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DANCING BHAGVATHI: A STUDY OF RITUAL FEMALE PERFORMANCE AND THE FEMININE EXCLUSION

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Hindu goddesses provide something that is unavailable in the West's repertoire of images – strong-willed, creative, and powerful females who are auspicious and beneficent.

— Rita Gross

We actually worship Bhagavati out of fear. See if we do anything wrong, if we commit any mistake, we fear she will punish us.

— Ladies of the Pattakil household, interview by Sarah Caldwell

The frenzied drumming and the fierce cries can be heard from a distance. The atmosphere is quite festive. Temporary stalls selling tea, snacks, cigarettes and small knick knacks line the dirt road leading to the festival site. It is quite late in the evening but that does not seem to bother the crowd that has gathered to witness the killing of the demon by their goddess. The festival arena is brightly lit with neon lights. There is an oil lamp burning at the center. A curtain in the style of Kathakali is raised and the goddess makes her first appearance behind it before she steps out and starts looking for her enemy – the demon Darika. She has a grotesque appearance. Her face is pock-marked and she carries a sword in her hand. Her breasts are bared and they are prominent and red. Devotees, some of them, rather drunk, hurl abuse after abuse at the goddess. Her companion enters the performance space. She does not have the prominent headdress of the goddess but she has larger and more prominent breasts. The crowd is ecstatic to see her. More obscene exchanges follow as this divine companion grabs the nearest man from the audience and thrusts her breast into his mouth. The man is embarrassed but seems to be enjoying himself. The performance continues, more men are forcibly breast-fed and obscenities continue to pour forth. The fight between the supernatural forces of the demon Darika and the goddess Bhagvathi is the focus of the performance and occurs at different places in the performance arena. Each time the goddess grows furious and tries to chase the demon, who runs away. The goddess in her furious frenzy runs around the performance arena to slay Darika. At the climax of the performance the goddess slices a bunch of plantain signifying the killing of the demon. The ceremony is concluded with *guruti*, the ritual act of offering blood (a mixture of turmeric paste and lime) at the goddess's altar.¹ Some live cocks are thrown over the temple compound. It is nearly daybreak and the performance has drawn to a close. The audience gradually leaves the temple compound. At the end of this Mutiyettu performance the observer is left with a series of questions. Why is the goddess so obviously sexualized? What function do the sexual slurs directed at the goddess

¹ Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, "Mutiyettu," in *The Oxford Companion to Indian Theatre*, ed. Ananda Lal (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004), 287.

serve? In spite of the divinity being portrayed being a female, why are there so few women involved in the performance? The performers were all males who had dressed as a female deity. The audience, at least the most active ones, was all male; the women present were all at a distance. Why is that?

Like most ritual art forms from Kerala, Mutiyettu performers are almost exclusively male. The priests and caretakers of the performance sites, typically attached to a temple complex, are also male. Women are in fact not only barred from performing the ritual dance of the deity, but they are also not allowed to enter the sanctum of the Bhagvathi shrines and the performance arena. The audience at the performance site of Mutiyettu includes a large number of women but they are made to stand at a distance and observe the performance without being directly involved with it. The following discussion studies the relation Malyali women from Ernakulam district, Kerala, India share with this fierce goddess and how the performance of Mutiyettu works as a patriarchal tool to impose behavioral norms on women. This paper will look at the distanced and insignificant role of women in the performance and worship of the mother goddess Bhagvathi as a reaction to the statement by Rita Gross quoted at the beginning of the paper.

Gross mentions that, “Hindu goddesses can promote the humanity of Hindu women by providing the psychological well-being that positive female imagery brings.”² Such an evaluation of the role of the Hindu goddess and especially the Bhagvathi/Kali figure that she is alluding to (in the epigraph to this paper) seems inaccurate. While it is undeniable that the image of the benevolent goddess portrayed as the dutiful wife Sita, or the goddess of learning Sarasvati or the goddess of wealth Lakshmi definitely make room for positive feminine imagery, it would serve Gross and us well to recognize that these goddesses are always portrayed as quiet, demure and subservient to their male consorts. They wriggle out favors sometimes by using their sexual charm, but they have to constantly prove that they are not sexually deviant, and when suspicion arises about their chastity and purity as it does in the case of Sita, she is forced to take refuge in the lap of her mother Dharitri. In the case of the Bhagvathi/Kali figure, the goddess is seen as someone with uncontrolled rage and capable of causing considerable harm. Although her antagonist in all stories is always a male, she is also revered more by the male than the female. This ferocious image is painted in direct contrast to that of the gentle, ideal Indian woman, often described as kind, gentle, soft-spoken and caring.³ Her assumption also seems incongruent with the reaction of female Bhagvathi devotees as recorded by Sarah Caldwell and quoted at the beginning of the paper.

Gross is wrong about the position of women in contemporary Indian society when she claims that since the image of the strong female is abundant in Hindu iconography, Indian men are generally more accepting of strong women. The image of Kali is regularly appropriated by men across the country. She is worshipped universally in the country at the dead of night, when existing social conventions require Hindu women to be indoors. Thus, the Hindu woman is automatically excluded from participating in the worship of the goddess and identifying with her. Being a single adult woman, who makes her own living and lives by herself, is still very difficult

² Rita Gross, “Is the Goddess a Feminist?” in *Is the goddess a feminist?: the politics of South Asian goddesses*, ed. Kathleen M. Erndl (New York : New York University Press, 2000), 106.

³ Matrimonial websites, Bollywood films and popular novels all abound with such ideas.

in India, even in urban settings. These women are seen as threats to the “natural” patriarchal order of things. You may find a stray instance of a woman being praised or lauded in national media, but reports of female infanticide, rape, marital rape, dowry deaths, molestations, eve-teasing and any other imaginable forms of violation against the female are abundant. For example, the National Capital Territory of Delhi has been consistently crowned as the “rape capital.”⁴ This paper will further demonstrate how the image of the powerful female religious icon works against women in the specific instance of Kerala and by extension the rest of the country.

In order to disprove Gross’s argument I use the notion of Judith Butler’s gender performativity as well as Peggy Phelan’s idea of marking and unmarking. Butler’s idea of gender as a social construction finds strong echoes in the way the role of the female is determined in both families and performance in Kerala. And drag, which Butler proposes as a way to subvert gender identities, fails to achieve its goal within this different cultural context and works to further consolidate the set notions of masculinity and femininity, breaking out of which is not only socially unacceptable but also virtually impossible. The argument of Phelan is employed to propose a notion of how the female is marked by the male in the figure of the Bhagvathi and in Kerala society. Sarah Caldwell’s pioneering work on Mutiyettu functions as a useful resource to inform and guide this study. An evaluation of the figure of the mother goddess in the Hindu pantheon is however in order before proceeding to establish the fallacies of Gross’s understanding.

The mother goddess is an important part of the Hindu pantheon. Almost everywhere in India the mother goddess occupies a position of prominence and importance. She is seen as a benevolent deity who does not mind taking recourse to violence in order to protect her children – her worshipers.⁵ She is at the same time a “chaste virgin and a caring mother.” Most of these mother goddess traditions belong to the Shakta school of Hinduism, characterized by the offering of animals and blood to the deity.⁶ It is believed that in ancient times human sacrifices were also made in honor of the goddess.⁷ Richard Brubaker makes significant observations regarding the mother goddess worshipped in rural India:

Demons in South India have a propensity for attacking and possessing humans of the opposite gender, as a means of satisfying sexual appetites. The deity representing the village is female, and it is nearly always male animals that are sacrificed to her; the buffalo whose sacrifice symbolizes the demons’ defeat is always male. Numerous village

⁴ “Delhi call centre worker gang rape: Two arrested,” BBC News South Asia, December 2, 2010, accessed November 15, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11895527>. See also Chintan Gupta, “Delhi Rapes,” *The Viewpaper*, October 25, 2011, accessed November 15, 2011. <http://theviewpaper.net/delhi-rapes/>.

⁵ For a definitive study of the mother goddess cults and traditions in India, see Narendra Nath Baattacharya, *The Indian Mother Goddess* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1999).

⁶ Shakta and Vaishnava are two of the most important schools of Hinduism. Members of the former are Shiva devotees and followers. They are non-vegetarian, drink alcohol and consume opiates like marijuana in the likeness of the Lord Shiva. Meat, alcohol and opiates often form part of the sacrifices offered at Shakta religious ceremonies. The Vaishnavites on the other hand, are Krishna or Vishnu devotees. They are mostly vegetarians.

⁷ Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence and Worship of the Goddess Kali* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) talks about such practices in connection to certain Bhagvathi shrines in 210-211.

goddess myths tell of a woman being wronged by a man (or men), often in the form of a buffalo, who has approached her lustfully.

Thus a common theme appears in several contexts involving or related to the village goddess festival—the theme of male assault, usually sexual assault, upon the female. This strongly suggests that the festival itself may be meaningfully viewed in the same terms. An enclosed, domesticated, sacred space personified by a divine female attracts and is penetrated and violated by a wilderness-roaming horde driven by distinctly masculine forms of lust and aggression. The village, in short, is being raped. And the festival, then, is the village's convulsive, expulsive response. In it the people relive the myth of their goddess defeating and repelling her male attacker.⁸

Thus, the mother goddess is seen as the manifestation of the positive energy that is going to protect the village and its inhabitants from the male demons which can represent diseases and inclement weather. At the same time, Brubaker continues, from the male demonic perspective it is not simply the easy good versus evil enmity/dichotomy at play here. There is the presence of a sexual attraction and often in legends and narratives there is the clear indication that the goddess too has interests in sexual encounters.

The sexual interests of the goddess are represented variously in myths. In certain instances she is portrayed as lustful, whereas in others she is a victim and in yet others she pretends to be inviting in order to gain control of the male demon and destroy him.⁹ The figure of the Bhagvathi in Mutiyettu is that of the lustful goddess created out of the fear of the voracious nature of uncontrolled female sexuality. Her festival celebrates the triumph of the good over the evil, represented by the male demon Darika. However, in this particular instance the sexual appetite of the Bhagvathi is far more powerful than that of the demon she overcomes.

Bhagvathi is an important goddess for the people of Kerala. She is worshipped across the length and breadth of the state as the spirit of the mountains and as the goddess of the earth. As Sarah Caldwell observes, “she is essentially life itself, and as integral participants in the natural world, human beings can easily invoke, contain, and experience her presence through the myriad ritual arts offered as devotions during annual temple festivals.”¹⁰ In Kerala the worship of the mother goddess involves possession and ritual transformation by performers who dance in her honor and also embody her spirit during the performance. Dominated by men, these ritual forms, which include Mutiyettu, are an integral part of Kerala society.

Mutiyettu, literally “carrying the crown (muti),” derives its name from the large crown that adorns the head of the Bhagvathi. The origins of this art form are unknown, but published accounts claim that it has ancient roots. The performance has some common features with both Kathakali and Kutiyattam, but unlike these classical forms which conform closely to the standards and techniques described in Bharata's *Natyasastra*, Mutiyettu for the most part seems to be a folk dramatic form. Caldwell describes Mutiyettu as a “complex multimedia event,”

⁸ Richard Brubaker, “The Untamed Goddesses of Village India,” in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present: an Introduction to her religion*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 154.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 10.

which combines elaborate rituals, art, music, theatre and dance. The performances typically last from noon until the dawn of the following day. Performers belong to the higher ranking castes of Kurup and Marar, who have purified themselves through strict ritual penance. Caldwell observes that, “performed exclusively in Ernakulam district and its environs in central Kerala, mutiyettu is a high-caste temple art rooted deeply in folk religious tradition.”¹¹

Bhagvathi, or Kali, is the protagonist and Darika is the demon antagonist in the Mutiyettu narrative. The slaying of the demonic evil forces represented by the brothers Darika and Danava by Kali and her retinue is depicted in performance. The story has it that Darika underwent strict penance and managed to get a boon from Brahma, lord of creation, that he can only be killed by a woman and if a drop of his blood hit the ground, a thousand demons would spring forth from it. Armed with these boons, Darika and his brother set out to oppress virtuous humans with the ultimate aim of taking over Mount Kailasa, the abode of Lord Siva. The sage Narada informs Lord Siva about Darika’s exploits and the enraged Siva opens his third eye to create Bhagvathi/Kali. Kali cannot defeat Darika because she does not know the secret *mantra* (chant) that Brahma gave the demon. Hence the gods create Durga, who fools Darika’s wife Manodari into revealing the secret *mantra*. This enables Kali to kill Darika. In the performance Darika shows off his indomitable prowess followed by a similar demonstration by Kali. The goddess seen chasing the demon in the performance resembles a hyper sexualized female in lustful frenzy, her crazed actions resembling the sexual cravings of an unsatisfied woman, the kind of woman that threatens the balance of a male-dominated Kerala/Indian society.

Women in Kerala society are supposed to have a certain advantage over their north-Indian counterparts since the society has had a tradition of a matrilineal social system. However, over the years, as Sarah Caldwell observes, “whatever vestiges of power and choice this unique social system had once bestowed upon women had dwindled.” Besides, there is very little account available of what the women’s actual experiences were within this unique matrilineal social system. The lives of women in Kerala today are not much different from those of women in north India and are guarded by similar barriers of conservatism and restriction.¹² It is true, as Robin Jeffrey observes, women in Kerala may do more things than elsewhere in India but they do not enjoy equality with men. Caldwell reports, following her conversations with the high caste Nayar and Ksatriya castes, that even within the supposed matrilineal structure all major social, sexual and economic decisions of the family were taken by the male head of the household, the brother of the eldest female in the family. Women’s movements in the public sphere were heavily restricted and inheritance, while passing though the female line went from uncles to nephews, not mothers to daughters.¹³ Therefore, the matrilineal social structure and the *sambandham* marriage rights did not otherwise privilege women and these practices were strictly limited to the upper caste Nayar and Ksatriya households due to their special relationship with the Nambutiri Brahmins. The vast majority of women in Kerala even during this period were subjected to the restrictions of a patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal form of social organization similar to the accounts found in ethnographic literature for much of South Asia. Nur Yalman in his 1963 study of the social life of Nambutiri Brahmins in traditional Kerala society calls the

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 195.

¹³ Ibid.

treatment of their women “sadistic.”¹⁴ The patriarchy was obsessed with exercising an iron-fisted control over the female.

Things have of course changed for women in Kerala over the last one hundred and fifty years when they mostly led cloistered lives. They have access to public education and a large number of women also hold jobs, essential to support the nuclear families. However, a strict moral code continues to make its presence felt governing the behavior of women in public. This code revolves around the notions of “modesty, reticence, and self-control.”¹⁵ Any digression from these set norms is met with strict social disapproval to the extent that the character of the woman is called into question. Women are not expected to speak with, look at, walk with, befriend or laugh in the presence of men outside their families, except in rare circumstances. Working women often narrate incidents of humiliating gossips that would start doing the rounds if they behave familiarly with a male colleague or so much as shake his hands. Except in the very urban settings of the state capital Thiruvananthapuram or Ernakulam, a woman is ordinarily not expected to walk the streets by herself after dark without disparaging gossip attacking her character. In spite of all that women might do in contemporary Kerala society they are still confined by patriarchal norms and standards. Caldwell finds similarities between the Bhagvathi shrines and the everyday experience of the women in Kerala society. They are both confined in “small, smoky, hot, claustrophobic” chambers in order to control their sexual needs and appetites.¹⁶

Given the cloistered existence of women in general in Kerala society, the figure of the Bhagvathi seems like an aberration. Caldwell cannot seem to match the image of this ferocious goddess with “long protruding teeth and tongue, her naked red breasts bouncing, chasing men wildly in the middle of the night” with the real flesh and blood women that she saw around her, women who were not only conscious about appearing as pure and proper but were engaged in “muting the sexual speech” of their female bodies.¹⁷ There is an impossibility about the femaleness of Bhagvathi and the picture of the female gender that this representation creates.

The image of the sexually frustrated, voracious young woman is very common in the ancient folklore of the yaksi.¹⁸ Yaksis were believed to be young virgin girls with voracious sexual needs who would climb on top of virtuous men as they slept and drain out vital life fluids. Kerala folklore abounds with such portrayals.¹⁹ Bhagvathi or Bhadrakali is conceived in Kerala as an unmarried, virgin girl—beautiful, hot and dangerous. The source of her frenzy is her virgin state and like the yaksis her desires and anger make her thirsty for male life-fluids. The deity inhabits the male body during performance and drains him of his energy. Performers have been known to describe the feeling of extreme exhaustion and fatigue at the conclusion of a performance, which they explain is not only the result of an exhausting performance but also the fallout of serving as a vehicle for a blood-thirsty, sexually-charged feminine entity. Women in

¹⁴ Nur Yalman, “On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* Vol 93 No. 1 (1963): 25-28.

¹⁵ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 198.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 201-202

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 202-203.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 163

this society, familiar with this image, make an active attempt at distancing themselves from it.

Caldwell discovered during her repeated attempts to know the reaction of the Kerala women to Bhagvathi that they often “would demur and defer to the greater knowledge of their husbands.”²⁰ The men on the other hand have intimate, devout personal reactions to offer regarding the goddess. Since she is essentially a male construct, it is the men who have a better understanding of the goddess. They share an intimacy with her while the women repeatedly deny that they feel any personal connection to Bhagvathi, claiming that their devotion is a result of fear and “an anxiety inside the mind.”²¹ Malyali women really believe that the uncontrolled energy of the goddess and her sexuality are ideas beyond their understanding. Like the women in Kerala society however, the goddess too is only allowed limited exposure to the public gaze. Her intense sexuality requires policing. Caldwell describes a visit to the Bhagvathi temple in Kodungallur:

Standing, sweating, chanting Amme, Devi . . . , I felt suddenly sad and full of longing for motherly love. We had to beg and suffer to get Devi's darshan. The closed door made me think of the days (not so very long ago) when women were kept secluded behind the doors of the houses, inaccessible, taboo but enticing, hard to get a glimpse of. Maybe this fuels the male fascination with peeping.²²

There is however a space where women come closest to embodying the spirit of the goddess: the daily frenzied ritual of the mentally unsound in front of the shrines of Siva and Bhagvathi at the Chottanikara Bhagvathi temple in Ernakulam district.²³ The ritual dancing of the women is particularly overpowering in their expression of extreme anguish. The strict rules governing the proper behavior of women in society are reversed in this frenzied dance as they scream and jump shamelessly while obscenities pour from their mouths. Anxious family members hover around the young women, watching their movements sadly and hoping for a cure, intervening only when there seems to be a possibility of the women injuring themselves in their violence. The obvious parallel to the frenzied dance of the Bhagvathi is unmistakable. Thus the only escape for women from their cloistered, claustrophobic existence is available to them when they are mentally unsound and hence incapable of being contained by the rules of proper behavior.

Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity substantiates Caldwell's observation of the cloistered existence of women, at the same time leading further credence to the incredulity of Gross's claims. Butler writes, "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them."²⁴ For Butler, gender is performative and therefore a socially agreed upon phenomenon. Butler challenges the notion of the “woman” as a universal category. She suggests that this term needs to be further investigated in order to understand the way the idea of the “woman” is complicated by issues of class,

²⁰ Ibid., 203.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 213.

²³ Ibid., 214-215.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 178.

ethnicity, sexuality and other determinants of identity. Butler suggests that assuming a universality for this term is parallel to the universality subscribed to by patriarchy which effaces the particulars of oppressive practices in different times and places. Butler challenges the distinction made between sex and gender (sex is assumed as biological, whereas gender is culturally constructed). She suggests that a sexed body cannot signify without gender and the apparent idea of the existence of the sexed body predating social and cultural discourse and imposition is a mere functioning of gender. Therefore, both sex and gender are constructed ideas. Butler goes on to suggest that no distinct, separate identities underlie the acts that supposedly suggest and express gender. These acts, in other words, do not express but only create the illusion of being a specific gender and having a stable gender identity. Therefore, the act of being a gender is the effect of culturally influenced actions and there is no solid, universal gender. And since genders (both “man” and “woman”) are culturally constructed ideas, Butler suggests, they remain open to interpretation and “resignification.” Butler thus creates a space for subversive action which challenges the imposed limits of gender roles and boundaries.

As already discussed, women in Kerala are expected to behave in a certain way and digressions from the strict code of conduct are met with severe social disapproval. The imposition of such moral codes of being for the “ideal woman” is of course a social and cultural construction. By making subscribing to this idea a marker of the ideal female, the society forces the woman to behave in a certain way in order to be recognized as a woman. Women who do not behave like they are expected to are termed a “real Bhagvathi,” a negative characterization. Male performers of Mutiyettu who enact the role of this female goddess often claim that she is no ordinary woman. She was not born in the ordinary way (through a vagina) and there are no mentions of her either having periods or going through the processes of pregnancy and childbirth.²⁵ The comparison with the Bhagvathi then strips the real woman of her feminine essence within this culture which revolves around their reproductive powers. Menstruation and childbirth are paradoxically seen as impurities associated with the female sex. A woman is supposed to spend the days of her period in isolation, Nalini Bekal, a well-known female writer from the Nayar caste describes the experience: “So for four days she (a girl/woman) has to sit in a special room by herself and she shouldn't go outside that room. Nobody should touch her either. All the ladies come to inquire about and see, but not touch her. Very close relatives bring snack and different eatables.”²⁶ Menstrual pollution is also seen as a reason, by women themselves, behind their not being allowed to enact the role of the Bhagvathi in Mutiyettu. As the wife of a prominent Mutiyettu performer who specializes in the portrayal of Kali (a form of Bhagvathi) says:

Women can't perform mutiyettu because of menses. I have much bleeding and sickness at each period. I can't touch any food. People think menses is bad. We can't enter the temple. My mother told me if a woman goes in the temple when she is menstruating, she will fall to shivering, have epileptic fits, or be possessed. The old women say that if a woman goes in at that time, she will lose her eyes and go mad. Women don't have much power. If we ask small things from Devi, we will get them – not big things. Men have more power. For work and such, men have more. Only at the time of birth do women

²⁵ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 205.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

have power. At other times, men dominate.²⁷

This woman clearly recognizes that “men dominate.” But, the gender role that she is supposed to perform within this social equation is so ingrained in her that she refuses to think of this domination as a restriction on her. Adhering to the male idea of what the role of the female should be is seen as an accepted fact of their lives by the women. They acknowledge and acquiesce to the cultural rules. These cultural norms appear arbitrary to a lot of them but there is no resistance offered. After all, it is an ancient tradition and challenging traditions is a disgrace. Also noteworthy, in the above quote, is the attitude that the women themselves have regarding a basic biological process associated with the female body. By perpetuating the notion of menstruation being an impure action and the time of the period as a time of social probation, women continue performing the role that patriarchy has outlined for them. We also witness an attitude of self-policing amongst the women in this attitude and a willingness to conform to the gender role expected of them.

Since menstruation and reproductive powers are such important markers of the female identity in this society, denying the female goddess Bhagvathi these markers of her “feminine sex” creates a gender anomaly. And since the male is the dominant force, only they can enact this anomalous sex possessing “female” energy. In spite of their same sex women are deemed incapable of understanding the “gender” of the goddess and consequently are denied any role in the portrayal of the Bhagvathi. Thus, contrary to what Gross would like us to believe about the Hindu/Indian men being more accepting of stronger women, we see that the iconography of the strong female divinity works against her claim. The image of the Bhagvathi is an ally of the male, working in conjunction with the masculine imagination to further subjugate and oppress the female. Looking at the performance of the Mutiyettu Bhagvathi as drag complicates the relation of the goddess with her female devotees further. Drag, in this context does not bring into relief “the understated, taken-for-granted quality of heterosexual performativity,” working instead to reinforce such a quality.²⁸

The enactment of the female Bhagvathi in Mutiyettu by male performers is a “drag” performance. The performer enacting the role dons a female costume, with emphasis on prominent breasts and adopts a stylized female demeanor which includes voice modulations, postures and movements. As a troupe leader described it, a performer should be like a lady.²⁹ The paradox lies in the fact, that the performer *should* be like a lady but *should not* be a lady. The ritual behavior of the goddess is contrary to all that a Malayali woman should not be and is seen echoed in the frenzied acts of the mad women in Chottanikara. A woman's sexuality and potential anger are taboo and need to be controlled. This particular form of drag then serves the purpose of the society by denying the female the right to express her sexuality and anger even in a ritual context. Butler writes,

As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely

²⁷ Ibid., 205

²⁸ Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies Volume 1, Number 1 (1993):

27.
²⁹ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 215.

naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity.³⁰

However, in the context of a Mutiyettu performance, as we have seen, imitating gender loses its efficacy in revealing the “imitative structure” of gender. As a matter of fact, it further reinforces the gender binaries that a drag performance is supposed to reverse and challenge.

The Mutiyettu Bhagvathi is imagined as a sex starved unmarried virgin who is thirsty for male life-fluids. The life-fluid in this case is of course the semen. The narrative of the Bhagvathi further substantiates the claim. It might be recalled here that the demon Darika whom Bhagvathi is looking for and ultimately going to kill in the performance has the boon from Brahma of being able to reproduce himself endlessly when a drop of his blood touches the ground. For this power, he is referred to as a *raktabijasura* – a blood-seed demon. *Bijam* in Malayalam means the reproductive seed or semen. Men and women both have it and it has a close relation to blood. In folk conceptions of reproductive physiology, the male and female produce their sexual fluids by arousing sexual desire and by heating the body – men in the form of semen and women in the form of blood. Therefore, the heat of the female is vital to the reproductive process, but to complete it the man has to sacrifice his life-fluids to the female, which “leaves him somehow less vital, closer to death.”³¹ The sacrifice of the essential male fluids is enacted in the Bhagvathi performance:

Darika is conquered by Kali, who takes the help of the insatiably bloodthirsty Vetalam, a horrible female forest ghost. Her enormous tongue spreads over the entire battlefield and as Kali kills Darika, Vetalam laps up the endless river of blood so that no more Darikas can be born from the contact of his blood with the earth. Thus Darika is destroyed by the direct controversion of his infinite autofertility: his yaksi/demon/vampire/virgin opponents ‘drain and drink’ his precious life-fluids thus destroying his vitality and killing him.³²

Sexual ideas not only abound in the narrative of the Bhagvathi but are also an important and integral part of the performance. Bawdy songs known as the Bharani are sung and addressed to the goddess by drunken devotees during a performance and talk in no uncertain terms about the sexual prowess of the goddess.³³ The cross-dressed performance of the female goddess allows

³⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175.

³¹ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 164.

³² Ibid.

³³ Caldwell talks about some of these songs. The men who are more than happy to sing these songs in an inebriated state and during a Mutiyettu performance did not seem equally forthcoming when Caldwell wanted to collect a few samples. However, she does manage to cite a few examples, which read as follows: “1. If you have to fuck Kodungallur Amma, you’ll have to have a penis like a flagpost. 2. Didn’t you see that Brahmin girl in Palghat? Didn’t you see her cunt? It’s like a cut Christmas cake [a European style dark fruitcake].” One of her respondents mentioned that songs like these are sung because the goddess is unmarried and can be made happy

the male to inhabit a form of the feminine that is socially unacceptable and hence out of bounds for a real woman. It is a performance of what Butler calls the “impossible within the possible” but its purpose is neither to celebrate the impossible nor is it to make up for a lack of social conventions which allow discursive forms of sexuality.³⁴ Thus, drag in this instance is not used for subversion but to assert the absolutism of prescribed gender rules and binaries.

Butler asks, “How would one ever determine whether subversion has taken place? What measure would one invoke to gauge the extent of subversion? From what standpoint would one know?”³⁵ Seen from the standpoint of an outsider peering into the patriarchal society where Mutiyettu exists, it is difficult to find any trace of gender subversion in the performance. The ferocious feminine divinity is constructed by the patriarchal society and her deviant example is one that women can revere and fear but not love and embrace. A large distance administered by patriarchy separates the goddess from her female devotees. In direct opposition to Gross’s claims the goddess is not a feminist but like her devotees a strong proponent of the patriarchal order of things. Her figure is used to marginalize and remind women of their inferior position in society not to celebrate them.

The figure of the Bhagvathi operates as a third category of gender in this society, that of the sexually-voracious female. This category may only be approached, performed and contained by the male but is always outside the realm of and serves as a warning and a limit to the female. The female sex is in this way divided into two distinct categories of the ideal (one which the Malayali women are supposed to aspire and adhere to) and that of the deviant, which would lead to their being excluded from society. Thus female possession as seen in the mad women and the possession resulting from social transgression is devalued as demonic as opposed to the male possession of and by the goddess which is celebrated as divine. This form of the feminine can rid the troubled female body of the “evil” that possesses her but can never enter the female body since that possession would be evil in itself. Gender roles in performance and in society sanctioned through cultural practices work to mark the woman as a category whose sexual and emotional potentials need to be checked in order for the society to maintain its balance. The work of Peggy Phelan discussed in the next section of the paper helps in understanding the extent and scope of this marking.

Deborah Tannen writes, “there is no unmarked woman.”³⁶ She suggests that women have always been traditionally marked as a category. In everything that a woman does from choosing a prefix for her name while filling out a form, in selecting footwear or clothing, her actions are under constant scrutiny. She cannot do anything without an interpretation of her character. Men on the other hand have been able to escape this vicious circle. They are most certainly the perpetrators who take it upon them to establish the yardstick on which a woman and her character are meticulously measured. Peggy Phelan argues that being invisible and consequently

by the singing of these obscene songs. Printed texts of Bharani are available at the performance site, but they do not contain the actual bawdy lyrics substituting them with devotional songs written in praise of the goddess by well-known poets (Caldwell, 165).

³⁴ Butler, “Critically Queer,” 27.

³⁵ Ibid., 29.

³⁶ Deborah Tannen, “Marked Women, Unmarked Men,” *New York Magazine* (June 20, 1993).

unmarked allows certain agency.³⁷ She uses the idea of the female as the invisible other and suggests that the female is a heavily marked entity. And it is the men who remain unmarked and create the signs and structures that mark the idea of the female and the feminine. A similar phenomenon is observed in the Kerala society that we have been looking at. The female is confined within the domestic space, and when she is allowed in public a wide array of restrictions are imposed on her. Abiding by these restrictions allows her to identify with the social category of the female in Kerala society. Transgressing these boundaries, in turn, marks her as an aberration and a threat to the balance in society that these restrictions supposedly create. For example, married Hindu women wear vermilion in the parting of their hair. This suggests that her body and person are controlled by a man. Not wearing the vermilion means that the woman is unmarried and hence available for male consumption. Dressing too provocatively (in the conservative, sex-deprived Kerala society this could mean something as common place as a t-shirt and jeans) suggests that the woman is “loose” and thus sexually available. Traditional Malayali clothes for women also make a distinction between pre-pubescent girls (hence not sexually desirable) and young women who have reached puberty. The latter adds a special garment which hides the bosom from the male gaze. However, the mere fact that she is wearing this special scarf is an indication for the male that this young girl is sexually mature. Schools and universities often try to impose the “moral dress code” on women. This is done in order to prevent the girls from showing their body off to the men and enticing them. Women who oppose these draconian rules are characterized as cheap, anti-traditional and “slutty.” The male, in this society is obsessed with the threat that uncontrolled female sexuality presents and makes every possible attempt to contain and confine it. The male however, is never subjected to any such regulation and is unmarked in this social equation. Although he is the visible representation of the culture, his presence in public is never subject to any scrutiny. It is only when the female enters the public arena that she is kept under a close and strict watch. However, in the Indian context, the act of marking can seem to have certain political agency as well. And since this act of marking allows agency, women are not a part of this arrangement. In India, caste and class may be identified by certain cultural markers. Sporting of the sacred thread (reserved for male members only) signifies affiliation to the higher, priestly castes of Brahmins and Nayars. Within this system of marking that guarantees agency, women remain unmarked but this unmarking only devalues their position. I argue that a process of marking and unmarking is also at play in the performance of the Bhagvathi.

When we view Phelan's unmarking and marking of women in conjunction with Butler's notion of the drag and Caldwell's idea of the cloistering of women we see Mutiyettu as setting boundaries for the right behavior of women. The ritual dance of the Bhagvathi represents an “unruly or ungovernable sort of woman; a flirt.”³⁸ These adjectives perfectly summarize the behavior of the Bhagvathi in performance and stand for everything that a Malayali woman is not supposed to be. The performance of the Bhagvathi by a male performer, I argue, functions as a warning to the female of the risks associated with being sexual libertines and of not possessing self-control. The performance serves as an effective strategy of marking the women. Phelan writes, “In excessively marking the boundaries of the woman’s body, in order to make it

³⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

³⁸ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 216.

thoroughly visible, patriarchal culture subjects it to legal, artistic, and psychic surveillance.”³⁹ Revising Phelan's approach (for the Kerala context), I suggest that the form of marking seen in Mutiyettu does not set down standards for an ideal feminine behavior but seeks to impose a boundary for that behavior. In the case of Mutiyettu, the image created is not of the ideal but of the kind of woman that the society does not want its women to be. Therefore, “the thoroughly visible” is the deviant woman, an image which is then used by the patriarchal system to enforce surveillance on the women who are culturally unmarked. The female body is not supposed to be visible in this cultural context and the surveillance imposed by the patriarchy ensures that. And the “thoroughly visible” bare-breasted, sexually-crazed female embodiment acts as the boundary that should not be overstepped. The deviation from the ideal woman “role” gives rise to the fearful, vengeful and lustful Devi who women are supposed to venerate but never emulate. Thus, being referred to as the Bhagvathi becomes a negative characterization and symptoms afflicting female transgressors defying the social code echo the behavior of the goddess in performance. The unmarked males in Kerala society then not only create and propagate the idea of the ideal feminine behavior they also use performance to create boundaries for the women in this society.⁴⁰ The figure of the goddess in frenzy thus becomes the “believable image” of the “unverifiable real” of the young virgin girl in heat, a phenomenon not seen outside of the figure of the mentally unstable women because of social impositions.⁴¹ The figures of the “strong-willed, creative, and powerful females” in Mutiyettu therefore prove to be more limiting than liberating.⁴²

The popular image of the Kali aptly summarizes the ideas discussed in this paper. The goddess is depicted naked. Her breasts and genitals are barely concealed by garlands made of human, more specifically, male, body parts. She is seen astride Siva, her creator. Legend has it that the goddess was afflicted by pox after being cursed by Manodari, the wife of Darika (the demon she killed and whose head she is holding in one of her left arms). Siva wishing to rid her of agony creates a son Ghantakarnan who licks her body to cure her. The story is fraught with suggestions of cunnilingus and incest. He is prevented from licking her face because brothers cannot enjoy such a form of intimacy with their sister and in pain Kali runs to her father. In order to calm her down, Siva strips (although shown in the accompanying image with a tiger skin loin cloth) and lies in her path. Daughters are not supposed to see their fathers naked and since she does, Kali is ashamed (the reason her tongue hangs out) and she lets off the steam. In another version, Siva lying naked in the path of Kali penetrates her as she steps on him and this releases the pent up energy that she had been holding back and the goddess calms down.⁴³ This widely

³⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 30.

⁴⁰ Women are expected to be ignorant about sex. They are supposed to be virgins till marriage and female masturbation is regarded as taboo not only by men but women themselves. A lot of women simply do not believe that female masturbation is possible although they know and think that male masturbation is dirty but normal. Women are also expected to be homemakers, not overtly ambitious, know some music and dance and be well conversant with traditional values and practices. They are supposed to be gentle, caring and “family-minded,” meaning not aspiring to or not holding a job. A lot of working women quit their jobs in order to devote full time and energy to their families post-marriage.

⁴¹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 1.

⁴² Gross, “Is the goddess a feminist?” 27.

⁴³ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 167-169.

disseminated popular image and the accompanying story are in complete contrast to the image of the “Indian woman.” Matrimonial websites advertising prospective brides bear testimony to what is expected of a “good” Indian girl. She is supposed to be fair (the goddess is dark-skinned, most Malyali men look for “very fair” women), good-looking, gentle, caring and traditional (read without ambition, can sing, cook and have children). In other words, qualities which are in direct opposition to the figure of the Kali/Bhagvathi.

It is hard to imagine, given the abundance of such contradictory evidence, that Rita Gross declares that the figure of the fierce goddess suggests the acceptability of strong women in Indian society. The goddess Kali as I have demonstrated in this discussion is the exclusive property of Indian men. Women, on the other hand, are scared of her and revere her fearing divine wrath. This wrath is supposed to manifest in ways similar to the uncontrolled frenzy of her behavior as seen in Mutiyettu performance and heard in folklores and legends. Any identification with the deity for the women in Kerala means that she is a deviant. Bhagvathi’s voracious sexual appetite scares the men but also excites them. Her flirtatious nature and big exposed breasts are exciting for men who engage in a playful banter with her. However, these are the exact qualities that they do not want the women of their society to exhibit as these examples from Kerala will prove:

'One day,' she would say, 'I was going to school with my friends. I was only 14 then. A couple of boys came from the opposite direction and pointing to me, said, 'This girl has magnificent breasts.' They thought I would not understand, but I did. I knew then just a few words of English...My temper flared up and I used an abusive Malayalam expression, the politest translation of which is, 'Your mother's coconut!' Somehow my father came to know of this incident and he decreed, 'Janamma shall not go to school any longer.' That was the end of my education, and that's why I'm such an ignoramus.'⁴⁴

Women in Kerala are able to be educated and have the opportunities that education affords them such as participating in politics, keeping up to date on news, reading religious texts, etc. These tools have not translated into full, equal rights however. At Cochin University women must be in their hostels by dark while men are free to roam at any hour. There is a general atmosphere and attitude that women must be protected and therefore restrictions such as this one are for their benefit. Of course there are women who break the rules, but they are often looked down on. One student from Kerala expressed to me his anger at women in Cochin who wore jeans short skirts and were "flaunting their sexuality."⁴⁵

The image of the Bhagvathi becomes a poignant reminder of the evils of flaunting sexuality. She is a goddess, yes, but she is stripped of her femininity. She is denied reproductive powers and several men exploit and abuse her.

This Hindu goddess is clearly not “promoting the humanity” of Hindu women. The energy represented in the Bhagvathi is, in sharp contrast to Gross’s claims, not “positive

⁴⁴ Robin, Jeffrey, "Governments and Culture: How Women Made Kerala Literate," *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 60, Issue 3 (Autumn, 1987): 462.

⁴⁵ Josh Andrix, “Gender and Religion in Kerala,” accessed December 7, 2011, http://www.haverford.edu/engl/engl277b/Contexts/gender_and_religion_in_ker.htm.

feminine energy” but a source of uncontrolled power which vilifies feminine energy and power. This ensures that such power, if it exists, is kept in check and preferably behind closed doors. Sarah Caldwell’s observations on the Mutiyettu Bhagvathi and the relation that women have with this deity, serving as a framework to this discussion, substantiate this claim further. The performative nature of gender in this society is brought to the fore by engaging in a discussion with Judith Butler. However, we find drag, which Butler sets up as having subversive potential loses its efficacy in this different cultural environment. As demonstrated in this discussion, it emerges as a patriarchal device used to subjugate and marginalize women. The form of drag seen in Mutiyettu marks the goddess as an aberrant form of the female gender. Peggy Phelan’s concept of marking and unmarking as a source of agency enters this conversation at this point. The discussion reveals that in the Indian cultural context marking can also be a source of agency. In such instances women are left unmarked (denying them agency), while they continue to be marked with standards of appropriate behavior and conduct. The performance of Bhagvathi acts as one such marking device. Set up in opposition to the unbelievably incredulous claims made by Rita Gross this paper sought to demonstrate that the figure of the “strong-willed, creative, and powerful” Hindu goddesses actually work against the interests of the Hindu woman and can be seen as a major cause for her inferior position in the Hindu social system.