

**BETWEEN SACRED TRANSITIONS :**  
**AN EXPLORATION OF LIMINAL LANDSCAPES IN MUṬIYĒTTU**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature*

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project titled “Between Sacred Transitions : An Exploration of Liminal Landscapes in *Muṭiyēttu*” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Tania Mary Vivera, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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*Muṭiyēṭṭu* is a ritualistic enactment of the myth of *Dārikavadham* and is the second art form from Kerala, to be inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2010. The research aims to acknowledge the aspect of liminality in the ritual, the intricate navigation of fictional realms and reality and the dynamic interplay between the dimensions of time and space. The study also reflects on the conflicting nature inherent to the ritual in challenging rigid patriarchal norms while simultaneously conforming to the very structures it endeavours to dismantle. In alignment with Richard Schechner's performance studies and drawing upon the concepts articulated by various theorists, this research is an effort to reflect on the manifestations of liminality within the structural framework, the performance of the ritual and within its feminist sentiments. The objective is to carve out a literary space that accommodates folk and ritual entities that are frequently invisibilized within mainstream discourses. This project also seeks to expand the literary framework, granting due representation to the marginalized entities, weaving them into the fabric of literature and contributing to a more inclusive narrative landscape.

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Gowri Murali

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## Introduction

The term 'drama' is used to denote a written play or the enactment of the written work involving characters and dramatic exchanges in the form of dialogues and action, performed by actors impersonating the characters created by an author. Theatre, on the other hand, encompasses a broader set of ideas starting from the enactment of the drama and the act of performing; including the actors, physical space of the performance, the cultural milieu and other physical, aesthetic and cultural elements. Non-textual performances are also integrated into the theatrical space, including folk performances, rites, rituals and the preparation for the act itself. Hence, *Kathakali*, *Kuttiyattam*, *Padayani* or *Ramlila* qualify as forms of theatre. Richard Schechner associates drama with 'words' and theatre with 'doing'. "The drama is the domain of the author, the composer, scenarist, shaman; ... the theatre is the domain of performers; the performance is the domain of the audience" (Schechner. *Performance Theory* 71). Schechner summarizes, "drama is what the writer writes; ...the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers (technicians too, anyone who is there)" (72). Performance involves the projection of a performer's talents to an audience through a display that reflects mastery over skills acquired through rigorous practice. It also involves an amalgamation of singing, physical skills, command over language, dancing, jugglery or even the ability to do superhuman activities, shamanic transits etc. The performance is either addressed to the normal audience or to the devotee (as in a ritual), where the performer is a receptacle of a higher entity.

Ritual can be comprehended within the broader framework of theatre. Jens Kreinath defines ritual in his article titled "Ritual" as, "any symbolic act, behaviour, or practice



performed by human agents aimed at invoking interaction with gods, deities, or any other intelligible agents. Ritual is integral, but not limited to, religion, and is more broadly conceived of as a sequence of obligatory acts that display stylized or formalized patterns of human behaviour. Traditionally, ritual was considered to be part of the institutional cult based on a written tradition. The corresponding terms “rite” and “ceremony,” at times referred to as “customs” and “manners,” were used to describe the equivalence to forms of ritual in nonliterate societies and cultures” (1). Within the Indian context, there is a fascinating fusion of ritual and theatrical entities. The rich tapestry of myths and myriad performances is expressed through performance and role play involving the artist and the audience. Whilst *Teyyam* embodies rituals with performative mode, almost all classical forms like *Kuttiyattam* explore the ritual within the performance. In *Muṭiyēttu*, the ritual itself is the performance. However, both ritual and theatre employ similar measures, like dance, spectacle, music, costumes, stage, speech, audience, makeup and performers to produce the desired results.

The close association with society frequently serves as a defining aspect of theatre. The social consequences linked to each form, ranging from classical/elite theatre and folk/ritual forms to contemporary theatre, vary in accordance with their sociological context. Ritual theatre is an important communal and collective activity that is mundane, flexible and less aesthetic. The act binds the villagers together and is enhanced by the myth, its representation and symbolization. Classical theatre nurtures a closed social community based on privilege and both the form and participants are aligned to what is considered orthodox or fundamentalist. Being a performer or connoisseur of the classical form itself is a matter of taste and social status and is not attained by participating in a ritual or folk theatre. *Muṭiyēttu* is a ritual that thrives without the sanctity and structural coherence associated with classical forms. In all its primitive glory, it strings the chords of spectacular, elaborate and brilliant

transformations, deliberating space and atmosphere within its metaphysical ritualistic environment.



Fig.1. *Kāli* in *Muṭiyēttu*. (Menon)

*Muṭiyēttu* is a traditional ritual theatre, that evolved around 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> CE and is practiced in the districts of central Kerala (Ernakulam, Trissur and Kottayam) mostly from the middle of *dhanu* (end of December) to *mēṭam* (mid-May), as per the Malayalam calendar. The performance is limited to four families, belonging to intermediary castes of temple servants (*kuruppu* and *mārār*) and the ritual form is intertwined with fertility and mother cult; performed as an attempt to please the goddess and to stall diseases and calamities. The customary venues include the Bhagavati temple courtyards, open spaces in front of temples and paddy fields after the harvest, thus qualifying as environmental theatre. *Muṭiyēttu* embodies a seamless amalgamation of ritualistic and formal theatrical elements. This includes the sequential development of the core myth of *Dārikavadham* ('The Slaying of *Dārikan*'), that functions as the story and the crux of the ritual. The performance is also structured into seven scenes featuring seven characters: *Śiva*, *Nāradan*, *Kōyimpāṭanāyar*, *Kāli*, *Kūḷi*, *Dārikan*

and *Dānavēndran*, thereby enhancing the theatrical quality. The ritual aspect is accentuated by codified and emblematic movements and gestures that supplement the trance like atmosphere and address the transcendent and mystical.

The liminal space explored in *Muṭiyēttu* and the liminality of the performance is reflected in the breakdown of the rigid theatre-ritual divide. The nuances of the performance are enhanced through maneuvering the performance space, the use of fire, dialogues, movements, percussive music, *kaḷamezhuthu* (powder drawings made on the floor using natural colours) and *Bhadrakālī* graciously bestowing blessings on the spectators who believe in the ritual and the authenticity of the divine transformation. Within the context of liminality, the performer transcends the role of a mere actor enacting the goddess. The process is defined by a complete transformation and possession of the actor (in the case of *Kālī*) by the divine entity being worshipped. The performer in turn becomes a receptacle that contains the supernatural presence which controls and curates their words and actions. The performance that starts as a linear narrative, presents a vivid retelling of the central myth and is eventually augmented to its zenith, as a direct communication between the ordinary spectator and the goddess herself. This facilitates the breakdown of demarcated spaces for the performers and the spectators and the duo becomes entangled in an interaction that is dynamic and transcendental.

The story enacted is about *Dārikan* and *Dānavēndran*, two infamous demon kings wreaking havoc on all realms under the aegis of a boon granted by *Brahma*, that they can only be killed by a woman. *Muṭiyēttu* represents the battle between the demons and goddess *Kālī*, born of *Śiva* to kill the demons.

Dr Chandradasan writes about the construction of the ritual in detail. The performance itself is structured into seven scenes, with the entry of *Kūḷi* providing a comic

interlude that regulates the intensity and ferocity of the ritual. The first scene is *Śiva 'Nārada Samvādam'*, which details the meeting between *Śiva* and *Nārada* at *Kailās*. During this scene, *Nārada* describes the problems caused by the demons to mortals, sages and even gods. The second scene is '*Dārika Purappādu*', an elaborate depiction of *Dārikan*'s entry, as the conqueror of all worlds, celebrated by his disciples, who are indeed the spectators who join the rendition through dancing and cheering. The third scene is the much awaited, '*Kālī Purappādu*', the entrance of the ferocious and enraged goddess, *Kālī*, in all her might and violent glory. The atmosphere reaches its zenith with the participation of the audience through shouting, dancing and moving in circles around the goddess. The scene is backed by fireworks, half curtains and music. Examples of animal sacrifice using chicken are also linked to this particular scene, in certain temples. This scene also marks the performer wearing the *muṭi* initiating the transformation into a receptacle that contains the mother. The fourth scene is the entry of *Kōyimpaṭanāyar*, the head of *Kālī*'s army, sent by *Śiva* to assist the goddess in her mission. This scene is deliberately less intense and low-key in contrast to the third scene and presents *Kōyimpaṭanāyar* in the light of a narrator, dressed in simple clothing and wielding a sword. The scene presents a discourse between *Kōyimpaṭanāyar* and the musicians. *Kūḷi Purappādu*, the fifth scene, details the entry of *Kūḷi*, a character that dilutes the intensity of the performance through histrionics, absurd jokes, imitations of the words and actions of *Kālī*, interaction with the audience and improvisation. *Kūḷi* functions as a comic interlude that buffers the intense transition phase. Dressed in grotesque costumes and makeup, *Kūḷi* stakes claim to being *Kālī*'s daughter and is a character that is not part of the original myth. With reference to examples of actual possession of the actor portraying the goddess, resulting in the actual killing of *Dārikan* during the course of the performance, this character follows *Kālī* like a shadow, even physically placing itself between the fight if the conflict escalates at any point. The sixth scene is *Kuttiyattam* (also called *Yudham* or the

Battle), which is a highly stylized composition that depicts the conflict. Choreographed to conform to a large performance space, the goddess pursues the demons wherever they run off to and moves around them in circles. This scene is also marked by the active involvement of the spectators, who mimic the movements of the performers. The aesthetic dimension and ferocity are further enhanced by *Thelli Eriyal* (throwing pine resin powder to the cotton torch, which inflates it into an intense flame, also depicting the anger of the goddess). The actor enters a complete trance and is forcefully made to sit on a stool, by *Kūli* and *Kōyimpātanāyar*. This culminates in the forceful removal of the headgear (*Muṭi*) and the return of the actor to his material reality. The seventh and the concluding scene is *Dārika Vadham* (The Killing of *Dārikan*). The symbolic beheading of *Dārikan* is done by removing the headgear and placing it at the feet of goddess *Kāli*. Towards the end of the performance, *Kāli* accepts *Dakshina* (offerings) from devotees waiting in a queue and takes children from among the audience to bestow blessings. (149-151)

*Muṭiyēttu* also reflects various functions, starting with the exploration of the sacred and demonic core of the original myth of *Dārikavadham* to providing an element of healing, as mentioned in warding off diseases and repelling evil entities and calamities. Additionally, the ritual fosters a sense of community among spectators and marks a profound transformation in the identity of the actor and the performance space, imparting divine attributes to both. Characters like *Kūli* contribute to the entertainment aspect of the ritual, by providing comic relief and the atmosphere is transformed by the aesthetics, percussive music and the use of fire and natural pigments in *thelli eriyal* and *kaḷamezhuthu*.



Fig. 2. *Kāli* with her assistants (Chandradasan)

*Muṭiyēttu* is the second art form from Kerala after *Kuttiyattam*, to be included in the UNESCO list for the preservation of human cultural heritage, yet is confined to the shadows and is relatively under-appreciated within the state itself. As Phillip B Zarrilli states in the introduction to his work, *Indian Theatre Traditions of Performance*, a ritual usually “.....establish a mediating bridge between the daily world and the unseen and powerful world of the gods. The ritual specialist establishes this bridge, mediating between the tangible daily world and the intangible other world by means of his or her ritual practices”(122). Such a bridge is constructed within *Muṭiyēttu* at multiple levels, negotiating the space, atmosphere and the founding myth and positioning itself within a unique transitional space. The objective of this research is to appreciate the element of liminality and the negotiation of fictional spaces and the reality of time and space. The study also explores the conflicting shift between transgressing rigid patriarchal norms and conformity to what it tries to deconstruct.

Chapter one is a succinct understanding of the theoretical aspects and methodologies that serve as the foundation of this exploration. The primary theoretical

framework used to support the research is Richard Schechner's Performance theory, supplemented by insights from other theorists specializing in ritual and theatre. Chapter two deals in detail with multiple elements of liminality reflected across multiple aspects of *Muṭiyēttu*, spanning from the original myth to the performance. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the inherent ambiguities present within the performance. Chapter three extends the exploration on the transcendental nature of the ritual by introspecting the contradictory nature of its feminist ideologies proposed. Conclusion consolidates various insights gained from the ritual and provides a general appreciation for the artform.

## Chapter 1

### Performance Studies : Understanding the Theoretical Framework

The history of theatre across different cultures traces the origin of theatre to the performance of rites or rituals that integrated the enactment space with the domain of the audience. This element is also mentioned in *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the first chapter pertaining to the evolution of drama as a ritual and myth. Even though “a ritual includes pretending, the ritual performance itself is no pretence, but an actual, here and now doing.[...]Ritual display is not simply a doing but a sharing of a doing, and is ‘often directed inward as much as outward’” (Driver 120). Ritual is considered as one of the earliest forms of language, that expresses the ineffable primarily through action and embedded symbolism. Every ritual is codified and is empowered by the local belief systems and traditions that back them. It has a didactic significance that provides entertainment, influences and/or controls human nature through the emotionally charged atmosphere. The incorporation of spectacle, dance, costume and makeup, speech, music and percussion, performers and audience, is similar to what is used in theatre. The transformation of a mortal being into a vehicle that contains the supernatural entity and the return to the original phase is another significant aspect that defines a ritual.

Richard Schechner defines performances as actions, yet he also specifies that the action is not “read” and the study is not limited to the text being enacted; instead, it is an inquiry into behaviour. Performances can either be based on everyday actions (popular music or sports) or highly stylized behaviour becomes the object of focus (*kabuki* or *kathakali*). One definition of performance is “Ritualized behaviour conditioned and/or permeated by play” (Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* 52). He also adds, “...performances consist of twice-behaved, coded, transmittable behaviors. This twice-behaved behavior is generated by interactions between ritual and play” (52).



Schechner labels it as something constructed as a broad spectrum and states that performance studies entail the detailed understanding of behaviour through four criteria. He adds that the first category is behaviour as “the object of study”. “Although performance studies scholars use the “archive” extensively – what’s in books, photographs, the archaeological record, historical remains, etc.- their dedicated focus is on the “repertory”, namely, what people do in the activity of their doing”(14). The second criterion locates the artistic practice as a significant part of the study, underlining the fact that many performance studies scholars are also practicing artists. Third, is linked to fieldwork as “participant observation”, adopting the anthropological approach and creating room for criticism, personal observations, commentary, ironical takes and sympathetic participation. In addition to this, “Taking a critical distance from the objects of study and self invites revision, the recognition that social circumstances – including knowledge itself – are not fixed, but subject to the “rehearsal process” of testing and revising”(15). The fourth element studies the solid connection between performance studies, advocacies and social practices. This entity deconstructs the notion of neutrality and unbiased approaches. This creates awareness of one’s own perspectives, studied in the background of the positions of others and is a relatively new discipline that is still in the formative stage.

Performance studies is also backed by perspectives adopted from other disciplines like feminist studies, psychoanalysis, gender and social studies, culture theory and studies, queer studies, ethology, semiotics, history, and starts where most of the limited disciplines culminate. The study itself adopts an empathetic approach to the avant-garde, minority and the marginalized, the subversive, the twisted and offbeat, people of colour and the queer. Performance studies questions the accepted conventions and hierarchies and act against these celebrated customs.

It is also gaining momentum as an academic discipline that is taught and institutionalized in multiple ways, with two major brands at present, New York University's and Northwestern University's. While NYU's approach is based on theatre, feminist and queer studies, postcolonial studies, social sciences and experimental performance, NU is concerned with oral interpretation, ethnography, communication and speech-act theory. Richard Schechner also specifies the seven functions of performances and adds that many emphasize on more than one of these functions. Schechner adds that the hierarchy or order of importance depends on the those involved in the performance, and very few performances accomplish all of these functions. He adds that rituals have the greatest number of functions and this research eventually proves that is successfully employed in the case of Muṭiyēttu. He gives examples of shamans that entertain, heal, foster a sense of community and deals with the sacred and/or demonic. On the other hand, there can also be propaganda plays that should persuade and teach, but if they fail to entertain and foster a sense of community there is no point in the exercise. (Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* 5)

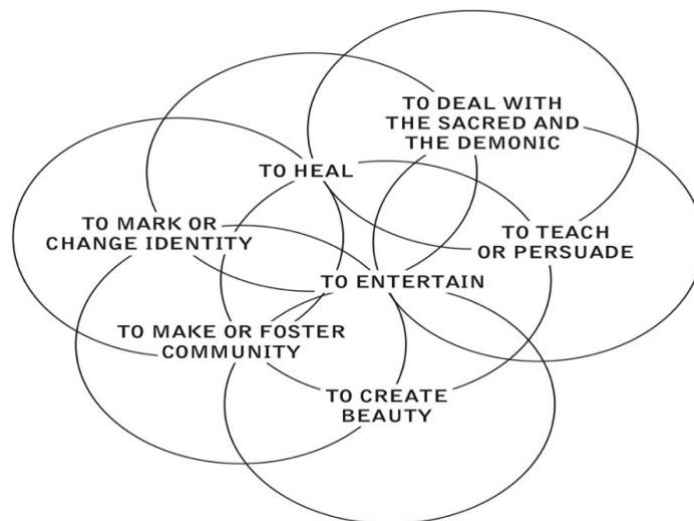


Fig 3. “The seven interlocking spheres of performance.” (Schechner, 2013)

Performance studies also rejects fixed definitions and the notion of purity, operating within a dense web of connections; making it the ideal vehicle to approach the elements of

liminality in the ritual. This aspect is further augmented by the open, self-contradictory and multivocal nature of the study. Schechner also proposes the clear distinction in performances into ‘make-believe’ and ‘make-belief’. Make-believe performances qualify as those providing a clear-cut distinction between the fictional world of the performance and the reality to which they belong. Such performances deliberately disrupt this distinction. For example, children playing “dress-up” are fully conscious of the fact that they are pretending to be someone or something. In the case of *Muṭiyēttu*, or many other rituals, the spectators and the performers often bypass the make-believe aspect of regular realistic theatre and completely accept the ritual as reality itself. At the zenith of possession, the audience equate the performer to a personification of the deity. When the actor, embodying *Kāli* is to be transported back to their material reality, the significance of liminality and this research sets in.

The exploration of ritual and related ideas, is a significant aspect of Richard Schechner’s study. He discusses primitive theatre in *Performance Theory* as, “ the interplay among space, time, performers, action, and audience. Space is used concretely, as something to be molded, changed and dealt with.”(61). A significant concept explored by Schechner in performance studies is how rituals encapsulate collective memory encoded into action, thereby empowering individuals (or even animals) to navigate complex transitions, desires and hierarchies that deconstruct the norms of everyday life. Ritual and play construct a “second reality”, that is detached from the ordinary, in which the ordinary self, embarks on a journey of transformation, temporarily enacting or in fact becoming another self. If the ritual transforms the individual permanently, it is labelled as “rites of passage”, as seen in weddings, funerals and initiations; a transition from one life to another in terms of the individual’s role. The implied meaning of a ritual is always connected to religion, or the idea of the sacred or supernatural. But there are also rituals of everyday life, called habits,

obsessions or routines. But performed rituals, whether they are sacred or secular, public or private, share a set of formal attributes.

The most common division of rituals is the sacred (associated with religion) and secular (associated with state ceremonies or everyday activities) divide. Many cultures do not guarantee a rigid distinction between the secular and the sacred. Richard Schechner categorizes rituals as liminal performances and adds that during the liminal phase of the ritual, two objectives are achieved. First, those individuals involved, experience a temporary state of “nothingness” and vulnerability, when they are highly receptive to changes. The time and space lack a definite nature, power and identity and is caught in the midst of a transition from one self to another. The second objective, is the initiation into new found powers and new identities. This is accomplished through various ways including clothing, performing special actions, taking oaths etc. Liminal entities lack a definite position and are labelled as ambiguous and indeterminate. Schechner picks out the idea of a “limen”, “a threshold or sill, a thin strip neither inside nor outside a building or room linking one space to another, a passageway between places rather than a place in itself. In ritual and aesthetic performances, the thin space of the limen is expanded into a wide space both actually and conceptually [...]What happens within a liminal time-space is “reinforced”, emphasized”(67).

Performance theory deals with actions and behaviour classified as “ in-between” like the initiation rituals and projects rituals as powerful experiences offered by life. To strengthen this idea, Victor Turner’s phrase, “ betwixt and between” to define action, is significant. Turner is also credited with the coinage of the term “ liminoid” to describe voluntary, ritual-like actions occurring in leisure activity and the description of people involved in rituals as elevated and taken over. He mentioned that they are liberated from the shackles of everyday life ( anti-structure) and they experience “ ritual camaraderie” (communitas). “Communitas” is hence generated through the ritual process and is located within the sacred space and time.

But it is also important to remember that the ritual experience is not always fun and can be accompanied by fear and anxiety (qtd in Schechner 67-70).

The space and time that contains the ritual is significant, as the act of entering sacred grounds can mark the transition to the meta space that demands specially curated behaviour. In the case of ritual, the actor has to grow into a vast open space and enter a trance like state. The proscenium is vast and complex, the enactment space is expanded and extrapolated, and the actor's space blends with the audience's space. Space and time are not mutually independent and time also dons multiple connotations like the actual time, performance time and fictional time. Liminoid rituals are temporary and the actual time equals the time during which the where they are "touched". But the experience ends in dropping them off at the point of departure. This is precisely visible in *Muṭiyēttu* and can be explained with the help of a diagram.

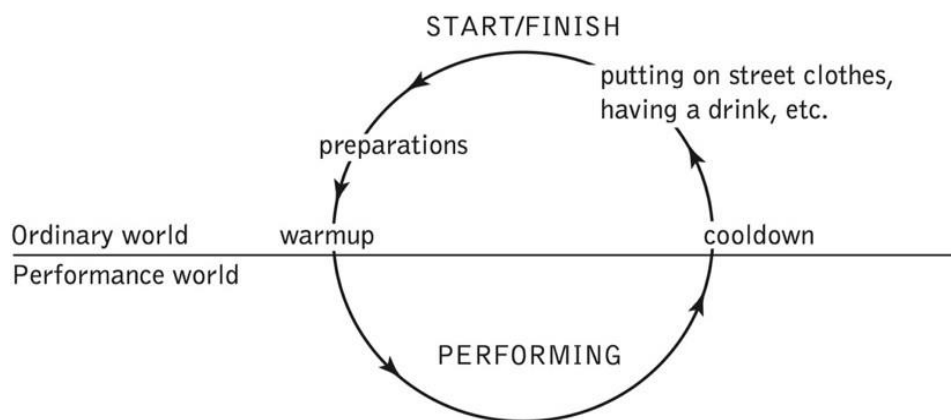


Fig 4. "A "transportation performance" from the point of view of the performer."(Schechner 2013)

The transformation performances also contain two types of performers – those undergoing the transformation and those who manage the transformation. This distinction is clearly seen in the treatment of *Kāli* and other characters in *Muṭiyēttu*.

In the case of *Muṭiyēttu*, the performance is the ritual, unlike *Teyyam* (performative mode) or *Kuttiyattam* (classical theatre). Thus, the fact that the performance and the ritual coalesce in the case of *Muṭiyēttu*, explains the significance of using Performance studies to analyze the ritual. In the light of performance theory proposed by Richard Schechner and the concepts and terms propounded by other theorists, this research is a humble attempt to introspect the ritual form of *Muṭiyēttu* and to understand the constituents of the ritual and the aspects of liminality reflected in it. The study of liminality and performance is also extended to the feminist sentiments echoed in the ritual.



**Fig. 5** *Bhadrakālī* in *Muṭiyēttu*. (Marar)

## Chapter 2

### Muṭiyēttu: Traversing the Liminal Space

*Muṭiyēttu* is a ritual theatre that is performed in the *Bhagavati* temples of Central Kerala and is the sequential portrayal of the myth of *Dārikavadham*, accompanied by cymbals and temple drums. As mentioned by Richard Schechner, in the case of rituals and aesthetic performances, the thin space defined by limen is augmented into a wider space, both actually and conceptually (*Performance Studies: An Introduction* 67). Hence, different elements of *Muṭiyēttu* are positioned within a liminal space, refusing to conform to rigid demarcations. This results in the breakdown of well-drawn distinctions within the performance and the core myth. Marianne Pasty- Abdul Wahid argues in “When Theatre Makes the Ritual Work Imitation, Materialization and Reactualization in the Malayali Ritual Theatre *Muṭiyēttu*” (2017) that, “ We could then apprehend it as a theatrical performance superimposed with a ritual meaning. But the complexity goes further, as the definitions and boundaries between theatre and ritual, and between imitation and reality, are blurred and overlapping” (35).

The first clear distinction that is deconstructed by *Muṭiyēttu* is that of the classification of performing arts indigenous to the state of Kerala. Performing arts can be classified on the basis of what is meant for entertainment (*Dṛśya kala* or *kalā paripāṭi* (as it is locally known)) and those that qualify as forms of worship (*Anuṣṭhāna kalā*). *Anuṣṭhāna kalā* (Arts of observance) are backed by invocations of gods or spiritual entities and is concerned with sacrificial practices and rituals (*pūjā*). The divine presence is glorified and celebrated and the goal is to produce overtly dramatic and performative elements to create an atmosphere that the devotee accepts as reality. They also supplement and augment the transcendental entity. *Dṛśya kalā* is the terminology that encompasses performances that are

recognized for their aesthetics and entertaining quality and are not driven by religious or ritual undertones or aspects of possession or transformation.

By the defining characteristics of both categories, *Muṭiyēttu* belongs to the class of *Anuṣṭhāna kalā*. In Kerala, equating art as ritual or forms of worship is a matter of prestige and it automatically implies high esteem for the *muṭiyēttukars* and a change in social perceptions. But the ritual cannot be labelled as an exclusive instrument of worship, as the performance serves as entertainment and it employs entertainment to enhance the devotion. In many cases, *Muṭiyēttu* is often performed for a foreign audience, who lack the religious grounding. The temple festivals also present these forms as entertainment programmes sponsored by individuals or communities, thereby deflating the religiosity, intentionally or unintentionally.

*Muṭiyēttukars* rigidly associate the form with its ritual connotations, but that does not erase the performative elements, that are inherent to *Muṭiyēttu* and determine its efficacy and acceptability at grassroot levels. “The definition of *Muṭiyēttu* as an *Anuṣṭhāna kala*, which is passionately defended by the *muṭiyēttukars* and their audiences, does not seem to be questioned; but its entertaining traits, which are outstanding and fundamental for its ritual function, are largely downplayed and relegated to a secondary role” (35-40). In short, the performance itself is located within a liminal landscape and it effectively navigates and transgresses the ritual-theatre divide.





Fig.6 Costume and *Chutti* - *Bhadrakālī*. (Chandradasan)

*Muṭiyēttu* also constructs a frequently explored mediating bridge between the tangible everyday reality and the intangible other, despite a relatively fixed scenography and choreography. This further amplifies the dimension of liminality as the performance frequently navigates this mediating bridge. Multiple examples of this transcendental space can be supplemented with respect to the ritual. The actual space of the ritual is detailed and meticulously constructed, starting with the courtyard of the temple or the paddy field that functions as the venue. This space extends to the structure of the temple and the related aspects, including temporary constructs like the provisional tea shops, flora and fauna, open field and the sky. This, when clubbed with the aura of the night (during which *Muṭiyēttu* is usually performed), creates a realistic space that stands as a contrast to the meta space explored. This transcendental space is charged with elemental energies and is enhanced by an

acoustically aggressive environment created using *ceṇṭas* and *ilattāḷam*, along with the involvement of the audience.

The performance mediates between the real world and the fictional space, as the first scene is set in *Kailas*, the abode of *Śiva*, who is credited as the creator of the goddess. This later shifts to the kingdom of the demon, *Dārika*, on earth and then to the netherworld (*Pāthala*) where he seeks refuge. This creates a frequently explored shift between different worlds. The fictional realm is interspersed with the appearance of *Kūḷi*, an entity that belongs to the reality which is represented by the specific space and assembled audience. *Kūḷi* employs imitation to emphasize this division in space and works as a mundane reflection of *Kāli*'s godly actions. *Kāli* takes children from the assembled crowd to bestow blessings (a divine and sacred act), while *Kūḷi* imitates this action by pretending to feed adults from her artificial breasts. Setting aside the comical implication of the act, it breaks the serious and charged space of the performance to establishes a bridge between the mythical entity and the material reality, thereby highlighting the liminality of the performance space.

Schechner mentions a defining feature of transformation performance as the presence of two kinds of performers. In *Muṭiyēttu*, the one who is actively involved in the liminal space is the actor, who becomes the receptacle for the goddess and undergoes transformation. The blurring of the realms starts with the possession of the actor and it is through the possession that the ritual achieves its dual target of enticing the goddess and inflaming the devotion. The actor embarks on a back-and-forth movement, along fused boundaries. This transformation is beautifully explained by *muṭiyēttukars*, as mentioned by Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid as, “the incarnation of the goddess during *Muṭiyēttu* is of a higher level than that of the *veḷiccappātu* (the institutional oracle officiating in the goddess temples), for the reason that the latter only wears attributes of the goddess and speaks for her without seeking to resemble her neither in appearance nor in actions. His personification of *Bhadrakāḷi* is

therefore incomplete, so they believe, unlike that of the *muṭiyēttukars*, who turns into the incarnate goddess, who is then ‘really there’, not only because the performer looks like her, but also because he acts in a way as to make the public believe that he is her. For this reason, they believe that the share of *caitanya* and *śakti* that enters his body during performance is higher than that received by the *veḷiccappātu*”(41). This strengthens the argument on the liminal nature of the ritual, as the act is no longer an imitation or mimicry of *Kāli*, but an actual possession. They further add that the possession is in fact “a priori spontaneous and super-human transformation”(42).

The senior actor, who is the receptacle, accepts the role of theatre in the act yet challenges the rigid boundaries between theatrical representation and institutional possession, that cannot be normally transgressed. The essence of liminality lies in its ambiguity; we cannot attribute the ritual solely to either divine intervention or the deliberate orchestration by an actor to produce a meticulously crafted transition. This obscurity defines the beauty of the ritual. The constant debate between the traditionalists and the modernists about whether the act is the influence of the goddess herself or a staged event that is controlled by the actor, strengthens the discussions on the threshold at which the artform dwells. When in attendance, we are in-fact witnessing something that we cannot demarcate or classify with precision and clarity.

They also mention that the artistic involvement of the performer to fuel the process of transformation, varies from one group to another. Some argue that the goddess is first articulated as a mental image within the mind of the senior actor through intense visualization and prayer following which the physical form is constructed by through the application of makeup, costumes, headgear and the process of acting or emoting. Others state that when the elements are arranged there is no further need for an actual presence of the goddess. This argument is also based on the fact that the possession is choreographed and non-spontaneous.

The transformations in most folk and ritual forms have a dangerous lucid edge as there are examples of the unconscious or the trance predominating. Specifically in the case of *Muṭiyēttu*, there are instances where *Kāli*, overwhelmed by the power, actually kills *Dārīkan*. This can be explained by the extra energy and shift in human thought process and experience that accompany the process. The actor has to be brought back to reality from this space by other characters. Characters and aesthetic elements embody the function of breaking the liminal space, proving that *Muṭiyēttu* has an inherent awareness of its transitional nature and has a mechanism to break the trance and enforce reality. The assistants moving along with *Kāli* forces the performer to sit on a stool. They remove the *muṭi* to cut off the possession and unties the knots of the upper garment and pour water over his shoulders and naked back. The irony of this act is that at that point, the person is merely an actor, drained and exhausted after the performance, wearing damaged makeup and costumes. Still, devotees gather at a distance observing the tired human with utmost devotion. They assemble, with their palms folded and over their heads as if they are on both sides of a corridor; a scene that resembles a *darśan* at a temple. This strengthens the argument that there is a breakdown in the sensibility of the audience in distinguishing between the actual and the created. Even when the main vectors of incarnation are absent, the community is collectively unable to break free from the transcendental state. When the performer enters the final sequence after the short rest, he is more human and is characterized by fatigue and slow movements. Yet there is no example of anyone who has questioned the authenticity of the possession at this point. However, this is not permanent, as Schechner says, “no matter how strong the experience, sooner or later, most people return to their ordinary selves” ( *Performance Theory* 175). He also adds “To be in trance is not to be out of control or unconscious ... In some kinds of trance the possessed and the possessor are both visible” ( *Performance Studies: An Introduction* 75).

The final element of liminality is the theatrical interference and the use of simple theatrical devices to create a powerful performance space within the ritual. This includes simple elements like the use half curtains, behind which *Śiva* appears with only his head and upper body being visible. The stool and half curtains create the impression of *Kailas* and the god on top of the bull.



Fig.7 *Śiva* appears to be seated on *Nandi* at *Kailas*. (Menon)

*Kālī* also moves during the solo sequence and the battle scene, accompanied by male attendants having heightened energy, jumping and running around the characters shouting *ārppuviḷis*. They become entities that enhance the physical experience of the audience. Their vigorous presence serves to enrich the divine experience and at the same time, they add layers of intensity and fervor to the theatrical performance. Through these synchronized movements and vocalizations, they contribute to the immersive nature of the spectacle, blurring the boundaries between ritual and drama.

*Kaḷameḷuttupāṭṭu* is a vivid picturisation of the goddess that is accompanied by musical renditions glorifying the goddess and narrating the story. The use of *ceṇṭas* and *ilattalam* in the representation of the final combat also enhances the dramatic quality of the performance. *Kurumkūlal* and *kompū* adds to the aggressive quality of the rendition and reflects the violence and grit of the combat and infuses high energy into the crowd. Art depicted through powder drawings and acoustics contribute to the creation of a charged and intermediate space and music is successful in inducing and maintain a trance-like state.

Violence is constructed through three media. First, there is verbally constructed violence in the form of dialogue, that ensues between the demons, the goddess and her general. This translates into threats, challenges and insults hurled at each other before the battle. The second medium involves the act of evoking torture and the symbolic beheading of the demon by removing the headgear. The final medium is that of acting. The acting part is detailed and carefully assembled, as *Bhadrakāḷi* enters the arena and stares at an invisible adversary, running behind him, brandishing her sword and eventually striking him. She catches his head, severs it and throws it away in full rage. The blood from the sword is licked clean by the attendants while the goddess juggles the heads. The assistants further engage in *Theḷli Eriyal*, throwing inflammable powder at the torches they carry, to incite the flame. The act is also done to fuel the anger of *Kāli*. The depiction of violence is crucial in discussing liminality as it creates an atmosphere in which rage becomes a palpable entity. This rage and ferocity are infused into the spectator, guiding them to accept and internalize associated emotions. The acceptance of what is depicted, thereby substantiates the perceived materiality of the myth.

In addition to this, *Muṭiyēṭṭu* is equipped with elaborate costumes, facial makeup and accessories including metal fangs. The enactment of *yuddham* is also detailed and borders into a realistic representation of war and the battlefield. This is one of the reasons for limiting

the performance to nights, in order to protect the weak and the vulnerable, who cannot handle the terror and to also match the timing with *Kāli's yāmam*. The temple is also temporarily shut and a purification rite is performed after the killing, to clean the impurity generated by the representation of the killing. It is also attributed to the presence of *bhūtas*, that eat the remains of *Dārikan*. The collective engagement underscores the shared belief in the myth, intertwining it seamlessly with their reality. Their conduct reflects the performance's existence in liminal territory, where observers acknowledge its ritualistic nature yet choose to blur its boundaries to merge it with their lives and immediate surroundings.

*Muṭiyēttu*, as a ritual, operates beyond the technical elements and aesthetic, in a fluid and ambiguous space. Richard Schechner associates rituals with stability, yet they also qualify as aspects that constitute changes in identity, thereby foregrounding the importance of liminality in this discussion. Rituals are also important in establishing connections to a collective and as Schechner points out, “Rituals are liminal, existing between or outside daily social life; other rituals are knitted into ordinary living. During their liminal phase, ritual performances produce *communitas*, a feeling among participants that they are part of something greater than or outside of their individual selves...Understanding how these rituals operate gives us an insight into basic human interactions” (*Performance Studies: An Introduction* 87).

## Chapter 3

### Blurred Lines of Transgression and Conformity: Delphic Feminism

An extract of *Kōyimpāṭanāyar*'s song performed during *Muṭiyēttu*, originally translated from Malayalam by Rajan Gurukkal (qtd in Pasty Abdul-Wahid 2).

‘She screamed with a dreadfully loud voice in the middle of battle preparations (...)

With both hands she angrily shook the sickle shaped sword and bowed down

The world trembled with the kick of her holy feet

She came to cut the head of *Dārikan* (...)

[In her hands a] bowl filled with blood and a sword with horrifying blade

She fought the head of *Dārikan* with a trident (...)

Swimming in blood and wearing a garland [of skulls]

[She is] the terrifying mother who bathes on the cremation ground with her army(...)

Performance studies, as mentioned by Schechner in his works, is a broad approach within which feminist analysis is also an integral element. The ritual form, that has its roots in ninth or tenth CE, is successful in functioning as a transgression of many patriarchal constructs related to aesthetics and enactment. At the same time, *Muṭiyēttu* ensures unquestioned conformity to androcentric biases. This is essentially reflected in the core text and its vague loyalties.

The myth of *Dārikavadham*, the core text of the ritual, departs from the conventional portrayal of goddesses in Hindu mythology by depicting *Kāli* as the demonized goddess in her violent and gruesome self; quashing the traditional poised image and celebrating her wrathful femineity. Violence becomes the defining feature of this warrior, armed with sixty-



four weapons. Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid in “Bloodthirsty, or Not, That Is the Question”, provides a detailed description of the goddessess’ beauty :

Death is her enslaved associate, the cremation ground her dwelling where she rejoices with her soldiers selected among the ranks of the vilest lower spirits, ghouls, and trespassed souls. She adorns herself with skulls and severed limbs. The horror of her imposing physical features only equals the extent of her powers, with legs described as beings as large as elephant feet, her navel as profound as a dark valley, her breast as impressive as two mountains, her hair as thick and foreshadowing as dark rain clouds, her round face as unfathomable as the moon, her ears as gigantic as to frame two elephant heads, her blood-coloured mouth with protruding tongue and fangs as a profound cave (2).

*Bhadrakālī* is praised for her beauty and her appearance is described in the light of features that are conventionally labelled as horrible and ugly. Violence, *raudra* and *ghōra* are the dominant aspects of the performance. Unlike other *Hindu* goddesses who are epitomes of grace, *Kālī* derives pleasure from witnessing the representation of herself as a warrior. Contrary to the accepted precedents where the violent, aggressive woman is penalized and projected as a bad example, *Muṭiyēttu* is a celebration of a raw woman who is aggressive and violent. The language used is also colloquial, interspersed with obscene comments, threats and insults, moving away from how women, especially those of divine origin were expected to speak. The myth and the performance are significant transgressions of the roles that have been traditionally assigned to women.

The core myth falters in its feminist sentiments due to the representation of *Kālī* as an entity that is created from the fiery third eye of *Śiva*. This inadvertently parallels the concepts of hysteria and the perception of women as lacking rational thought, which have been

perpetuated by patriarchal discourses. The misogynistic downside is that, the woman herself becomes the product of an uncontrolled emotional outburst. The myth also states that even after beheading *Dārikan*, *Kāli* could not control her anger and returns to *Kailas*, which horrified the gods. *Śiva* then asks *Ganapati* and *Subrahmanyam* to lie down after taking the form of infants. This produces in *Kāli*, a rush of motherly love and under the influence of her maternal instincts, she breastfeeds both of them. The act quells her anger and she eventually presents *Dārikan*'s head before *Śiva*. This maternal side reappears in the performance when *Kāli* takes children from the audience to bless them. Even though *Muṭiyēttu* celebrates the aberrant woman, the roots remain in patriarchy as it subtly reinforces the importance of motherhood in a woman's life. Maternal love is used to correct the woman who has deviated from herself (a loving ideal daughter), even though she was only created to be violent and aggressive in the first place. *Śiva* always appears at crucial points and remains the controlling and deciding factor, despite the progressive colouring of the ritual. The woman is always at the disposal of a man and in need of his approval and guidance. This overarching importance given to maternal love and limiting a woman's identity to her maternal instincts is also evident in the case of *Dārumati* and *Dānapati*, the only women to have escaped the war. Their extreme penance is translated into them forcing *Brahma* to grant them both sons. These women eventually plant the seeds of evil through *Dārikan* and *Dānavēndran*. The role of *Manōdari*, the wife of *Dārikan*, is limited to the female presence in any typical myth. The central myth bears the weight of all the deep-seated gender biases whilst celebrating and worshipping a ferocious and fearless feminist icon.



Fig.8 *Bhadrakālī* with devotees. (Chandradasan)

The feminist undercurrents are evident in the theatrical aspects, including the aesthetics of the ritual (costumes and makeup). Varanattu Narayana Kurup, a celebrated *Muṭiyēttu* artist, writes in detail about the aesthetics and the constitution of the ritual in his book, *Muṭiyēttu: Achāravum Anuṣṭhānavum* (2014). The depiction of *Kālī*'s face covered in small dried lime spikes (indicative of small pox) and the use of metal fangs, aids in dismantling the unanimous beauty standards that persist even at the divine level. The use of sickle shaped sword, solidifies the position of *Kālī* as a revolutionary outfit within the Hindu traditions. The metal anklets worn by her can be interpreted as a symbolic breaking away from the shackles that have always constrained women, whether they are mortals or divine beings. The weaponization of hair is significant as the *velya muṭi* becomes the component that leads the transition and controls the aggression of the goddess. Hair has always been equated to femininity, a quality that patriarchy deems to be gentle, soft and altruistic. In *Muṭiyēttu*, hair becomes the defining feature of *Kālī*, fueling her aggression, infusing *śakti* and *caitanyam* into the male actor. Toward the end, the hair has to be forcefully removed by

the attendants to control the possession. The act of altering the proportions of the *kalam* and intentionally adding dirt under the headgear, by the artists involved in the performance, can be interpreted as ‘fear of the feminine’ and anxiety pertaining to the exploration of true and unrestrained female identity.



Fig.9 *Kalam* drawn with natural pigments and powders. (Menon)

*Muṭiyēttu* tries to disintegrate the hypermasculine template but is tied down by the weight of its severely masculine-centric performance space. The ritual is traditionally bound to men, who are both taught and tasked with its performance. Men involved have complete control over the execution, starting from the characters to the use of musical instruments.

*Kizhakke Varanattu Muṭiyēttu Kala Sangham*, under the guidance of celebrated *Muṭiyēttu* artist, Varanattu Narayana Kurup, has been accepting female disciples. But whether their presence is welcomed in temples and other spaces that ascribe rigid taboos to menstruation and female presence is a question worth considering. The space, especially temples and traditional stages, is a significant limiting agent when it comes to female participation.

Pazhoor Bindu, is an icon in this regard, as a female performer coursing through a homogenous, all-male performance space. *Muṭiyēttu* also explores the most active and

physical aspects of the myth, with the movements lacking the grace of classical theatre or classical dance forms. This raw depiction of the combat and physicality can be another reason that is cited to control female presence, as women involved in performance space are often labelled as dancers and limited by *lasya* (grace and gentleness). In short, despite being the story of an iconic and revolutionary female, *Muṭiyēttu* is reduced to a masculine perception of the goddess. Narayana Kurup writes that the performer dons an *uduthukettu*, a loincloth that is worn in a particular manner, along with a red vest and white cloth around the waist. The costume is pleated at the rear side (defining feature of *Muṭiyēttu*) and the torso is either bare, covered by a breast shaped plank (*Koratty*) or is fully clothed (*Keezhillam* and *Pazhoor*). The costume, with its resemblance to a skirt, the bejeweled and carefully carved, heavy gilded headgear and the hair (which is finely torn *kurutthola*) are the only feminine aspects of the performance, other than the goddess herself. The discussion further extends to the man dressed in a woman's attire, face covered in black with white chutti sticking out, facilitating the breaking down of the hypermasculinity template. The ritual celebrates and worships the performer by equating him to a feminine identity, even though exploration of femininity in a man has been deemed inappropriate and stigmatized for a long time. Female identity is worshipped and the *velya muti* becomes the ultimate source of divine power for the male performer. The dominant (male) entity is empowered by assuming the role of the marginalized (female) entity. The performance facilitates the breakdown of binary gender definitions during the state of possession and is characterized by a sense of divinity that transcends temporal demarcations of male and female. Another way of interpreting this can be by equating the state of sanctity during *Muṭiyēttu* to something that can be attained in man, when his feminine and masculine sides co-exist. This transcendental essence blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine, ushering participants and spectators into a realm where identity and expression intertwine fluidly, guided by a spiritual resonance completely

invalidating the stigmatization of the effeminate man. The bending of the problematic binary gender divide is also evident in the ritual, through the character of *Kūḷi*, whose gender is not specified. *Muṭiyēttu* does not emerge from female sensibilities and is not a woman's perception of *Kāli*. The transvestite aspect empowers the male performer to be the center of veneration by embracing the identity of a woman. On a more metaphorical level, the male actor is exalted when he is able to subsume the female within. *Muṭiyēttu* is not an attempt to glorify machismo men and their saviour complex. It celebrates the man in his complete feminine splendor, even though femininity is confined to costumes, makeup, and the character portrayed. However, the impact of the ritual on the female landscape and feminist narratives, extending beyond the feminine elements integrated into the performance's aesthetics, remains uncertain.

The representation of the combat gives *Kāli* the dose of aggression and violence that she craves for and the myth can be interpreted as a manifestation of every woman's desire to be loved and worshipped, even though the actual performance remains a masculine outlook of *Kāli*. Worship means acceptance for *Kāli*, a goddess who does not belong with conventional *Hindu* goddesses. It reflects the desire for being the object of reverence, considering her efforts for humankind. During the performance, *Kāli* chases and brandishes her sword at an invisible adversary, which can in fact be interpreted as the patriarchal society against which every woman is fighting. The violent and savage avatar is a rebellion against the conditioning that women are made to go through and vengeance is directed at every agent of patriarchy (including *Dārikan* and *Śiva* himself, even though in a veiled sense). The time of the performance is night and a feminist reading of this fact suggests that this is when a woman awakens to her true self. Even within a typical household, a woman can only carve out time for herself after she has attended to the checklist of societal obligations and duties. Within the feminist lens, the timing of the performance equates to the fact that a woman

realizes her potential and is up for self- exploration when the agents of patriarchy are weak and sleeping. Music and dance (choreographed movements) are severed from the usual and ideal purpose and become agents that kindle aggression and heighten the terrifying mood. The goddess is a feminist icon despite being tied down by certain elements in the narrative, which again can be traced back to the transcendental nature of the ritual and its core structure. *Muṭiyēttu* harbours numerous revolutionary elements, particularly considering the time frame of its evolution. However, the ambiguity surrounding the ritual is also reflected within the feminist approaches proposed and despite the countercurrent, it never fully embraces a progressive outlook.

## Conclusion



Fig.10 *Dārikan* and *Dānavēndran* before *Yudham*. (Narayana Kurup)

According to Schechner, “...the performance process is a continuous rejecting and replacing. Long running shows- and certainly rituals as these – are not dead repetitions but continuous erasing and superimpositions. The overall shape of the show stays the same, but pieces of business are always coming and going” (*Performative Circumstances from the Avant Garde to Ramlila* 92). *Muṭiyēttu* is positioned within a distinctive transitional space and the study explores the intricate negotiation between fictional spaces and the solid realities of time and space. The form also navigates the conflicting shift in its gender outlooks and sentiments. As mentioned by Marianne Pasty-Abdul Wahid, this liminality is reflected and outlined in the character of *Kāli* who is labelled as ‘ambivalent’, ‘dualistically split’ or even as ‘schizophrenic’. This title also applies to other goddesses like *Māriyamman* (Tamil) or *Pattini* (Singhalese) (4). The clear-cut black and white demarcations cease to exist within the filter of religion and devotion. The space itself is ambiguous and perpetually fluctuating.



*Muṭiyēttu* and other folk and ritual forms are intricately woven into the life and sensitivity of the local community, compared to classical forms. These forms engage the lower strata of the society and have diverse functions. Farley Richmond, Darius Swann and Philip Zarrilli, in their study pertaining to Indian theatre, states that classical theatre assumes a ‘self-consciously articulated aesthetics’ that is deeply embedded within the performers and patrons, who persuade the classical system to remain closed, while folk performances adorn diametrically opposite characteristics. The observations presented within this context explains why *Muṭiyēttu* and other ritual forms strongly appeal to a section of our society. They add that in contrast to classical sphere, the folk-popular space is marked by immediate accessibility, vitality, exuberance, and by easily understandable modes of performance. Folk-popular traditions have three defining characteristics. They are regional, belonging to a specific language area, although similar forms may exist elsewhere under different names. They are not explicitly religious in function, while some vestiges of religious practice, such as an opening invocation may be present, the impact of performance is mostly secular. The performances cater to the masses; audience expertise is not a prerequisite for appreciating the artistry (9).

These forms have diverse functions and closely involves the lower strata of the society, offering entertainment, devotion, self-expression and they also encourage sharing of resources within the community. Ritual theatre is based on vast open spaces and the fusion of the domains of the actor and the spectator and have a specific mode of operation, set of aesthetics and relevance that sets them apart from the premises of the classical Sanskrit aesthetics. There are many forms, which were practiced by those belonging to the lower rungs of the caste and class structure. They are less spectacular in their approach and are undergoing a steady decline in importance and almost nearing extinction. . As Dr. Chandradasan opines, spectacular forms like *Teyyam*, *Muṭiyēttu*, *Yaksagana*, *Padayani*,

*Ramlila*, *Terukuttu* and *Tamasha* have survived and are flourishing by modifying the performance organization and through alterations catered to the demands of changing epochs. Almost all forms perfected the elements of costume and makeup, to make the performance more spectacular and to give itself an impetus in the contemporary space. These alterations have helped to tap broader public appeal, even when they contradict the inner spirit of the performance. For example, forms like *Muṭiyēttu*, *Padayani* and *Teyyam*, used *Pantham* (torches) to augment the dramatic quality and supernatural aura. But with the extensive use of artificial lights and LED within the performance space, the torches are insignificant and irrelevant. Important performers emerged within these ritual forms, who have been successful in nourishing their skills and popularising the form. They have been exalted to the status of ‘artists’, marking a distinct rise in the status of both the artist and the form. The celebrated artists include Varanattu Narayana Kurup and Keezhillam Unnikrishnan. A departure from the traditional venues and migration to urban centres, non-traditional stages and theatre festivals across the country has also aided in the process. The formulation of Sangeet Nataka Academy, allied scholarships and recognitions instituted to celebrate folk theatre and artists have also helped to encourage practitioners of such forms. The presence of alien spectators, like tourists, has forced the rituals to alter their form whilst preserving their basic structure and functions. It is the flexibility of such forms that has equipped them to course through a world that is rarely kind and accepting to what is deemed traditional.

The essence of the study is the exploration of liminal landscapes in *Muṭiyēttu*, reflected in various aspects of the ritual, beginning with the amalgamation of ritualistic and performance elements. The ritual is structured into scenes and is a unique negotiation of space, atmosphere and the core text. *Muṭiyēttu* presents a shift between the fictional space and the actual space and time and is also characterized by the transcendental nature inherent to it. The idea of liminality extends to the pursuit of its feminist sentiments. The ritual

celebrates a revolutionary female by transgressing patriarchal constructs but at the same time, it is weighed down by its conflicting loyalty to gender norms. The exploration of Delphic feminism extends to the appreciation of unconventional and liberal hues that the ritual flaunts, despite its roots in the ninth and tenth CE. Though *Muṭiyēttu* dwells on a threshold, the form creates a world of its own by bridging the tangible and intangible, and constantly moving between both zones.

In conclusion, the objective of this study extends beyond exploring the elements of liminality embedded within the structure and performance. It is, in essence, a celebratory endeavour and a personal commitment to contribute towards the preservation of this culturally rich heritage. The intention is not merely limited to scholarly exploration but to foster an appreciation for forms such as *Muṭiyēttu*, particularly among the present generation, with the ultimate goal of preserving the fundamental essence of this cultural legacy. The objective is to carve out a literary space that accommodates folk and ritual entities that are frequently invisibilized within mainstream discourses. This endeavour seeks to expand the literary framework, granting due recognition and representation to these, often overlooked, aspects of culture. The intention is to amplify the voices of these marginalized entities, weaving them into the fabric of literature and thereby contributing to a more inclusive and diverse narrative landscape.

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