

SUBVERSIVE GENDER PERFORMANCE IN KOTTANKULANGARA TEMPLE FESTIVAL

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Abstract: This paper critically analyses the images of the self and the “othering” of the transgender identity in the public sphere of Kerala in the context of gender visibility. The performance of queer sexuality and gender identity is contested in Kerala where transgenders are forced to displace themselves from their homeland in search of identity and solace. However the religious space in Kottankulangara temple in Kerala offers the transient realm of transvestism. The cross-dressed males here commemorate the annual chamaya-vilakku festival, which is considered as an offering to the Goddess Bhagavati. Those gender non-conforming people who live as men due to social pressures get the chance to flaunt their gender identities at this occasion. In this sense, transgenders, “the other” who take their legitimization from various religious myths, achieve a temporary space of acceptance in the public sphere. It is noted that besides the normalization of the subversive gender performances, the religious ritualistic site and the worship system is transformed to a commercial space as the temple premises are filled with make-up stalls, ironically endorsing the gender idealization in terms of the patriarchal binary norms.

Keywords: Chamaya-vilakku, Commercialization, Cross-dressed male, Gender performance, Kottankulangara, Public sphere, Religious space, Transgenders.

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1. Introduction

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.¹

Gender is a construction by the society and often it demands the enactment of certain role expectations from the society. It is not a mere process but a process within a regulatory framework. The freedom of an individual to choose the gender role is thus curtailed. The queer enactments cross the sex boundaries by performing a different gender role of one's choice. The LGBTQI² people use the acronym to self-affirm their identity which is disembodied from the binary understanding of gender and sexuality. The gender performances that deviate from the naturalized social construction have been marginalized for a long time. Queer persons lacked a space for the articulation of their voice in the social and political spheres. However, different manifestations of transgender identities and alternative sexualities are illustrated in religious scriptures in India.

Mahabharata narrates the sex change story of Amba/Sikhandini/Sikhandin, where Amba prays to Shiva for the "boon of manhood" to avenge Bhishma, her abductor, for thwarting of her "duties as a woman."³ In another myth, Aravan agrees to sacrifice himself in the Mahabharata battle as long as he makes love to a woman first. As no woman was ready to marry him, Lord Krishna takes the form of a woman and marries Aravan and fulfils his desire. After becoming a widow and the subsequent mourning, Krishna assumes his male form.⁴ The ritualized

¹Butler Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, 43-44.

²An umbrella term for sexual and gender minorities, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex.

³Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, *Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, New York: St Martin's Press, 2000, 31-37.

⁴Wendy Doniger, *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*, New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1999, 262-63. Vanita and Kidwai, *Same Sex Love in India*, 69-71; cited in Gayatri Reddy, *With*

enactment of this myth is held annually in Koothandavur festival in Koovagom, Tamil Nadu. Also, the same-sex procreation story of Shiva and Vishnu (as Mohini) is elaborated in the Puranas and Ayyappa (Hariharaputra) is the child of the two male gods - Hari/Vishnu and Hara/Shiva.⁵ The transgender community in India legitimises their existence with these puranic myths.

The images of the transgender self projected in the contemporary media and in the public sphere especially in Kerala is that of 'the other.' However, at Kottankulangara temple festival in Kerala, the male-to-female (MtF) transgender identity and the cross-dressed subversive gender performance capture certain religious significance and recognition. The MtF transgenders revisit the religious space to perform their gender identity along with other believers who participate in the cross-dressing festival. This paper explores the space of transgender performance in the Kottankulangara temple festival, and critically analyses the commercialization of the myth and the ritual.

In the first part, the paper examines the construction of transgender identity represented in the existing ethnographic scholarly inquiries and the framework of the MtF transgender identities - hijra, jogappa/jogtas,⁶ Kothis, aravani subcultures - existing in India. The next section observes the transgenders living in the fringes and the transformation in the representation of such identities in the public sphere. The final section of the study critically analyses the subversive gender performance in the ritualistic space in the Kottankulangara temple festival and how the marginalization of the transgender identity is temporarily eroded in the contentious circuits of the cross-dressing festival. The section also critiques the commercialization of the religious ritual and the binary idealization in terms of images and gendered

Respect to Sex, Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005, 19.

⁵Doniger, *Splitting the Difference*, 264. Vanita and Kidwai, *Same Sex Love in India*, 69-71, cited in Reddy, *With Respect to Sex*, 19.

⁶The Male-to-Female transgender community in South India, and worshippers of Goddess Yellama. Mposo S. Paulina, *Alternative Sexualities in India*, Leiden: Leiden University, 2017, 11.

markers of the body. The significance of this study lies in the effort to unearth a few spaces that offer avenues for transgenders to 'come out' in the public sphere in Kerala.

2. Transgenders, Cross-Dressers and the Subversive

Possibilities of Identity: Framing Theories and Histories

The MtF transgenders are an integral part of Indian society and "undoubtedly related to the variety and significance of alternative gender roles and gender transformations in Indian mythology and traditional culture."⁷ Traditionally, they dance at the weddings and the birth of a child and is seen as a blessing in these special occasions because of the way they are represented in the puranic myths. In Northern states of India, they live as a community and are known as hijras. The English translation of the word 'hijra' relates to the categories of eunuchs and hermaphrodites, "emasculated biological males and intersexed 'males' whose sexual organs are ambiguous at birth or who suffer from a genetical malformation."⁸ Serena Nanda refers to them as "neither men nor women" in the title of her study. The terms used for hijra such as *kojja* in Telugu⁹ and *pottai* in Tamil are derogatory in nature that refer to effeminate male.

The notion of community is a key to the understanding of hijra existence as a marginalized subculture, which helps them to belong to a hierarchical frame and survive as a "parallel society."¹⁰ Since they were seen as outcasts in the public sphere in the past, hijras formed their own familial structures which follow

⁷Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1999, 20.

⁸Sandeep Bakshi, "A Comparative Analysis of Hijras and Drag Queens: the Subversive Possibilities and Limits of Parading Effeminacy and Negotiating Masculinity," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 46.3-4 (2004), 211-223.

⁹Christopher Anderson, *Gay Men in India*, Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1977; cited in Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 14.

¹⁰Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Chicago: Adline, 1977; cited in Bakshi, "A Comparative Analysis of Hijras and Drag Queens," 213.

strict internal rules. In order to be a member of the community, an elder hijra would adopt the new transgender as her daughter.¹¹

Hijras worship Goddess Bahucharamata - a manifestation of Goddess Kali. They please her by undergoing emasculation and nirvan¹² and are adopted by the community through a ceremony called jelsa¹³ in which, according to the belief, a castrated male becomes a female wholly. Unlike the hijra community, the jogappas in Karnataka do not undergo the nirvan and are worshippers of Goddess Yellamma. They are perceived with a halo of divinity and in possession of supernatural powers of healing and fortune telling. The privileged divinity of Jogappas is derived from the folklore of Renuka, the wife of an ascetic sage, Jamadagni who was ordered by her husband to be beheaded. The two sons, who refused to behead their mother, were cursed to lose their masculinity because of their 'cowardice'. As per the myth, she became Yellamma and the cursed sons, Jogappas.¹⁴ The possession of the Goddess by a devotee requires a gender change, which gives a religious sanctity and transgenderism is framed as a divine division rather than an individual's wish.¹⁵ Though transgenders lack the ritualistic role as performers as that of the hijra community in North Indian states, certain religious spaces like the Koothandavur temple in Koovagom (where aravannies

¹¹Resmi and Anilkumar, *Transgender: History, Culture, Representation*, Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2016, 28.

¹²An operation that removes the genitals of a male-to-female transgender, which is also called a rebirth. Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman*, 27.

¹³A ritualistic adoption to the transgender community, followed by pooja and celebrations. Resmi and Anilkumar, *Transgender: History, Culture and Representation*, 32-33.

¹⁴Makepeace Sitlhou, "Jogappas, the Men who Marry a Goddess to Become Women," *The Wire*, 1 December 2016. <<https://thewire.in/gender/jogappas-goddess-gender>> (10 October 2017).

¹⁵N. J. Bradford, "Transgenderism and the Cult of Yellamma: Heat, Sex and Sickness in South Indian Ritual," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3, Autumn 1983, 307-322; cited in Heinrich Böll Stiftung, *Jogappa, Gender, Identity and the Politics of Exclusion*, Bangalore: Aneka, 2014, 6.

celebrate their myth), and the Yellamma *Jatre* in the Saudatti temple (where Jogappas celebrate their myth), in Northern Karnataka attract a number of transgenders.

The MtF transgenders who lead a community life legitimise their existence through certain puranic myths: for instance, in *Ramayana*, while leaving to jungle, Rama blesses people who were neither men nor women. Certain myths relate the descent of the hijras from the deity of Shiva (the god of destruction), who was also called Ardhanariswar (half man and half woman). For many hijras, the quality of being half man and half woman is a source of infinite strength that endows on them the divine power to give curses just like Shiva cursed the earth.¹⁶ In another myth from *Mahabharata*, Arjuna dressed as a woman in appearance called Brihannada,¹⁷ and participated in the wedding ceremony of his son Abhimanyu with the princess Uttara.¹⁸ It must be pointed out that Arjuna's cross-dressing is read by almost all hijras as an instance of voluntary emasculation that opens up avenues for their existence. Different transgender communities in North Indian states and certain regions in South India formed subcultural spaces by legitimising these myths and religion offered them some sanctity to a level though the public sphere marginalised them.

Considering the gender and sexuality discourse in the state of Kerala, the use of the term "transgender" is novel. The cultural and historical aspects of third gender identities in Kerala remains as a slippery terrain and certain instances can be identified on the regional imaginations and the conceptualization of gender and sexuality discussions in various media. The LGBTQI social and cultural discourse and identity politics were unfamiliar to Kerala for a long time unlike the other states in India. Among the

¹⁶Alf Hiltebeitel, "Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadi," *History of Religions*, 20.1/2 (1980), 147-174. Nanda, *Neither Man, nor Woman*, 20.

¹⁷Hiltebeitel, "Śiva, the Goddess," 154. S. K., Sharma, "Eunuchs: Past and Present," *Eastern Anthropologist*, 4, (1984), 381-389. Nanda, *Neither Man, nor Woman*, 30-31.

¹⁸Hiltebeitel, "Śiva, the Goddess," 166.

Travancore-Cochin-Malabar trinity, Calicut in the Malabar region was seen as a "Mecca of homosexual expeditions."¹⁹ The foundation of the same sex group *Men in India Movement* in Kochi was a culminating moment, and the *Malabar Cultural Forum* formed in Calicut in the late 90s promoted the creative expression of homosexuals and transgenders through art and culture. However, the marginalisation and ostracism in Kerala forced the queer people to migrate to other states in search of identity, livelihood and existence as the state lacked support system for the LGBTQI community like the hijra, jogappa or aravani subcultures in other Indian states. Social activism and the emergence of queer movement as intellectual and political development also contributed to the fledging of paradigm shift in gender and sexuality debates in Kerala's recent history. The impact of Western education and post 1990 globalization process largely affected imaginations beyond the limits of hetero binarism.

While examining the marginalization of the body, identity and desires, it can be discerned that transgenders are ostracized and marginalized due to their difference from the patriarchal heteronormativity. "There are no transgenders in Kerala. ... There are few people in the State who come out openly about their transgender identity. Our society simply does not accept transgenders."²⁰ The news report brings out the notion that the experience of living as a transgender is filled with trauma in Kerala. The banishment and ostracism starts from the hetero-patriarchal familial system where even the cross-dressers are bullied. "Many transgenders in Kerala migrate to cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, or Delhi as people in their home State do not accept them."²¹

¹⁹T. Muraleedharan, "Shifting Paradigms Gender and Sexuality Debates in Kerala," *Economic & Political Weekly*, vol. 49.17 (2014), 70-78.

²⁰Staff Reporter, "Kerala Hounds out its Transgender Community," *The Hindu*, 14 February 2013.

²¹Staff Reporter, "Kerala Hounds out Its Transgender Community."

In the social scenario of Kerala, a sudden shift happened with the 2014 Supreme Court Verdict²² recognizing the transgenders' political and civic rights and the Social Justice Department of Kerala conducted a transgender survey,²³ which covered the social and personal aspect of their life. The term "transgender" was officially documented for the first time instead of locally used derogatory terms of "Penpoosu," "Menaka," etc. Based on the findings in the survey, the state adopted a transgender policy in 2015.²⁴ The premier university in the state, the University of Kerala for the first of its kind adopted a policy for its transgender students²⁵ modelling on the state policy for addressing equal opportunity, respect and educational needs. Followed by the example set by Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka have cleared the proceedings for the formulation of transgender policy. Transgenders started to get political, social and cultural recognition which is evident from events like right to cast vote in 2016 Kerala assembly election and the distribution of electoral identity cards.²⁶ Besides these, the queer pride parades since 2010

²²*National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India* verdict by the Supreme Court of India declared transgender people to be a 'third gender,' and affirmed their fundamental rights granted under the Constitution of India <<https://web.archive.org/web/20140527105348/http://supremecourtindia.nic.in/outtoday/wc40012.pdf>> (21 October 2017).

²³*The Transgender Survey 2014-15*, Report Submitted to the Director, Department of Social Justice, Government of Kerala: <<http://sjd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Survey%20Report/12157.pdf>> (21 October 2017).

²⁴The policy document affirms the rights of transgender people in line with the Supreme Court verdict 2014 <<https://kerala.gov.in/documents/10180/46696/State%20Policy%20for%20Transgenders%20in%20Kerala%202015>> (21 October 2017).

²⁵University of Kerala, *Policy for Transgender Students*, <https://www.keralauniversity.ac.in/pdfs/news/kerala_university_transgender_policy1463741162.pdf> (21 October 2017).

²⁶P. Abhijith, "Avalilekkulla Dooram," Dream Capture Productions, 2016, Documentary.

too became a platform for transgender visibility.²⁷ In the sacred sphere, the MtF gender performance as an offering to the deity in Kottankulangara temple festival, Kollam district in Kerala, has been observed since time immemorial²⁸ and transgenders also started attending the festival.

3. Chamaya-vilakku: Subversive Gender Performance in Kottankulangara Temple Festival

Cross-dressing was highly discouraged and criminalized under the British rule in India. Transgenders were ostracized for their deviation from the norm: "transgenders being branded unclean and freakish – their marginalization was more severe than that of the Indian male who was termed effeminate and devious."²⁹ The temple festivals offered spaces of solace for transgenders where they have prominent roles. The hijra, aravani, jogappa MtF transgender identities and certain transgenders who live as males due to social pressures found the ritualistic space of the temple festivals as appropriate chances to flaunt their gender identity.

In Kottankulangara, the Goddess Bhagavati³⁰ is worshipped and the festival is held annually. Though it is part of the temple festival, the cross-dressed men's lamp holding ceremony (*chamaya-vilakku*), single-handedly made it a bustling site of pilgrimage. The cross-dressing and the MtF gender performance

²⁷Queer Pride Keralam, *From Silence to Celebrations ...* <<http://queerpridekeralam.blogspot.com/>> (21 December 2017).

²⁸The pamphlet issued by the temple trust, Chavara Sri Major Kottankulangara Temple, 2017, 7.

²⁹Nair, J. Sonya, "Transgendering Celebrations: The Politics of Sexuality in Koovagam and Kottankulangara Chamayavilakku," *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies*, Vol. 9.2, (July 2009): 20.

³⁰In Kerala, the goddess is most often called Bhagavati, a name equivalent to the generic Devi. In the context of worship, Bhagavati is more specifically used for the benevolent and serene form of the goddess usually pictured as a young charming woman (but devotees may describe her in many different ways). Marian Pasty and Abdul Wahid, "'Our Devi is like that': An Ethnological Insight into the Image of the Hindu goddess Bhadrakali in Popular South Indian Belief and Temple Practice," *The Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 9, (2016): 332.

at the Kottankulangara temple is also depicted in some Malayalam films like “Odum Raja Adum Rani” (directed by Viju Verma, 2014) and “Tamaar Padaar” (directed by Dileesh Nair, 2014) and such visualisations are significant in registering the visibility of transgenders in the sacred as well as cultural sphere in Kerala. According to the believers, the temple had a mythical past; it was a deserted place and a group of cow-herd boys got a coconut (*kottan* in local language), and to break the coconut, they found a stone from this place. When they hit the stone with the coconut, it began to bleed, and an astrologer suggested building a temple in the place where the stone was found. As per the belief, since there were no girls to hold the lamps as offering to the Goddess, young boys cross-dressed as girls and carried the lamps.³¹ The same is celebrated as a religious ritual in the temple:

During the month of Chaitra, thousands of men of all types dress up as women and offer themselves to Bhagavati an expansion of the Goddess Durga. In a special ceremony called Chamaya-vilakku, the cross dressers grasp tall lighted lamps and wait for procession of the Goddess in the form of *sila* or stone to pass by. The goddess Bhagavati then blesses the pilgrims and showers all good fortune upon them.³²

Another version of the myth has something in common with the Bahucharamata cult worshipped by the hijra community. “The cowherds used to dress as girls and venerate a stone and playfully offer *kottan* to it. The Goddess was pleased by their devotion and blessed them.”³³ During the chamaya-vilakku festival, men appropriate their body as that of women by shaving off moustaches which can be read as a ritualised castration as the way hijras undergo nirvan.

³¹The pamphlet issued by the temple trust, 7.

³²Amara Das Wilhelm, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex conditions through Hinduism*. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2013, 59.

³³Nair, “Transgendering Celebrations,” 92.



A poster displaying the temple festival

The above poster depicts the Goddess Bhagavati in the centre and cross-dressed male holding lamps on both sides of the Goddess. The festival tag is written in Malayalam reads, “historically famous male make-up lamp festival”. As per the belief, dressing up as woman and offering prayers by holding the lamp is seen as a penance: “It’s believed that by dressing as a woman and offering prayers holding the chamaya-vilakku (the five-wicked lamp), Bhagavati forgives a man’s sins.”³⁴ Those men who participate in the cross-dressing festival observe *vrata*m (abstinence from meat, liquor, sex and so on).³⁵ It is also seen as a *nercha* or offering to the Goddess. There are a few other *nerchas* in the temple as Kottannivedyam, Paayasam,³⁶ and Panthirunaazhi³⁷ by all the

³⁴U. R. Arya, “This year’s Chamayavilakku Witnesses 4,000 men Cross-dressing to Offer Prayers,” *Times of India*, 2017 <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/this-years-chamayavilakku-witnesses-4000-men-cross-dressing-to-offer-prayers/articleshow/57839258.cms>> (23 Decmber 2017).

³⁵The pamphlet issued by the temple trust, 7.

³⁶A sweet made of coconut as an offering.

³⁷Naazhi is a rice measurement vessel in local vernacular and weighs around 200 gms. 12 naazhi measures 2.400 kg rice as offering by a devotee.

devotees and Narangavilakku³⁸ and Chandrappongala³⁹ exclusively by women devotees.

These offerings may be read in line with Pongala⁴⁰ and Kuthiyottam⁴¹ - a few rituals observed as offering and penance associated with temples in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Traditionally, Pongala is "an offering to the Sun or the Moon for protection from disease, in menarche rituals of various communities, in rituals done at the seventh month of a woman's pregnancy, and in Irhava and Cheruman agricultural and kavu festivals to Bhadrakali" in tribal communities.⁴² The Sanskritisation of this festival in the contemporary times has transformed the occasion to a mass cooking in open space in the Thiruvananthapuram city, where women across class, caste and creed participate. All these sacrifices are ritualised, which are "massive act of devotion in order to obtain specific boon from the deity."⁴³ As in Attukal Pongala where a large number of women turn up as devotees, in Kottankulangara the temple festival becomes the celebration of cross-dressing and transgenders began to appear at this space which demarcates a rupture in the normative gender performance.

³⁸The lamp made of lemon as an offering for blessing from the deity; at some places oral narratives say it is used as a relief from snake blemish.

³⁹A mass open cooking by the female devotees, and here the name is synonymous with the pongala on the basis of lunar calendar.

⁴⁰The ritualistic offering of porridge made of rice, sweet brown molasses, coconut gratings, nuts and raisins.

⁴¹A ritualistic representation of human sacrifice. Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, "Migration and the Commoditisation of Ritual: Sacrifice, Spectacle and Contestations in Kerala, India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 37.1-2 (2003), 109-139.

⁴²Dianne Jenett, *Red Rice for Bhagavathy/ Cooking for Kannagi: An Ethnographic Organic Enquiry of the Pongala Ritual at Attukal Temple, Kerala, South India*, San Francisco: California Institute of Integral Studies, 1999, 3.

⁴³Filippo Osella, and Caroline Osella, "Migration and the Commoditisation of Ritual: Sacrifice, Spectacle and Contestations in Kerala, India," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 37.1-2 (2003): 121.

The festival has seen the participation of an increasing number of homosexual and transgender people from Kerala, for them, it is a celebration of their own identity. The temple premise offers a temporary realm of transgenering for the gender non-conforming biological male. The event gave "the freedom to dress up as woman and travel in buses without much stigma."⁴⁴ Connecting with the Bhaktinian notion of carnival, during *chamaya-vilakku*, the temple space transforms to "carnival site where, under the aegis of a religiously sanctioned festival, the transgenders 'appear' for two nights."⁴⁵ A number of events associated with the festival like the games, dances, songs and beauty pageants commercialize the space and make it a carnival. The Bhaktinian notion of carnival was evolved as a form of self expression among many communities and is understood as a "licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony."⁴⁶ Carnival challenges the prevailing norms of those who are in power and the temple premise as a carnival space subverts and parodies the gender performance through the MtF cross dressing. The transgenders and the cross dressers in the festival deconstruct the normative gender through their physical appropriation, which is a threat to the hegemonic gender roles. In this sense, the hetero-patriarchal familial system in Kerala that shuns the transgenders and eschew their presence at home and in public places ironically let the boys and men to hold the lamp as cross-dressed to commemorate the myth concerned with the origin of the temple. The transgenders also get a religious sanction among the cross-dressed males.

⁴⁴Arya, "This year's Chamayavilakku," 2017.

⁴⁵Nair, "Transgenering Celebrations," 94.

⁴⁶Lynda Johnston, *Queering Tourism: Paradoxical Performances of Gay Pride Parades*, London: Routledge, 2005, 76.



Cross dressed male devotees holding the lighted lamps

The transgender body is looked down with aversion in the public sphere in Kerala, but the same transgenders are difficult to discern from a large number of cross-dressed males who carry the *chamaya-vilakku* during the festival. Interestingly, the tabooed bodies of the MtF transgenders become objects of desire then (as in the figure above) during the festival. It can also be linked to Julia Kristeva's understanding of the "abject" in contravention to the Lacanian notion of "object of desire" or *objet petit a*.⁴⁷ The abject body refers to a threat of order: "what disturbs identity, system and orders" and refuses to "respect borders, positions and rules,"⁴⁸ whereas Lacan's idea of *objet petit a* is an object that causes a desire. The transgender bodies are seen as taboo against hetero-patriarchal society where, the gender binaries - only male and female - are the normative. Judith Butler illustrates the tendency of the heterosexual society to disavow those who deviate from the mainstream - Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transgenders - and to relegate such people to the "domain of abject beings, those who are not yet subjects, but who form the

⁴⁷Dino Felluga, "Terms Used by Psychoanalysis." *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory* <<https://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>>(21 October 2017)

⁴⁸Julia Kristeva, "The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," 1986, 4.

constitutive outside of the subject."⁴⁹ The marginalized bodies of the transgenders become objects that fascinate the mass during the festival. The participants themselves as well as other men at the temple premise derive a scopophilic⁵⁰ pleasure by looking at the transgressed bodies. This gender parodying is legitimized with the myth on the temple festival. As per the myth, it was the boys below 14 years of age, carried lamps as offering, and the custom is now metamorphosed to accommodate all men who wish to participate in the event.

The commodification of the body and the appropriation of the gender binary can be discerned from the large number of make-up stalls in the temple premise during the Kottankulangara festival. The social construction of feminine gender and the image of the female body in the cultural practices, including films are of wearing saree and using make-ups which include *kajal*,⁵¹ *bindi*⁵² and jewellery. Hence the temple festival attracts a number of males who cross-dress and MtF transgenders who join the festival as a celebration of their identity.

⁴⁹Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London: Routledge, 1993, 3.

⁵⁰The pleasure derived from looking, introduced by Lacan while translating Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Laura Mulvey suggested Cinema was an ideal platform to have scopophilic pleasure. See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, Jacques Alain-Miller, ed., New York: Karnac, 1994, 194. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, 14-26.

⁵¹An eye makeup, also known as kohl, endorses femininity in South Asian culture especially in dances. It also has some medical purpose. See Fawzi Sweha, "Kohl along History in Medicine and Cosmetics." *History of Science and Medicine*, 17.2, (1982): 182-183.

⁵²In South Asian cultures, the coloured dot worn on the forehead. See Subhamoy Das, "Bindi: The Great Indian Forehead Art," <<https://www.thoughtco.com/bindi-the-great-indian-forehead-art-1770089>> (16 February 2009).



A male is dressed up as a woman by a make-up artist



Make-up stalls near the temple premise

Since the festival itself is named as chamaya-vilakku, it signifies the importance of make-up to switch from the male biological physique to the female. The figure above shows advertisements in display in front of make-up stalls during the festival which ironically endorse the feminization of the male body and evokes the sensation of gender as a social construction and performance. In Koovagam temple festival, there is a beauty pageant as part of the festival, whereas the Kottankulangara temple festival has transformed to beauty idealization and it is evident from the comments the cross-dressed males receive from

the spectators. The cross-dressed male is an amalgam of the collective imagination of the patriarchal notions of the gender binary. While analysing gender as performance, Judith Butler puts it, "the notion of an original or primary gender is parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing and sexual stylization of butch/femme identities."⁵³ Butler sees such parodic identities as either degrading to women in the case of drag and cross-dressing or an uncritical appropriation of sex role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality. In this sense, cross-dressing is a fabricating mechanism through which the social construction of gender takes place. Gender is culturally determined as a performance rather than an innate biological function and the different gender roles created by society. In agreement with Butler, it may be adjudged that the subversive gender performance at Kottankulangara festival by the cross-dressed male as well as the MtF transgenders becomes an endorsement of the heterosexual imagination of how a female body ought to be.

The figure also indicates the commercialization of a religious ritual; cross-dressing is commercialized in market in terms of the patriarchal beauty concepts on the female body. The *chamaya-vilakku* festival is discussed in a blog article in detail; about the myth, the make-up and cross dressing of males in the festival: "men dress up as girls and all make ups will be applied on them so that they will look like a 'real girl.'"⁵⁴ Modern dresses like jeans are not allowed in the temple premise, endorsing the stereotyped gendered notion of the traditional female costume in Kerala. Cross-dressing is done to show respect to the Devi for the favours and blessings received. "The boys wear *set-mundu* and saree or *pattu-pavadai*, *churidhars* and apply lipstick and put long hair wigs and after completing all such things these devotees will light up

⁵³Judith Butler, "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions," *Feminist Theory and The Body: A Reader*, Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick, eds., New York: Routledge, 1999, 418.

⁵⁴Shruti, "Men in Saree," *Meninsaree.blogspot.com*, 2010 <<http://meninsaree.blogspot.in/2010/11/kottankulangara-sridevi-temple-at.html>> (17 October 2017).

lamps and start visiting the temple as a procession."⁵⁵ The emphasis given on certain 'girly' costumes are the society's stereotyped notion of the feminine gender. Majorie Garber criticises the bipolar approach of the society while she discusses cross-dressing, and according to her, such approaches create "category crisis." "Cross-dressing is a disruptive element that involves not just a category crisis of male and female; but the crisis of category itself. In this sense, cross-dressing is a commentary on our own stereotypes."⁵⁶ And these stereotypes disregard the fluidity of gender. However, at the temple premise, during the festival the space is blurred between a cross-dressed male and a male-to-female transgender and this in turn becomes a blessing for the latter to easily 'pass off'.

The blog article further states certain other instructions and information for participating in the festival:

If you want women's wigs, it is available for hire or you can buy it near the stalls in Temple. There are lots of Makeup Stalls near the temple. The cost of simple Make Up will be about Rs. 100 or 200. You can buy bangles and flowers also from nearby shops. Wooden Lamps are normally used and is the main thing you must have for participating in this ceremony. Such lamps are available for hire. When you get inside the temple, you will have to give Rs. 10 or something to get a Coupon which you will have to pin on your dress. Remember that this is an offering to the Goddess, so you should pray very well so that all your needs are fulfilled.⁵⁷

These guidelines clearly show the commercialization in the worship system, where beauty and devotion is marketized. The relationship between the Goddess and devotee who calls upon her is commoditised around monetary transactions. It can be read in the context of the consumer culture, where faith itself becomes

⁵⁵Shruti, "Men in Saree."

⁵⁶Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York: Routledge, 1992, 17; cited in Vern L. Bullough, and Bonnie Bullough, *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*, University of Philadelphia, PA: Pennsylvania Press, 1993, 325.

⁵⁷Shruti, "Men in Saree."

a commodity in the market. "It is a process of re-contextualization of religious symbols, language, and ideas from their original religious context to the media and consumer culture."⁵⁸ During the festival season, there is a boom of make-up stalls in the temple premise besides the other festival stalls that sell Goddess as religious object. One may feel a tension between spiritualism and commodification while participating in the festival. The increasing number of professional make-up artists opening stalls at the festival venue can be attributed as a result of the commoditisation of the ritualised cross-dressing. Paradoxically, at the same time, the tabooed bodies of the male-to-female transgenders become desired spectacles in the chamaya-vilakku procession and they get the opportunity to exhibit their identity in the public sphere.

4. Conclusion

A critical analysis of the gender inversion happen at the Kottankulangara temple during the chamayavilakku cross-dressing festival proves that it is an arena of gender identity contestation by applying the theories of Butler, Kristeva and Lacan on gender performance and the body as 'abject' as well as 'object petit a'. It is observed that transgender body has been marginalized and is seen as aberration in Kerala for a long time. The study is able to point out that when transgenders get the chance to flaunt their gender identity in at least the sacred space though it is temporary, may become a legitimisation for their existence in the state as they turn to be desired figures from the status of abjected bodies. The cross dressing at Kottankulangara temple festival is not a transgender religious festival like that of the Koovagam festival or the Yellamma jatire at Soudatti. The MtF transgenders take part in the religious ritual of cross-dressing to experience the freedom in performing their gender identity. The temple premise, under the aegis of a religiously sanctioned

⁵⁸Alexander Darius Ornella, "Commodification of Religion" in *Encyclopaedia of Sciences and Religion*, Anne Runehov and Luis Oviedo, eds., Berlin: Springer, 2013, 431.

festival offer an exclusive and temporary 'MtF transgendering' space which has been absent in the public sphere is Kerala. This paper signifies that the gender parodying in the temple premise overturns the naturalised construction of gender identity, but the gender inversion can also be adjudged as an endorsement of the gender binary. It may be discerned that besides the normalization of the subversive gender performances, the religious ritualistic site and worship system is transformed to a commercial space and the temple premise is filled with make-up stalls. The make up for bodily appropriation to the female gender ironically becomes the gender idealization in terms of the patriarchal binary norms. Kerala marks absent spaces for transgender performance, however the MtF transgenders reconstruct a divinity in Kottankulangara to project their self. Slowly, the cross-dressing at the temple festival is transforming to a venue of transgenderism.