternatives look like pathologies rather than viable alternatives (186).

Pointedly, queer theory seeks to subvert the process of normalization in favor of heterosexuality, and rather than hoping a welcome into the mainstream gender, they call

for a celebration of their difference. Lesbians and gay men, transvestites, and persons of indeterminate sex challenge the absolute nature of the binary opposition. The Intersex Society of North America (ISNA) of 1996 defines intersex as “individuals born with anatomy or physiology which differs from cultural ideals of male and female” (Ekins and King 170). This formula regards a purely biological definition of sex as impossible. At the same time, it challenges ideas of culture as a received tradition that shapes identity. The cultural ideal of the perfect human body denies people of intersex the very right to exist. They are in essence, fighting to retain their own body, in the original way it had been created from its inception. They are fighting for acceptance of their bodies without alteration. INSA brings attention to the practices of body alterations as Intersex Genital Mutilation (IGM). In the name of tradition, to curb female sexuality, in some societies, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is performed during which women are subjected to the excision of the clitoris and labia and even a practice known as infibulation in which the vaginal opening is sewn shut apart from a small opening. Such cases are reported all around the world, not only in primitive tribal societies but alarmingly in communities that proclaim to be progressive and educated; Kerala being one. If culture is defined as inherited tradition, these traditions too must be accepted, which cannot be.

Judith Butler’s understanding of human sexuality is immense, her notions not dogmatic but broad enough to embrace the diversities. Rather than viewing humans as helpless or passive receptors of values and identities created by distant extraneous factors, Butler posited the body as the tool of cultural production, a site of perpetual performances that ultimately defined its destiny. The next section is a discussion of

pollution and taboo ideas of society, its connectedness to sexuality, particularly focusing on the menstruation taboos and its patterns.

Pollution and Taboo

Pollution and taboo ideas play a significant role in creating gender separations. Sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world. Mircea Eliade states that the man of the traditional societies is admittedly a *homo religious* (15). Mary Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* asserts that pollution ideas work in the life of society at two levels; instrumental and expressive. At the first level, we find people trying to influence one another's behavior. Beliefs reinforce social pressures. Similarly, "the ideal order of society is guarded by dangers which threaten transgressors" (Douglas 1). The fear of falling into profanity checks man from indulging in such 'dangerous' activities. "The whole universe is harnessed to men's attempts to force one another into good citizenship" (Douglas 2). These pollution ideas are cleverly planted in human minds and any sort of lapse is unacceptable and criminal aiding in framing the absolute moral code of the society. Sacred things and places must be protected from defilement. Thus, profanity and divinity must be compartmentalized stringently, allowing no space for mutual contiguity.

Douglas famously notes: "The unclear is the unclean" (97). Patriarchal society still views female experiences with skepticism, for it, these experiences constitute the incomprehensible, hence unequivocally hailed as 'polluting.' In certain tribal societies, an unborn child and mother are seen as polluting. For example, a Lele woman while pregnant does not approach a sick person, as it may worsen his/her condition. Among the Nyakyusa tribe "A pregnant woman is thought to reduce the quantity of grain she

approaches because the fetus in her is voracious and snatches it” (Douglas 96). In the Enga tribe, another conspicuous pollution idea is seen. The young boys are advised to shun female company as women are inherently polluting. Only married men can enter into the sexual union as they only get special remedies to purify them and preserve their virility. Even so, they reduce the sexual contact to a minimum, limiting it only for procreation. Douglas notes that the two dominant beliefs in their culture are the superiority of the male principle and its vulnerability to female influence (148). Menstrual blood and miscarriage are equally polluting agents.

Female sexuality is feared by most societies. If a man marries a woman of the plains Arapesh, he observes elaborate precautions to “cool off her more dangerous sexuality.” The wife is allowed to remain in his house, and they enter into sexual contact only after several months. Then he watches the signs if everything is safe and secure, he continues the relationship, if not he “abstain from relationship with this dangerous, oversexed woman still many more moons, lest the part of his potency, his own physical strength, the ability to feed others, which he most cherishes, should be permanently injured” (Douglas 149). Also, in the Enga tribe of Papua New Guinea, not only women, the sexual activity itself is a means of corruption and danger. Anyone coming from sexual intercourse should not go near sick or newborn babies as they can harm or even kill them. The wife had the duty of cleaning her husband and herself after every sexual contact. For this purpose, every woman keeps a pot of water hidden in the grass outside the village. Making matters worse, if a man touched it accidentally, he is believed to lose his virility. If the wife cooked food without ablution, he would again lose his virility. Thus, we discern virility to be a vulnerable fragile quality and a much cherished one.

Further, a menstruating woman should not light the fire, but she can cook food, seeking the help of a friend. And she should not enter the forest as it can wreck any enterprise of men in the forest. They depend on the forest for their living and hence it must be protected at any cost. In such societies, all rituals had to be protected from female pollution, and hence, women were generally excluded from cult affairs. The male officiants abstained from sexual intercourse the night before the ritual. The same applied to warfare, hunting, and tapping palms for wine. Similarly, women should abstain from sexual intercourse before planting ground nuts or maize, fishing, making salt, or pottery. These applied for men and women as well. Also during certain junctures, sexual abstinence was prescribed for the whole village. Douglas states that in such a society women were treated as “simultaneously as persons and as the currency of male transactions. Males and females are set off as belonging to distinct mutually hostile spheres” (153). Ironically enough, though considered as an agent of ‘pollution,’ women were not discharged of their duties but instead supplemented with means and solutions to ‘protect’ others from their ‘contagious’ presence.

Another polluting agent is menstrual blood that can “sicken a man and cause persistent vomiting, ‘kill’ his blood so that it turns black, corrupt his vital juices so that his skin darkens and hangs in folds as his flesh wastes, permanently dull his wits, and eventually lead to a slow decline and death” (Douglas 148). Menstrual blood down the ages is seen both as polluted and polluting in most societies. The *Book of Leviticus* taught that menstruation made women ‘unclean’ and that their menstrual blood was a sign of moral as well as a physical impurity. This impurity was considered to be contagious, and anyone coming into contact with it was in need of ‘cleansing.’ The menstruating women

themselves were to be ‘put apart seven days,’ and whosoever touched them would “be unclean until the even.” This idea that menstruation was a sign of women’s sinfulness was reinforced by popular interpretations of the Biblical *Book of Genesis*, which held that “the pain of childbirth, and, by extension, the discomfort of the menses, was a reflection of the punishment of Eve for her *Original Sin*” (Newton 20). Tellingly, to what extent these religious testaments had a role in drilling misogynist ideas into the society is imaginable.

Furthermore, Aristotle contrasted women’s sexual difference to men. He saw men’s souls as more active than women’s and ‘concluded that they [men] add more active energy to their blood, transforming it into sperm. As sperm can leave the body with great energy, he further concluded that sperm has more force than menstrual blood (Newton 27). Frazer in his *The Golden Bough* (1890) explores menstrual taboos that describe menstruation as a negative and polluting force: “The general effect of these rules is to keep [menstruating women] suspended, so to say, between heaven and earth...being shut off from both the earth and from the sun, she can poison neither of these great sources of life by her deadly contagion” (Newton 34). India, being a traditional society is replete with such rituals of pollution. Though they vary between different caste and religious groups, several similar patterns can be noted among them. Curiously, the old testamental notion of seven days seclusion is not an exclusive one; we can trace several such rituals around the world. The Hindu notions of pollution are governed by epic text *Manava Dharmasastra* (*Manu’s Treatise on Dharma*) believed to have written around 200 BC. According to the text, the twelve bodily fluids that are deemed dirty are “oil, semen, blood, bone marrow, urine, excrement, snot, ear-wax, phlegm, tears, the discharge

from the eyes, and the sweat.” The treatise considers semen too as polluting in contrast to the western view but validates that “when a man has shed his semen he is cleaned by washing; a sexual connection involving semen afflicts a man with inauspiciousness for three days” (Doniger and Smith 150). Noticeably, this concept of male pollution is not so popularized as female pollution and most often conveniently ignored. In Nepal, a *chhaupadi* or menstruation hut is built near homes to keep the ‘polluting’ menstruating women. Similarly, a menstruating woman in Kerala, in the past was forced to spend seven whole days in seclusion, in a dark room; she would be given food on regular intervals in utensils kept exclusively for her. She must not have any access to religious ongoing; additionally, they were prohibited from touching sacred plants as tulsi or lemon tree, lest it would be dried up due to the catastrophic menstrual heat of the women’s body. Thus, she was kept away from indulging in any kind of social activity during these days. She was incorporated into normal life only after a ceremonial ablution. This aspect pressed them to be absent for a few days and the male-dominated society has devised this as a tool to make her absent from the mainstream forever. In modern times, this custom has died out as it has become a practical impossibility. Such notions of pollution are also connected to life phases as birth as well as death.

Judy Grahn in her book *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* (1993) develops the ‘metaformic theory’ that posits menstruation to be “at the base of our distinctly human cultural habits, including our religions, sciences, and household arts and crafts.” She presupposes that ancestral females possessed a ‘metaformic consciousness’ which is the knowledge that their menses is synchronized with the lunar cycle, “giving them a means of identifying with an exterior time pattern. This gradually

pulled their minds into a radically different consciousness than that of other primates. Recognition of the synchronized cycles, combined with the danger posed by blood flow on the open plains, led to timed seclusions producing rituals.” She asserts that the Sanskrit term *ritu* meaning menstruation is the root of the word ritual. This leads to her theory that all human knowledge derived from rituals is constructed and held in forms called ‘metaforms,’ meaning “embodied forms of knowledge with menstrual roots or components” (53). This bold argument precisely places menstruation at the key center of human epistemology and praxis centered on rituals.

Foucault argued that power does not flow down from individuals, but is held and exercised within networks. Within these networks, social control can be exercised through the observation and sequestration of problematic individuals and behavior. In Foucault’s terms, bodily functions, such as menstruation are ‘confined’ within appropriate boundaries, and kept there by discourses that compel us to carry out activities in their proper place and to do the accepted thing. Mary Douglas draws a parallelism between society and the body:

The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva, and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society and to see the powers and dangers to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.

(115)

Douglas argues that the body, as an organic bounded system, provides a powerful analogy of the social system. For Douglas, the body is traced with the values of culture: the contours of the body are the contours of society: each reproduces the 'nature' of both the powers and dangers credited to social structure. Even so, fears for the flesh commonly cluster around sexuality (157). It is sexuality and, in prevailing economies of meaning and power, women's bodies which tend to bear the burden of these fears. Thus, it is female purity which is carefully policed, and women's sexual transgressions are brutally punished (125). She also demonstrates that sex is given a special status in society and that institutions of power commonly rely on sexual differentiation, where men hold the power, regulate the law, and control meaning (138). Thus, substances that breach the natural bounds of the body, such as menstrual blood, are symbolically coded as 'pollutants' and perceived as possible threats to social order. Blood is a powerful ritual symbol with deep emotional resonance because it is associated both with the physical experience of the color red and inherently to the relational experiences such as maternity, war, hunting, kinship, etc. In an introduction to a special journal issue on blood and relationality, Janet Carsten expounds a 'theory of blood.' She states that blood has some special material qualities such as liquidity and fungibility that lend it an "unusual capacity for accruing layers of symbolic resonance." Though the values associated with blood may vary with culture, the special qualities of blood and its range of resonances with "a heightened propensity to evoke emotional responses" are the same (Carsten 18). Although blood is widely considered a fundamental part of the body, associated with the life itself, it is expected to be mostly contained within the body's frontiers. When it crosses these barriers it is a cause of concern. Daniela Tonelli Manica in her article,

“(In)visible Blood: Menstrual Performances and Body Art,” points to the general perception in the society that menstrual blood must be concealed, creating a demand for sanitary products that make menstrual blood ‘disappear’ as it is absorbed by devices made of cotton (20). Bodily fluids abound in the human body, but it is often the female body which is the most commonly associated with ‘pollution.’ A male-chauvinistic society circulating such bigoted notions through secular texts and a patriarchal society embracing them to the present day come as no surprise, but what is alarming is the fact that these notions are so internalized by women themselves that they too accept these taboos as the truth of nature. These taboo ideas have no place in Bharani; it revels in the breaking of these rules, which is discussed in detail in the following section.

Gender in Bharani Festival

Women in Kerala society have always been tied upon by the mores of right and wrong and they are denied the right to express themselves, especially in matters concerning their sexuality. Usually, even while performing for a goddess, women do not participate as men do, and their roles are limited to chores that do not break the accepted codes of propriety. Men, whereas, in female guises identify with the goddess, they experience a relative merging of their spirit into the greater spirit of the Bhagavathi, and they eventually become Bhagavathi herself. This aspect is explained by Sarah Caldwell by exploring the etymological meaning of the words *tullal* and *tullich*. She lists the meaning as, “jumping, leaping, hopping, skipping; prance, prancing; fretting and fuming with auger; tremor; involuntary motion as of demoniac possession; dance; a kind of stage-play with the accompaniment of rhythmic dance and music, usually performed in temples” and of *tullich* as “an unruly or ungovernable sort of woman; a

flirt; an arrogant woman [slang usage]” (“Kali” 209). While *tullal* is a neutral word meaning ‘jumping,’ ‘dancing’ etc., *tullich*, the feminine version of this word is loaded with a series of negative connotations. This is applied for a woman who behaves against the established norms of a society, who displays unacceptable behavioral patterns and follows loose moral standards. Another word similar to this is *koothich*, a Malayalam slang word which presumably originated from the term *koothu* meaning ‘play,’ ‘drama’ etc. It evidently belongs to the genre of curse words. It is amusing to note that this word is a feminine noun for which no masculine counterpart exists.

The unmitigated, unintervened presence of male lends them the ‘power’ and they dominated in the ritual practices of Bhagavathi. For it, they had to make necessary adjustments. Caldwell notes:

The performer enacting the role of Bhadrakali in the ritual dramas of Kerala dons an entirely female costume (with an emphasis on prominent breasts) and a stylized female demeanor, including voice modulation, posture, and movements. The goddess’s oracular representative, (the *velichapadu*, is also clearly if more subtly feminine in his dress and behavior. (“Kali” 210)

Thus, it is evident that dancing, jumping, and play by women in public were not appreciated in earlier days. This used to be the case when high caste women were not allowed to display themselves in front of a public. To what extent these codes of behavior infiltrated to the lower castes women is worth pondering. They toiled in the fields along with their male counterparts and shared equal space in daily life. Regarding the dress code, they were prohibited from covering their breasts, thus living in perpetual shame and

indignation. They seem to little regard these high caste mores and participated in rituals with equal vigor and enthusiasm. This is clear in the Kodungallur Bharani Festival where thousands of female oracles dance, 'abuse,' and sing to placate their Bhagavathi. A similar performance is seen in the *tullal* dance of mad women in the Chottanikkara Bhagavathi Temple. Caldwell notes, "All rules of female propriety were controverted by the wild screaming and shameless jumping of the women, their matted hair flying about loose, dirt clinging to their faces, obscenities pouring from their angry tongues" ("Kali" 208). As mad women, they were outside the circle of propriety prescribed for the normal women; their madness gave them the freedom to break the frameworks and hence did not have to suppress their instincts. The lack of control displayed by all these undesirable female models centers around the double taboos against anger and sexuality (Caldwell, "Kali" 211). They display behaviors that violate the stereotypical notion of a Malayali lady. Freedom, more or less the same is savored by female oracles participating in Bharani. It is another fact that the high class society does not welcome these 'anti-social' behaviors and they are looked down upon as 'mad' women. Sarah Caldwell notes that the oracles are 'exclusively male.' Nobody seems to have questioned the appropriateness of a feminine force entering the body of a male oracle; probably the division of body happened in a later stage. The body becomes a site where their past, present, and future interplay. They use their body as a tool, as an offering in itself; their blood being one among them. It might be the helplessness of the destitute, their gnawing awareness of lack that in an ultimate gesture of sacrifice propels them to offer their own body to the deity. In this social drama, the performer is real and his performance 'live' with flesh and blood.

Caldwell notes that the dramatic rituals that celebrate the Goddess Bhagavathi in Kerala temples clearly are modeled around images of female sexuality, with both its promises and its perceived dangers. She notes that in *Mudiyettu* women have no direct participation. She negates the existence of matriarchy and explains that the ritual roles were a means to channel Tamil concept of *ananku*. Ananku can be understood as the early forerunner of the concept of *Shakti* (power) which is associated with females in the Siva-Sakthi concept of Hinduism. The union of male-female powers resulted in the creation of the universe. Saktas who worship the supreme deity exclusively as a female principle conceive “the Mother Goddess as the personification of primordial energy and the source of all divine as well as cosmic evolution” (Bhattacharya 13). In primitive thought, menstruation was regarded, as a process of the same nature as childbirth. In *tantras* for the same reason, special importance is attached to menstrual blood (Thomson qtd. in Bhattacharya 17). He notes that vermillion stands for menstrual blood and mother goddesses from Mohenjodaro, Venus of Willendorf, Egyptian, Maltese, Cypriote, and Danubian are similarly painted red (Bhattacharya 17). Without Sakthi, Siva is incomplete. Holly Baker Reynolds defines it as “a malevolent, dangerous power” inhering in both the natural world and the bodies of humans and deities, particularly female. This power residing in the parts of female breasts, loins, and genitals constitute her sexual energy which if uncontrolled can cause much destruction (qtd. in Caldwell, *Encountering* 254). Probably, this power is manifested in the possession performances of Bhagavathi in which the oracles are in a frenzied state endowed with supernatural powers of prophecy and cursing. Bhagavathi is always associated with nature/earth and these powers are present in the natural cycles as well. Caldwell connects rituals like *Teyyam* in

Northern Kerala and fire-walking cults in Southern India and Srilanka to these practices. With Brahminical onslaught women were pushed to the peripheries and silencing them was a part of their agenda to have domination over all walks of life. The exact means by which they achieved it is still an enigma, but the current status of women in Kerala as well as in most parts of India reveals that they have been successful in making women accept their 'secondary roles' in life.



Fig. 3. 1. Jayan, Nimisha K. Female oracles dancing in accompaniment with *chenda melam*. 27 Mar. 2017. *Private collection*.

Caldwell notes that this prior prominence once enjoyed by women in Kerala is entirely forgotten by them and they have chosen a path of resignation and tolerance. Also, they “attempt to raise their status by distancing themselves from everything connected to Bhadrakali” (“Margins” 254). This reminds us of a time when Brahmins took over Kodungallur Temple, Nambudiri women were altogether prohibited from going to the temple. Thus, there has always been an attempt to keep them at a distance as Bhadrakali certainly was not an ideal model for chastity.

By trying to control and curtail the various rituals of Bharani naming it as amoral or unacceptable, authorities are trying to rip the festival of its very essential spirit. Sensuality and extremities are the innate nature of goddess worship in India. Much harm has been done to the original practices through mortifying religious and political movements and what is left over is its present abridged form. Devotees claim that their Goddess relishes these extremities and demands it. Favorably, the Bharani festival has been still able to retain the importance of female devotees and they share an equal ritual space with their male counterparts (see fig. 3. 1). Thus, they are not marginalized entities in this festival but central to the performance. In the everyday lives, they may be unequal; however, in the divine presence of their Bhagavathi, female devotees enjoy considerable equality and immunity (see fig. 3. 2).

Scholars concur in the opinion that Kali derives in part from the ancient Tamil deity Kottavai, a warrior goddess who delights in blood. Kottavai is described as “wearing a necklace of tiger teeth, riding a tiger, and shouting in victory (*kurava*)” (Caldwell, *Encountering* 255), the goddess comes to the battlefield to kill enemies, eat their flesh, and drink their blood. The similarities between Kali and Kottavai can be justified as Kerala and Tamilnadu were one in the earlier times and the religious influences are natural. Female dancers accompanied Kottavai to the war front and they played, danced, and drummed. The demonic spirits that attended the war goddess Kottavai were represented by women dedicated to the service of the king. These ‘sacred females’ were considered powerful as they had direct contact with the divine and these women later came to be known as *devadasis* of South Indian temples. But later, with Aryanization, these women who once enjoyed immense power were hailed as ‘whores’

by the society and thus pushed to margins. Caldwell notes that their ritual roles included actions similar to oracles. Caldwell is of the opinion that the male oracles of high caste temples modeled their behavior on these female shamans, whose role was superseded in the Aryanized lowlands (“Margins” 256). As Kali’s worship came more under the control of Brahmanized elites, the earlier multivalent potency of the goddess was reconfigured as a danger, chaos, and pollution.



Fig. 3. 2. Jayan, Nimisha K. Female oracles seated in *avakashathara* during Bharani. 07 Apr. 2019. *Private collection*.

In Bharani, the Goddess enters into a battle against a male opponent Darika who poses a threat to the chastity of women. One group of scholars believes that the Bharani festival is the representation of this legend where thousands of men and women in primitive form, clad in red war-dress with swords race around the temple recreating the impression of a battlefield. Thus, Bhadrakali stands as a symbol of motherly love, affection, and protection to their devotees and at the same time, fiery and malevolent to their enemies. In her, two conflicting facets of nature are contained, which must be rightly balanced as procreation and destruction are essential in ensuring the continuity of

life. Discerningly, Bharani celebrates the valor and energy of womanhood. Here the experience is close to being in primitive existence springboarded on instinct. They are free to move about and are not constrained by the norms of female propriety (see fig. 3. 3). This freedom to an extent is granted by the narrative that forms the backdrop of the Bharani festival. For the devotees, it is the celebration of the triumph of Goddess Kali. She is fierce, demonic, and uncontrollable. She is energy and vitality and a loving mother to her devotees. This duality is present in her devotees as well. The devotees as well as the oracles are easily provoked as they are in ongoing communion with some otherworldly energy.



Fig. 3. 3. Jayan, Nimisha K. A female oracle carrying ritual sword and stick in Bharani. 20 Mar. 2018. *Private collection*.

Thus, to state that Bharani is primarily a festival of women folk would not be a hyperbole. As noted earlier, female oracles are fast dwindling in number in Kerala. In such a scenario, we see hundreds of female oracles participating in Kodungallur Bharani. The fest provides them an opportunity to sustain their identity in this changing world.

Generally, we perceive two tendencies among the oracles. One group of oracles performs as oracles only during the Bharani festival. The rest of the year, they are engaged in other occupations. It must be noted that most of them are hailing from lower strata of society making a livelihood through daily wages. The other group, which is less in number, is full-time practitioners, maintaining a slave-protectress relationship with the Goddess. They have a small temple, attached to their homes, where Goddess Bhadrakali is the supreme deity. They perform daily worship for her and make a living through the meager amount of money they get as offerings. Some also perform healing rituals in those temples. Apparently, their life is wholly dedicated to the service of Bhagavathi. In contrast, there are oracles belonging to well off families, running temples that more or less receive considerable offerings from believers in the form of money and gold. Mostly they belong to the chiefs of the group. Obviously, no rigorous organizational pattern is followed by the community. Each group can either act independently or link themselves to a major group. But most groups attach themselves to a chief under which they operate. The chief is not elected as such; neither age forms a yardstick. It gets conferred to a person mostly out of family lineage and tradition. Distinctly, the chief has much power over the pilgrims; he is the head of the *avakashathara*. All Bharani devotees attach themselves to any of these groups as being a part of *avakashathara* is important in the festival. Mostly, the *thara* is assigned on a regional basis. The royal head still decides the distribution of these platforms and the formation of new *thara*. They are not altered on yearly basis, he orders for exchange of *thara* if any disciplinary issue is involved. Thus, the pilgrims derive power from the space of *thara* as much of their activities are centered on this space. In this *thara*, they have a deity, and swords are recharged in front of it.

During the festival days, groups of oracles come dancing and ascend the *thara* to pay homage to the deity. The chief receives the sword, places it in front of the deity as a part of the recharging ritual, and then hands it back to the oracle.

Pointedly, such a life is not without sacrifices. In Bharani norms, female oracles are not restrained from leading a marital life. But in society, there is a negative attitude towards them as devoting the whole of their life to the service of the Goddess comes in conflict with conjugal life. During the interactions with oracles from Palakkad, it was learned that they are not promoting young girls getting initiated to oracles; the reason being the severe demands such a life makes. In most cases, they end up in forsaking a family life and career. Though girls feel a calling from the Goddess herself, through the continuous counseling from the chief oracle they hold this inner call. They participate in the festival, coming with the groups, sing songs, and go back. This is not a problem that women alone face. Even male oracles are finding it difficult to find a partner in life. They have a different life and lead a more severe life than the priests of general temples. They are also the priests of their household temples, but being an oracle is an entirely different experience. The now chief oracle from Palakkad, Shibu Swamy, also the head of *All Kerala Velichapadu Sangam* (“All Kerala Oracle Community”), is a degree holder but dragged into this realm by an inner call he received in his childhood. He has made it a habit to wear red-colored dress in his life, red symbolizing the Goddess Bhadrakali. Thus, the Goddess is inseparable from their being. Their unwavering faith is not for a few days of the year, it is for every day, for the whole life. They carry Goddess in their heart, and Goddess, in turn, protects them as a mother. Women, as mentioned above are free in the space of Bharani. They sleep in the open ground of the temple at night along with others

including men. They may not belong to a group, but inside the temple, under the guarding eyes of their mother goddess, they become brethren and one community. The following section traces how the body operates in the rituals of Bharani, the interactions which result in whole performance that ultimately derive their identities.

The Interplay of Power, Ritual and Body in Bharani

Women have been excluded and marginalized down the ages and her 'body' served as a major factor in this discrimination. Luce Irigaray presupposes that this is actually a deliberate attempt from the part of the patriarchal society to ensure its order and logic. Her body and bodily functions like menstruation and pregnancy, to an extent, ensure her servility and exclusion. As we have seen, during pregnancy and menstruation women are considered as untouchable and impure in the Indian scenario, and this altering between purity and impurity, acceptability, and unacceptability exactly keep in with the cultural agenda to make women's identity shifting and thereby oust her from the agency. As Michel Foucault suggests, power works here not through force or coercion, but through individuals conditioning their bodies into compliance with social norms. Pierre Bourdieu similarly locates power in the boundaries of what can be said and thought, a people's sense of reality, by which every social order naturalizes its arbitrariness (149). These rites and rituals become a part of 'gendered performances' and get registered with repetition through generations. These practices act as 'regulative discourses' or 'disciplinary regimes' and continue to enjoy unequivocal acceptance. But in the Bharani festival, all these codes of taboos are violated, pollution is normalized. This aspect of the festival ensures the presence of women throughout and at all times, thereby equalizing the ground for every gender.

Different rites and rituals exclusively constituting a 'female experience' are invariably connected to the 'gender performativity' and 'metaformic consciousness.' Butler's 'performativity' is not the same as 'performance.' She draws a distinction between a performance that presupposes the existence of a subject and performativity that does not (*Gender* 45). Butler stresses that gender is a process that has neither origin nor end so that it is something that we 'do' rather than 'are' (*Gender* 46). For gender to appear as natural, it must be repeated itself, according to Butler, thereby revealing the patterns of their 'constructedness.' "Performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates to the convention of which it is a repetition" (Butler, *Bodies* 12). "This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation" (Turner, "Body" 77). Butler argues that "gender ought not to be construed as stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (*Gender* 59). Thus, identity is temporal rising out of repeated performances and therefore subject to change. Linda Alcoff states, "Both race and sex are most definitely physical, marked on and through the body, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena and determinant of economic and political status" (102). Human identity or 'self' is not something they are born with, but something born out of a complex process of recognitions, comparisons, exclusions, demarcations, divisions, alignments, and re-alignments. We identify ourselves within a shifting field of images defined by language and imbued with power relations. Thus, it is through the

performance of bodies in Bharani that the performer emerges, and through repetitive performances, the oracles assume a new identity in marked contrast to their everyday reality. This identity is derived from the context, without which the performer becomes an absence. Even male oracles adopt a feminine physique and are presented as a Goddess- incarnate (see fig. 3. 4).



Fig. 3. 4. Jayan, Nimisha K. A male oracle after *tullal*; incision marks seen in forehead. 28 Mar. 2017. *Private collection*.

Thus, there is a relative obliteration of gender differences, and the whole of their identity and being, interests, values, and beliefs come together in one single act. Apparently, it is only through their bodies in performance in Bharani, they attain gender and identity. It is, by no means, connected to the essence or an inner core of the performer, but their actions in the prescribed contextual framework.

In ritual theory, ‘body’ occupies a significant place as it proposes that through ritual, the animal becomes man and man becomes a new man. For Foucault, the ‘body’ emerged in the late seventeenth century as the arena in which more local social practices were linked to the larger-scale organization of power. Power is not a single entity and

represents a cluster of discourses. Distinctions between power as implicit social control and power as explicit acts of political coercion create symbolic power, associated with ritual and ideology, and secular power, associated with agencies and institutions of force (139). Thus, power is simultaneously the agent and catalyst of change; a change in favor of the dominant.

For Foucault, power is contingent, local, imprecise, relational, and organizational. In particular, he breaks with the longstanding premise that “power, whether localized or invested in a monarch, a community of citizens or a class dictatorship consists in some substantive instance or agency of sovereignty” (*History* 151). He sees power not operating from a single point, rather it is dispersed. Power is everywhere and comes from everywhere, so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure (*History* 63). Foucault uses the term ‘power/knowledge’ to signify that power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding, and ‘truth.’ Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true” (*Power* 131). He also rejects the notion of a dominant ideology perpetrated by the ruling class to serve its real interests, a view supported by the sovereignty model. For Foucault, power does not exist as a substantive entity that can be possessed or wielded, nor is it some ‘thing’ that exists in historical forms and causal effects. As such, power relations are deeply embedded in the network of social relations and basic, therefore, to any society (*Power* 156). According to Foucault, power not always work from top to bottom. He adds that this exertion of power from the top cannot be initiated without a “conduit from below” (*Power* 159). For the kings or capitalists to establish and maintain power, it must be rooted in local networks which are projections

of central power. Foucault argues, power is exercised over “free subjects, and only insofar as they are free,” (*Power* 161) that is, with the option of acting differently. For Foucault freedom is the condition, as well as the precondition, for the exercise of power. Freedom is power’s “permanent support, since without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination” (*Power* 161). Hence, the resistance is embedded in power itself that is manifested through bodies in action.

For Foucault, the body is a “political field: power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (*History* 63). The body is the most basic level of power relations, the ‘microphysics’ of the micropolitics of power. Ritualization, Foucault appears to imply, is a central way that power operates; it constitutes a political ‘technology’ of the body. In ritual, both body and ideology come to operate. The social body is the micro-network of power relations, but not in terms of a reflection of larger social institutions or as some sort of social *homunculus* that contains a blueprint for them. The social body is the active site of “dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functionings,” it is a “network of relations, constantly in tension” for which the proper metaphor would be a “perpetual battle” rather than “the conquest of a territory” (C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 169-172). Physical bodies are subjugated and made to behave in certain ways, as a microcosm of social control of the wider population, through what he called ‘bio-power.’ Discipline and bio-power create a ‘discursive practice’ or a body of knowledge and behavior that defines what is normal, acceptable, deviant, etc. – but it is a discursive practice that is nonetheless in constant flux (Foucault, *Discipline* 63). The social body—as the shifting network of power relations “between a man and a woman,

between the members of a family, between a master and his pupil, between everyone who knows and everyone who does not”—is, simultaneously, the “concrete, changing soil” out of which the sovereign’s power is constituted and out of which the individual and his or her power strategies are constituted (C. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives* 175). A ritualized body is a body invested with a sense of ritual. We always associate power with violence and thereby ignore the fact that ritual, “as artifice, is there simply to disguise crude instruments of power” (Foucault, *History* 194). Thus, the ritual is more or less a tactic to discipline the bodies according to the norms set by society. Catherine Bell identifies the significance of the body in ritual, which through its movement and senses, not only experiences and receives the values ordering the environment but simultaneously defines and imposes such values.



Fig. 3. 5. Jayan, Nimisha K. Ruddied face of an oracle performing in trance. 20 Mar. 2018. *Private collection*.

Bharani festival with its highly ritualized environment becomes an ample mechanism for the production of gendered bodies. Women participating in Bharani enjoy

relative freedom equal in terms of their male counterparts and in them primordial energies and consciousness dominate. Women's 'body,' in contrast to the established notions does not seem to serve as a demarcating tool in Bharani and most often we see a celebration and exaltation of female body. "To be female is a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to a historical idea of woman, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility..." (Butler, *Bodies* 100). Footed on this notion it can be argued that the bodies in Bharani are in constant flux, shifting to and fro between identities.

Again, Reena Tiwari through her analysis of the cremation rituals in Manikarnika, Varanasi brings forth a relationship between spaces, rituals, and bodies. The body involved in the ritual marks out the internal and the external spaces within the city. The body also makes the private spaces of dwellings separate from the public domain, emphasizing the threshold or transitional spaces between them (2). Bharani festival also gives rise to a separation of spaces within Kodungallur. A body has an identity as long as it journeys through fixed territories; when it moves out of this space, it ceases to be a performing body. Thus, not only space constructs the performing bodies, but interestingly, the bodies in action construct the space of the Bharani festival. Spatialized bodies undergo a process of transformation while engaged in the acts, both 'everyday' and 'extra-everyday' (Turner, *From* 230). For the bodies, this space is not only a festival space, but a primitive battlefield, and a space of salvation. It becomes a space for transcending from the physical world to the spiritual, divine world. Sacred time is reversible as it is a "primordial mythical time made present" and is indefinitely

recoverable and repeatable (Eliade 68). While participating in a festival, the performer steps out of his ordinary temporal duration and reintegrates with the mythical time. With each periodical festival, the participants find the same sacred time, the same they had experienced in previous years. Thus, a religious festival is precisely a “reactualization” (Eliade 70). In the festival the sacred dimension of life is recovered, the participants experience the sanctity of human existence as a divine creation and they are periodically becoming contemporary with the gods.

Thus, Bharani act as a ‘ritual of power,’ marking the bodies of its performers and by arraying them in fixed positions, underlines their inferiority. During *Kaavutheendal*, with the arrival of the royal head all groups which were otherwise scattered over the temple premises, retrieve to their respective *avakashathara*. The royal head is placed in the *Nilapaduthara* that is located at the center of the Bharani space and directly placed against the idol of Lord Siva inside the temple, only a door marking the separation. Here, the chief sits in a position facing the idol, thus creating a linear power circuit, primarily a male communion. Here, the royal chief can be assumed as a symbol of patriarchy, dominant and controlling the wild, feminine spirit manifested through the pilgrims. Also, the embodiment of chief with his white cloth, jewels, and crown is in clear contrast to the pagan crowd that surrounds him. A panopticon-like structure emerges, with *Nilapaduthara* as the supreme center, and the performers derive power to touch the Goddess from the consent of the royal chief. Arguably, the very presence of chief constraints and controls their movement; they unconsciously enter into the wider dossier of symbolic power.

The festival is primarily a festival of marginalized groups. People standing at the periphery of the society, come together, in small communities and become one bigger force. Transgenders are marginalized beings, struggling to find a voice in society. Seemingly, there is a kind of ‘gender culture’ in our society which recognizes only two genders, gendering can be divided into two processes, those of ‘maling’ and ‘femaling’ (Ekins and King 33). For Raewyn Connell gender is the outcome of recurrent interpretations of, and definitions placed upon the reproductive and sexual capacities of the human body. Femininities and masculinities are the multiple effects of these ongoing interpretations and definitions, impacting bodies, influencing personalities, and shaping culture and institutions. Any particular society will express its understanding of gender in a complex, and largely unwritten set of rules which tell us what to expect of other people’s behavior. A basic rule of our gender culture is that only biological males are expected to male, and only biological females are expected to female. Where this rule is broken – where males ‘female’ and females ‘male’ it is called transgending (Ekins and King 33). In this regard, Goffman states, when we interact with others, we take for granted that each of us has an “essential manly or womanly nature- one that derives from sex and one that can be detected from the ‘natural signs’ we give off (*Presentation* 75). To Butler, gender is an act that brings into being what it names. Nancy Duncan states, ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are unstable categories which are only loosely and contingently related to sexuality (5). “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, *Gender* 136). She further records that those who do not ‘do’ their gender correctly are punished by the society (*Gender* 139).

The sexuality of the performers is not essential; rather they are created in the discursive practices of Bharani. The repressive regimes of power are muted, and the hidden truths of one's sexuality are allowed a free play. This accommodation of divergent groups categorically results in the creation of a 'safe space' for the performers within the ambit of Bharani. While transgenders are engaged in a mission to destabilize their essential identities, the heterosexual too joins in, with their deliberate carnival behavior, transgression, and parody. Overt cross-dressing and adoption of feminine demeanor are visible while retaining the contrastive masculine features as beard and mustache heightening the element of play (see fig. 3. 5). The structure of Bharani gives them ample space to be themselves; here no question of identity is raised against them. The male body is decorated and adorned projecting a female identity and this ambiguity or erasure of sex is a unique feature of the Bharani festival. Thus, the geographies of sexuality are fluid and converging ever working against the socio-cultural forces that demand a 'compulsory heterosexuality' and the resulting ghettoization of transgenders.

All gender is parodic, but Butler warns that "[p]arody by itself is not subversive." There are some forms of drag that are definitely not subversive, but serve only to reinforce existing heterosexual power structures (*Gender* 66). To claim that all gender is like a drag, or is a drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binaries, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations (*Gender* 125). She advances the view that drag is not precisely an example of subversion; "It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency" (*Gender* xxii).

On seeing a man dressed as a woman, the secondary experience is often taken as “artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion” relying on the external factors as clothes or the manner in which it is worn. But this again is a ‘naturalized knowledge’ based on a series of cultural inferences that may be right or wrong. In a trans-sexual person cross-dressing, the secondary appearance forms one’s real identity that cannot be judged by mere seeing. Thus, “body may be pre-operative, transitional, or post-operative” (Butler, *Gender* xxii). Women, like men, roam around freely singing obscene songs. Men take the guise of the Goddess; clad themselves in silk *saree* and gold ornaments. Here, appearance does not derive from one’s sexual identity. These distinctions are blurred and the participants are reduced to mere bodies in performance divorced from their sexual orientations. By obliterating the sex and gender constitutions, the circuit of desire is categorically broken. Every deviant nature has space; the performer can choose his identity from the mesh of identities. By pushing the margins of the body, males experience femaleness; by using the language of ‘abuse,’ which is more or less masculine, females experience maleness. Hence, ‘drag’ in Bharani is not subversive in nature. No relative importance is attached to heterosexuality; therefore a need to oppress homosexuality does not emerge in its space. Both men and transgender groups dress up as women, in the former, they are trying to attach themselves to the power, here, power being the Bhadrakali herself. The latter group extends their own identity into the festival, for them, the merging is a relatively easy process.

In contrast to the popular imagining of Bharani as a carnival-like lawless situation, it is strictly monitored by the state law and order machinery; it is a ‘ritual of power’ or a ‘ritual of rebellion’ where the lower caste sects inadvertently vouch for the

monarchy thereby attesting the supremacy of the connected disciplinary discourse. The entire stratum of society and culture is coming to display in this celebration. Thamburan is still the head of the celebration supported by an upper caste organization known as *Onnu Kure Aayiram Yogam* (“Nine Hundred and Ninety-Nine Brotherhood”) looking after the administration of the temple and the State-run Devaswom Board.

In 1990, the protest of the rationalist groups against *theripattu* and *Kaavutheendal* was staged. A notice of the movement reads:

The expletive songs devotees sing every year as part of the Bharani song festival in Kodungallur Bhagavati temple has become so disgraceful as to degrade the cultural sense of the common man. In front of sanctorum of a deity and surrounding it in the whole countryside, songs about sexual flirtations, procession, and dances odd devotees in sheer nudity, inebriated exultations were all-sufficient to demean public decency of the state. (281)

In April 1989, *Sadachara Yathra* (“March for Ethics”) led by *Navodhan Prathishtan* President Swami Bhoomananda was held as a part of this movement. J. J Pallath notes the hostile environment that ensued as a consequence of these rationalist movements:

Numerous policemen deployed both in plain clothes and in uniform inside the temple were immediately censoring the songs. Consequently, there was a lurking fear of the police. Some singers stopped at the sight of the police. Other enterprising ones quarrelled with the police. Some singers were taken into custody for not stopping at the sight of the police. The police also beat up a few people for going into a trance.

Thus, the entire celebration and its emotional expressions were censured, supervised, and closely monitored by the police, causing grave emotional distress and discontentment to the devotees.



Fig. 3. 6. Jayan, Nimisha K. Policemen positioned in the temple before *Kaavutheendal*.
20 Mar. 2018. *Private collection*.

Bodies in Bharani lose their individuality, become subjective tools and their ecstatic body is the link between the human world and the cosmos. The bodies are designed by the performers to fit into the framework, there is a conscious effort to highlight the body and assert their presence and visibility. It is curious to note that even in Bharani that is widely considered to be a rebellion of the repressed, through careful tactics the bodies are turned ‘docile’ by rigorous monitoring, hierarchization, and examination. Hordes of policemen and temple officials are placed within the space of Bharani to carry out this carefully scripted scheme of ‘discipline and punish’ (see fig. 3. 6). By privileging certain caste groups over others, and assigning them titles and special rights, the upper caste sects have been able to create a divide between the marginalized,

preventing them from a potential revolt. Bharani as a festival is fragmented, composite of 'mini-narratives' and cuts through the psyche of the lower castes, aligning them in unsurpassable casteist order.

In all the rituals and narratives connected to Bharani, the performers are projected as the extreme: profane and vulgar humans, demons or ogres, or lustful perverts desiring the Goddess herself. They constitute a foil to the royal chief with his obnoxious superior, stylized body, a magnate not reprimanding them for their sins but negotiating and patronizing their 'lowbrow' behavior. Bhadrakali becomes the embodiment of oversexed female who must be appeased; the body of the Goddess is targeted particularly in *Kaavutheendal* and erotic songs, and seemingly the upper caste groups have adapted this behavior to a ritual to discharge the Goddess of her sexual urges and bodily heat. Pollution is necessary to re-consecrate and rejuvenate her body, and rather than stopping this ritual altogether, this act is conveniently entitled to the lower castes, positing them as the targeted repository of undesirable values of a society, that must be eventually 'civilized' or 'cleansed.' The polluting touch of the subaltern is countered by the purifying touch of the Brahmin male priests; the Goddess is sanctified and alienated, her identity shifting between profane and sacred.

In brief, the idea of 'pollution' is very much alive in the festival. The word *theendal* in Malayalam discourse literally means 'to touch,' but by cultural assimilation, it has come to acquire the added meaning of 'to pollute.' Even before touching the temple, the 'pollution' takes place when they enter the temple. The barrier existing is rather a psychological one than being a physical boundary. The wall around the temple thus becomes a boundary for the pilgrims and in Bharani, this is surpassed

ceremoniously. A transformation of the whole place is evident; the factual world gets transformed into a spiritual realm and for the spectators, it is a pilgrimage. They travel far, spend sleepless nights, and neglecting the scorching heat of summer stays at the temple for worship. They have the anxiety of a borrowed space but the religious fervor and their blind devotion to the Goddess make them forget their pain and suffering.

Gennep observes: “a rite of spatial passage has become a rite of spiritual passage. The act of passing no longer accomplishes the passage; a personified power ensures it through spiritual means” (“Territorial” 31). Therefore, to cross the threshold is to unite with a new world. Through this act, the mattered body confronts the hegemonic powers but unequivocally capitulates. However, this invasion of space is significant as it inaugurates an important phase in the life and psyche of the individual. Precisely, Bharani is a matrix of free-floating identity where the material body through its repeated performance is perpetually pushing its contours to transcend the limits and have an experience of divinity.