

## **Swaying between Divinity and Discrimination: *Theyyam* Performance and the Dalit Experience in A. Shanthakumar's *Dreamhunt***

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### **Abstract**

*Dreamhunt* (Mal: *Swapnavetta*), a Malayalam Dalit play by A. Shantha Kumar, translated by Catherine Thankamma, is staged on the backdrop of Theyyam, a cultural and ritualistic form of dance worship in Kerala performed by the lower-caste communities. Theyyam, for the duration of its performance, enables those from the marginalised communities to be momentarily worshipped as divine. We argue that the play re-enacts the irony of this divinity alongside social discrimination. It portrays the conflict in the family of a poor Theyyam performer who lives with his daughter and has lost a son to suicide. The paper situates and historicises various aspects of Dalit issues in the context of Kerala through this play. Drawing from scholarship on Dalit writing, we will also analyse how performance studies enable characters to momentarily transgress the bondage of caste and claim an alternative identity that goes beyond this transgression. The paper discusses the dynamics of language, semiotics of performance and politics of translation and examines the Dalit identity and expression of their experience through performance. In doing this, we add to intersectional studies on Dalit writing and performance.

**Keywords:** Caste; Dalit Identity; Dalit theatre; Performance; Theyyam.

*Dreamhunt* (Mal: *Swapnavetta*) is a Malayalam Dalit play by A. Shantha Kumar, translated by Catherine Thankamma and published in *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* (2011). The play is written against the backdrop of Theyyam, a cultural and ritualistic form of dance worship in Kerala, South India, and performed by the lower-caste communities, who gain momentary respect through its performance. The play depicts the tragic story of a father and daughter oppressed by caste and

poverty and ends in the daughter's symbolic killing by the father, a former Theyyam performer. This paper does a critical close reading of this play, situating it at the intersection of Dalit Writing and performance and examines questions of Dalit experience, language, gender and the politics of translation. We argue that Theyyam is both a conceptual framework and a critical tool in the play to articulate the irony of Dalit lives which sway between divinity on one hand and discrimination on the other. Although scholars like Anil Sapkal identify a close connection between Dalit movements, especially the Dalit Panthers movement of Maharashtra and Dalit theatre, there is a conspicuous lack of well-rounded studies on Dalit theatre or the discussion of Dalit expression through the medium of performance. Dalit Writing as a heterogenous body has often emerged in prominent genres such as life-writings, poems and autobiographies, which remain in prevalent discussion, but Dalit plays often remain under-studied (42). This paper attempts to place the reading of *Dreamhunt* as a step towards addressing this gap in the context of Malayalam at least.

*Dreamhunt* is a play that has been in public life for some time. It was performed at theatre festivals, reaching out to the student communities ("University College Students Re-Launch 'Campus Theatre'"). Although the English translation, *Dreamhunt*, is included in various college syllabuses, there has been little critical discussion around this play. The paper provides an account of Theyyam in its various aspects and irony for the communities that perform it in a casteist society. While an exhaustive account of Theyyam is not within the scope of this paper, the play becomes a starting point for a critical discussion of the socio-cultural and historical aspects and draws from questions of Dalit writing, scholarship and experience in order to extend them to the domain of Dalit Theatre, however, fluid that may be. Then we move on to an overview of Dalit Theatre and performance in Kerala, which serves as a backdrop for this play. Further, we do a close reading and analysis of the play, mapping its themes, motifs, aesthetic representation and the politics of translation. Let us first elucidate the overarching presence of Theyyam and its significance for the play.

### **The Significance of Theyyam for the Play**

In *Dreamhunt*, Theyyam serves as an overarching theme in representing the struggle of the Dalit community. According to M.P. Damodaran, "Theyyam is a magico-religious observance that has more than one meaning" (283). Etymologically, the word Theyyam comes from 'daivam', the Sanskrit word for 'god.' It is a folk ritual and dance form which belongs

to the Northern Malabar of Kerala, mainly the Kasargode and Kannur districts. Theyyam is enacted at the *Taravadu*<sup>\*</sup>, where groups of families worship a particular family God. It is also performed at sacred places like *kavous* or groves known to belong to the lower caste communities (M. P. Damodaran 283). The performers of Theyyam belong to marginalised communities, including, Munnutan, Mavilan, Pulayan, Karimpalan, Vannan, Velan, Malayan, and Kopalar (Gopi 201) irrespective of high development, literacy and secularism, caste is still a crucial matter in the social and cultural life of the people. Related to the caste system in the Hindu religion is hierarchy in status, prevailing inequalities in power and wealth as well as imbalances in the religious sphere. This study explores such a case in which the famous religious ritual of kaliyattam in Northern Kerala is subjected to an ethnographic investigation. What resulted is the understanding of the harsh realities existing in the society in terms of caste and ritual authorities and exploitation. The different communities in the region that are a part of the ritual have to follow strict customs, which are mostly exploitative economically and unjustifiable and inhumane socially. [{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Gopi","given":"Anil","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""}], "container-title":"Contemporary Voice of Dalit","id":"ITEM-1","issue":"2","issued":{"date-parts":[["2021"]]}, "page":"199-207","title":"Gods and the Oppressed: A Study on Theyyam Performers of North Malabar","type":"article-journal","volume":"13"},"locator":"201","uris":["http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=070d322b-c251-4022-bb43-e4232a352c-9c"]},"mendeley":{"formattedCitation":"(Gopi 201. These are names of marginalised communities, mostly acting as caste markers to their occupations or others. For instance, *Karimpalan* means collectors of charcoal, *Velan* means Lord Shiva's son and *Pulayan* means the owner of soil or *pulam*.

Theyyam performances consist of various ritualistic parts. The first part, can be either *Vellattam* (invocation ritual) or *Thottam Pattu* (ballad song). They are very light invocative performances without any elaborate costumes (M.P. Damodaran 192). In the next part, the *kolakaran* (main performer) recites the origin of various Theyyam performances, invoking a deity. The deity appears before the devotees through the medium of a performer, who is believed to be in communion with God. The performer, thus adorned with all the *vechukettal* (ornaments, headgear) and facial make-up, is gradually taken over by the deity, and identifies himself as God in the mirror (symbolising this communion) placed before him.

\* Ancestral home that serves as the home for the joint family system in the aristocratic families of Kerala

After that, he\*\* appears before the devotees and communicates through symbolic gestures known as *kalaasams*. He is not seen merely as an instrument but as God himself as he reassures and consoles the devotees and offers blessings for a prosperous society. Some performances go on for a duration of 12 to even 24 hours with intervals (Gopi 201)irrespective of high development, literacy and secularism, caste is still a crucial matter in the social and cultural life of the people. Related to the caste system in the Hindu religion is hierarchy in status, prevailing inequalities in power and wealth as well as imbalances in the religious sphere. This study explores such a case in which the famous religious ritual of kaliyattam in Northern Kerala is subjected to an ethnographic investigation. What resulted is the understanding of the harsh realities existing in the society in terms of caste and ritual authorities and exploitation. The different communities in the region that are a part of the ritual have to follow strict customs, which are mostly exploitative economically and unjustifiable and inhumane socially.”,”author”:[{“dropping-particle”：“”,“family”：“Gopi”,“given”：“Anil”,“non-dropping-particle”：“”,“parse-names”:-false,“suffix”：“”}],“container-title”：“Contemporary Voice of Dalit”,“id”：“ITEM-1”,“issue”：“2”,“issued”:{“date-parts”:[{“2021”}]},“page”：“199-207”,“title”：“Gods and the Oppressed: A Study on Theyyam Performers of North Malabar”,“type”：“article-journal”,“volume”：“13”,“locator”：“201”,“uris”:[“http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=070d322b-c251-4022-bb43-e4232a352c9c”]},{“formattedCitation”：“(Gopi 201. During this time, the ritual song is recited, accompanied by folk instruments, mainly, *Chenda, Veekan chenda, Kuzhal and lalthalam*\*\*\*

There are more than 400 different types of Theyyam, attributed to different gods and mythological tales. Although many of these types are unknown, some well-known ones include, Vishnumoorthi, Sree Muthappan Theyyam, Padikutti Amma, Gulikan and Padamadakki Bhagavathy. Vishnumoorthi holds a significant place in the Theyyam tradition as it performs an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, while Gulikan stands out as the most important warrior god of Lord Shiva in Indian mythology. Muthappan Theyyam distinguishes itself by being performed throughout the year, unlike other Theyyams which are specific to seasons (John 5)”author”:[{“dropping-particle”：“”,“family”：“John”,“given”：“-Jacob”,“non-dropping-particle”：“”,“parse-names”:-false,“suffix”：“”}],“container-title”：“Atna - Journal of Tourism Studies”,“id”：“ITEM-1”,“is-

\*\* Theyyam performers are usually men. There is only one Theyyam, *Devakkoothu*, where the performer is a woman.

\*\*\* Chenda is a percussion instrument and Veekan Chenda is used to give basic rhythm while playing Chenda.Kuzhal is a double reed wind instrument, and Elathalam or lalthalam is a miniature form of a pair of cymbals.

sue": "2", "issued": {"date-parts": [{"2015"}]}, "page": "1-15", "title": "Dalit Art Forms and Tourism Promotion: Case Study of Theyyam Dance", "type": "article-journal", "volume": "10"}, "locator": "5", "uris": [{"http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=490e2018-9829-4be4-a5fe-5798560b4b9a"}]}, "mendeley": {"formattedCitation": "(John 5. Padikutti Amma Theyyam gains popularity due to its association with the famous Palapraath Temple located in Kodallur, Kerala, where it is performed. Additionally, the deity Padamadakki Bhagavathy is celebrated for her role in protecting the king of Nileshwar, Kannur, Kerala, from the invaders of Karnataka (Manjusha). According to M. P Damodaran, some Theyyams are a direct attack on society. For instance, in the myth of Pottan Theyyam, Sankaracharya, a great Brahmin scholar, in his angry exchange of dialogues with a Pulayan\*\*\*\*, is made to realise the foolishness of untouchability and of socially constructed hierarchies. There are also Theyyams like Vishnu-moorthi that indirectly oppose such discrimination (195).

Given this brief glimpse of a long history of performance in the Theyyam tradition, it is worthwhile to note such cultural productions have archived Dalit experiences in ways which have largely been neglected by mainstream art forms. Dalit writings have emerged in many parts, as a means to create a cultural, political and social identity for the deprived community. These writings have often incorporated artistic elements such as folk performances that are specific to local communities. Dalit theatre in Kerala, an off-shoot of other Dalit writings, also incorporates elements of ritualistic performances and substantially from Theyyam as seen in this play. In the next section, we briefly trace the major contours of Dalit Theatre and performance in Kerala to contextualise the play better.

### **An Overview of Dalit Theatre and Performance in Kerala**

"Dalit Literature is, precisely, that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits" (Limbale 30). As Limbale says, "'Rejection' and 'Revolt' in Dalit Literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits' pain" (31). Dalit literature records the pain felt by Dalits, expressing their disagreement with hegemonic society. The experience of joy and grief is expressed through various genres of Dalit writing such as poetry, novels, life writings, autobiography and theatre. Among these, the rise of Dalit theatre has been a political process in which dramatists with a social commitment came together around the Dalit cause. As Pawade elucidates, Dalit Theatre, based on Ambedkar's ideology, became a weapon of pro-change movements by

\*\*\*\* A lower caste group of South India

adopting Indian folk styles and crafting them into new theatrical forms. The mass appeal of the dramatic form, in a way brought the oppressed together in their common experience of discrimination and enabled a vision of an alternative social order. Even though theatre has played a prominent role in creating awareness and discussing the collective plight of Dalits, it is largely under-discussed in the academia.

According to the academician Hikmathulla, the effort to systematise and organise the history of Malayalam theatre began only after the 1970s (8). In the nineteenth century, the written tradition of theatre in Kerala began through translations from Sanskrit (Dasan et al. 165). As in any other social sphere, caste prominently shaped art forms in Kerala, till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hikmathulla 8). Moreover, the upper castes also being the landed class provided further cause for the communist party to use the double-edged oppression of class and caste for their propaganda (Sundar 134). Soon theatre became a preferred channel for a propagandist and didactic articulation of this cause (Dasan et al. 165). Thus, “high political consciousness is reflected in very active street theatre on social and political performances” (Sundar 134). Some of the significant plays that made an impact on the masses during that time include *Pattabaki* (Rent arrears) (1937) by K. Damodaran, *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made me a Communist) (1952) by Thoppil Bhasi and *Balakalesham* (Lord of Queen Bala, Cochin) (1913) by Pandit K.P Karuppan (Anupama 181).

On the other hand, the folk performances in Kerala were held in open spaces where everybody was allowed access with no strict differentiation between performer and audience. Since its inception, Dalit folk tradition in Kerala has significantly democratised art by making it accessible to a larger public (Dasan et al. 166). The amateur<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> groups and playwrights from South Kerala toured places including Alappuzha, Ernakulam and Thrissur, staging the satirical subversions of casteist plays in the existing theatre tradition. The amateur theatre groups also focused on children’s theatre with plays including *Kannadiyum Komalikalum* (Mirrors and Baffoons) and *Omanakuttan* (Beloved Son/boy). Some of the prominent theatre practitioners of South Kerala include Jayachandran Thakazhi, Santhosh Thakazhi, Dr Baburaj, and Kochin Babu (Dasan et al. 167–68). Meanwhile, most performances in Northern Kerala aligned with Marxist ideologies, discussed social issues, including unemployment, untouchability, and feudal exploitation. Thus, themes including Dalit experiences,

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\*\*\*\* Left and extreme left ideologies led the theatre groups of the 1970s and 80s. They took to unconventional and experimental writing to speak about societal evils. Fringe theatre and impromptu street plays were also a part of these groups.

culture and spirituality were also written and performed about, especially as street plays. Some of the practitioners who brought the Dalit sensibility to the amateur stage included, Purushan Kadalundi, Shanthakumar, and Pappan Pantheerankavu (Dasan et al. 167).

Moving onto the playwright discussed here, A. Shantha Kumar (1968-2021), a Dalit actor and director from North Kerala, has written, published and directed more than fifty plays on various topics. He has also written on Dalit themes, discussed their issues, and alerted the public about the Dalit question through his theatre performances. The plays *Swapnavetta (Dreamhunt)* (2011) and *Kakkakinaavu (Crow-dream)* (2013), which talked about the distress of the community, have been translated into English and published in reputed journals, giving them wider public access. The playwright has won various awards and recognitions, including the 2010 Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in Drama for his renowned work *Maram Peyunnu (The Tree is Shedding)*. Some of his major plays within the Dalit tradition include *Daaham (Thrist)*, *Karutha Vidhava (Black Widow)*, and *Sukhanidrayilekku (Sound Sleep)*, among others. As someone who prefers the repertoire of theatre to other media, Shanthakumar has been seen as a political activist who spoke out strongly about the issues around him. He gave importance to the culture and politics of a region: "Politics is part of life, and it seeps into my plays rather unconsciously". He adds, "My father was a Theyyam performer. What I knew as a young boy was its strong colours and angry rhythm"(Amina). The play *Dreamhunt*, draws from the playwright's own lived experience, became an important entry point into deeper questions on Dalit experience. The paper now moves onto a close reading of the play, giving special focus to the themes, motifs, and aesthetic representations.

### **Broken Dreams: Themes, Motifs and an Analysis of the Play**

*Dreamhunt* opens with a surreal scene. The stage is made to look like a one-room shanty in which Kannan Theyyam and his daughter Parvati stay. Both characters battle the loneliness of their separate disillusionments. Kannan Theyyam finds himself trapped in the nostalgia of the past while his daughter, Parvati, dreams of a better life, a groom. The scene begins as Parvati lies dreaming in a corner, her head resting by her sewing-machine on which she has just been stitching a garment. In the middle of that, she has begun the act of weaving her own dreams. Her tresses are loose and she dreams of a bridegroom who loves her, cherishes her and promises to marry her. Kannan Theyyam's yearning for the past is reflected in the Theyyam articles that lie strewn about him. All of these, Parvati's

sewing machine, her curly locks, and Kannan Theyyam's old and tattered Theyyam adornments become the first motifs in the play that portray the disillusionment of the household.

The sewing machine that lies in the corner of the house is significant throughout the play. The sewing machine is Parvati's sole means to escape from her painful reality. She points to the machine, "...this is my only relief. I want to live as long as the wheel of this machine turns." (170) The only reality she equates with the happiness of dreaming is stitching a beautiful garment. However, the image of unfinished garments hanging from the machine represents the unfulfilled life of the girl with nothing to look forward to or be excited about. A parallel can be drawn between the sewing machine motif in *Dreamhunt* and the *Neyyappam* (sweet rice fritter) motif in the play *Crow-Dream* (Mal. *Kakkakinavu*) by Shanthakumar. The Dalit play *Crow-Dream* tells the longing of crow chicks to eat Neyyappam instead of the *Balichoru* (rice ball offering to dead ancestors) they were forcibly fed. Neyyappam alludes to the freedom of choice, the Dalits are denied. Instead, they are forced to live on dirty and decaying leftovers as commanded by mainstream society. The image of Parvati stitching dreams at her sewing machine and the unfulfilled dream of eating Neyyappam is a motif of the marginalised communities' longing to live life in fulfilment.

Parvati's hair is described as thick, curly, and hanging loose. The bridegroom in her dream is enchanted by the beauty of her hair. The curly locks are a motif for the desires of a young adolescent girl whose emotions are not fully in her control. The bridegroom kissing her curly tresses argues for her to dream of a life where she is accepted, and her desires are satisfied. This is contrasted to the scene at the end of the play when Parvati lies dead-eyes half-closed. The fictional bridegroom who kisses and presses his face against her hair symbolizes a reality that never attains fruition. "Your tresses still have the scent of dreams" (Shanthakumar 179). Always the voice of her dreams, the bridegroom becomes a poetic device that eventually culminates into irony as he urges Parvati to call out from her grave and ask aloud- Who hunted down your dreams? How did you wither away to death in the prime of youth? (Shanthakumar 179).

The third motif, Theyyam, and Theyyam ornamentation, are a reminder of the good times. They stand for agency, self-sufficiency and social respect. This is in contrast to the movie *Kantara* (2022) directed by Rishab Shetty which also used Theyyam significantly. The movie was based on *Buta Kola* and *Panjurli Daiva*\*\*\*\*\* in Karnataka, in which the performer

\*\*\*\*\* According to Tulu mythology, a boar spirit was sent to earth by Lord Shiva to

brings solution to the villagers by killing the upper caste land-owner who tries to take away their lands. Here the performer and the ornamentations are a symbol of divine power that can also strike awe or fear and evoke devotion in the audience. The ornamentations in *Dreamhunt*, however, evoke an absence, nostalgia for the prosperous times of before when he adorned himself as Gulikan Theyyam and "became king" (Shanthakumar 172).

"...It was this day Kannan Theyyam became King. He would roar and dance as Gulikan Theyyam, through the glowing embers in the grove (kavu)... in harmony with the chenda's chembada rhythm Gulikan, who would move to the front of the ritual space and suck the warm blood of the live rooster... people would watch this Kannan Theyyam with awe." (Shanthakumar 172)

Another significant aspect in the play is the theme of contrast and irony, whether it is the oscillation between dreams and reality, the sway between divinity and discrimination, the contrast between father and daughter, of age and youth. Dreams are both a marker of disillusionment as well as of escape and the possibility of changing the narrative of reality. For Parvati, the night is a time to dream as dreams become the space where she wants to transgress reality. Kannan Theyyam, on the other hand, curses the night, which reminds him of his fading prosperity of Kannan Theyyam, the death of his son Prabhakaran, who kills himself as his lover is married off elsewhere due to his low birth. Life/reality, according to Kannan Theyyam, is as frightening like the rope from which his son hanged himself. According to Perczel, the main protagonists of a Dalit story are the dreamers, as dreams act against the established norms of society and religion(5). As Perczel further argues, a dream is employed as a strategy where the protagonists attempt to move away from the existing condition (33). Reality keeps them trapped as does social discrimination, but the act of dreaming like the act of performance becomes a momentary escape from the prison of the present and offers an alternative world and also momentary communion with divinity. The moment Kannan Theyyam incarnates as Gulikan, he becomes divine and an object of worship for the people around him. However, as soon as he comes out of it, he becomes an outcast once again. The contradicting images of divinity and discrimination point to the varying instances of the irony of caste. As M.P. Damodaran states, the concept of 'purity' and 'pollution' makes every layer of society secluded and divided, giving special privileges to some. The marginalised 'other' is treated as an 'animal-like creature', agonising in pain and grief. Gods in Theyyam, members of this marginalised other,

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protect crops. People worship this *bootha* (Divine Spirit) as Panjurli

became gods after they challenge and resist such social evils (M. P. Damodaran 284).

Perhaps the most acute struggle of this can be seen in Kannan Theyyam as he battles his simultaneous failure as a performer and as a parent. When Parvati accuses him of Prabhakaran's death, Kannan Theyyam takes responsibility and says, he forgot to pray for his children as he climbed down the groves after the dance ritual (Shanthakumar 174). Kannan Theyyam was not affected by any other things around him, until he loses his livelihood. His devotion to the sacred groves led to the loss of everything he held dear. Historically, there have been various groves across the world, especially in India, ranging from estuaries to mountain ranges, including the Western Ghats, Aravalli ranges in Rajasthan, Bastar in Central India and many more. According to Umesh, various social transformations caused attitudinal shifts towards sacred groves in Kerala. Some of them include the land reforms in 1957, condensation to nuclear families, growing population density, and rising monetary demand (Umesh 82-83).

The ecological significance of the *kavus* ranges from maintaining a minimum of some species, conservation of water and contributing much to the biodiversity. Rajesh Komath denotes how "Temple Hinduism is a powerful abode of worship of the upper caste and grove/kavu form of Hinduism is a ritual practice of large sections of lower caste" (25). This is again ironic because the shifting of deities from *kavus* to temples restricted the Dalits from entering, putting a halt to their access to those spaces. The culture of a society is shaped by its flora and fauna and clothing them in sacredness was a way of protecting the nature (Umesh 26). To protect groves, they have a shrine which were usual venues for ritual performances such as Theyyam. However, now since all the groves have been turned into temples, the Theyyam and its performers dwindled. The respect which they had had earlier as performers of Theyyam now diminished, as so did the joy and the comfort of Kannan Theyyam, whose very identity came from his occupation. The act of marginalisation that followed the shift of worship to temples also brought along a change in the acts of naming. The name that served as a means of livelihood for the family now became a caste marker. With no means of livelihood, Kannan Theyyam found his identity a burden to the well-being of the family.

Although the father and daughter want the same things, they are very critical of and dissatisfied with each other. Even though Kannan Theyyam scolds his daughter for dreaming about impossible things, he himself does the same, pining for the past glory of his Theyyam days. Like a "good

dream,” “the tattered Theyyam decorations” please and comfort him. “When I look at the dusty Theyyam crown, the happy past trickles into my memory,” he says (Shanthakumar 171). During such an unpleasant argument, Parvati questions Kannan Theyyam for bringing his children, “two worthless bits of flesh into the world” (Shanthakumar 177). A dejected Kannan Theyyam feels desperate at her accusation for giving them an existence that is worthless. Struggling to find sleep after the death of his son, Kannan Theyyam now cannot bear his daughter’s resentment and unfulfilled dreams. Once, in the month of *Vrichikam*\*\*\*\*\*, and when he hears the *thottam pattu*, he breaks into a mad frenzy and adorns himself as Gulikan Theyyam. Instead of taking the sacrificial blood of a rooster\*\*\*\*\* as was the practice, he decides to take the “good-for-nothing being” he gave life to (Shanthakumar 178). In drawing his own daughter’s blood, he gives her existence meaning and kills her. Through Theyyam, this symbolic killing becomes an act of sanctification and protest in the play. Theyyam becomes in *Dreamhunt*, a momentary escape from a life of caste oppression, while also providing the characters involved a momentary form of agency of their own narrative, existence in the act of giving meaning, albeit through death. Theyyam, becomes both a way of reclaiming agency and respect, while also being a way of reconstruction and the presentation of their own narratives. Death becomes here, not murder but an ultimate act of sacrifice and protest.

According to M.P Damodaran, the real histories lie not in the history of rulers and social reforms but in the struggles and endurance for the survival of the common people. Theyyam performances, counter-narratives to the hegemonic society, are repositories of similar struggles from the marginalised communities (284). The next section moves on to a closer examination of the themes and motifs in the play.

### **Caste Consciousness and Aesthetic Representation**

Caste is the lurking factor that brings the characters to suffer in *Dreamhunt*. The play strongly emphasises Dalit consciousness, and Shanthakumar, the son of a Theyyam performer, drew upon his experience ‘of being the

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\*\*\*\*\* It is the fourth month in the Malayalam calendar, from November 17 to December 15. In the Pallipattu Baghavathy groves mentioned in the play, Theyyam performances are held this month.

\*\*\*\*\* Gulikan, is believed to have originated from Lord Shiva’s left toe to defeat Lord Yama, who threatened to kill Shiva’s devotee, Markandeya. During performances, Gulikan wears coconut leaf clothing, a large headgear made of areca nut palm, and a mask with the Trishul symbol of Shiva on the head. In the *Karinkalasangam* ritual, Gulikan is offered rooster blood, and devotees pray for longevity and protection from negative energy.

subject' while writing the play. The question of identity has been central to the Dalit cause, which is a simultaneous condition between stigma and taking back agency. Identity also becomes the basis for the articulation of a unique experience of discrimination. The category of lived experience, central to Dalit consciousness\*\*\*\*\* is "not about sharing their lifestyles, living with them and being like them, but being them in the sense that you cannot be anything else" (Sarukkai 36). This truth of the condition and the inescapability of caste is reflected in the play through Kannan's helplessness. Sarukkai argues that lived experience cannot be replicated or materialised, and individuals do not have the freedom to leave or modify their experience (35). These experiences lead to varying choices for each individual. In an article, G. C. Pal discusses the psychological effects of such social behaviours in marginalised groups:

Because of the feeling of constantly being threatened by something, the discriminated people may resort to either 'fighting' or 'fleeing' as two broad coping strategies in the presence of stressful situations. Due to the denial of opportunities and discriminatory treatment, they at times react with anger and resentment. On the other hand, discrimination manifested in terms of restrictions in interpersonal interaction and other unpleasant behaviours, bring a lot of humiliation, undermine self-esteem and violate the sense of dignity. A fear of further such negative experiences, often lead to withdrawal from social interactions. (199)the caste identity has been a dominant factor in the discourse of social exclusion. This is largely due to the pervasiveness of the caste-based discrimination and violence. The Indian psychological literature has provided considerable insights into psychological attributes of caste groups and its linkage to their dis(advantage

The pathos of this experience etches the lives of Kannan Theyyam, Parvati, and Prabhakaran, leaving them with no choice but to live with it until death. Prabhakaran unfulfilled makes him flee his useless life which weighed as heavy as a mountain, with death being as soft as a feather (Shanthakumar 176). While Parvati absconds to her dreams as an escape from reality, Kannan Theyyam's suppressed sadness unleashes the Gulikan within him to sanctify his problems. The night after the quarrel he hears the chenda from the groves, he said, "...Ho! If I could forget myself and perform just once, my heart would cool a bit... Nobody wants

\*\*\*\*\* According to Laura Brueck, Dalit consciousness, the central concept in Dalit literature, involves firsthand knowledge of atrocities against Dalits. The goal is to encompass the experiential and political perspective of caste-based oppression and foster a sense of awareness and empowerment.

Kannan Theyyam. But I want this Gulikan Theyyam's dress and crown..." (Shanthakumar 178). Thus, the Gulikan shatters the chains of restriction in Kannan Theyyam's mortal body. However, the lines state, "No unfulfilled dreams must appear before your eyes again. And that is this father's dream..." (Shanthakumar 178). The open-endedness of the scene, whether it evolves from Gulikan's possession or fatherly duty, intensifies the comprehension of Dalit psychology in the climax of this act.

In the climax, the act of killing Parvati can be interpreted in many ways. It goes beyond the patriarchal nature of the father's actions and highlights the double oppression endured by the daughter. Parvati, symbolically replacing the rooster, becomes a metaphor for lives sacrificed unjustly. Victor Turner's concept of liminality plays a significant role, with its tripartite structure. The initial phase involves detaching individuals from fixed social and cultural structures. The liminal phase, characterised by ambiguity and a departure from past and future states, follows. Ultimately, individuals return to a stable state, bound by customary norms and ethical standards based on their social positions (Mathew and Pandya 5) considered as a reflection of the war cry against the caste system and oppression, conducts subversion of the social hierarchy. The chosen deity by the performer for a transitory symbolisation expresses the collective outrage of the oppressed and exploited people. This research paper enquires about the anti-structural characteristics exhibited by the performance of Theyyam.

In the context of Richard Schechner's performance theory, it attempts to trace the characterisation of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque, Victor Turner's liminality and social drama in the transitional performance of Theyyam that mostly relies on interim separation and reintegration. The expression of antipathy to the hierarchy in Bakhtinian carnival, the anti-structural emphasis in Turnarian liminality, and the deconstructive-reconstructive stages in social drama elucidate the symbolic delineation of the performance of Theyyam. The analytical findings of the paper derived from the discussion of the three concepts reveal that the performance of Theyyam is rooted in its anti-structural characteristics. The performer is subject to continuous alteration in the identity that intermediates the idiosyncrasy between the deity and the human being. It symbolises the temporal transition from the oppressed to the equivalent status of the dominator that occurs as part of counter-culture, through status reversal and inversion.

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Theyyam is rooted in ritualistic worship of gods, goddesses, and even animals, where the performer embodies the divine entity. This elevation grants the performer a heightened status, representing the worshipped deity (Mathew and Pandya 4) considered as a reflection of the war cry against the caste system and oppression, conducts subversion of the social hierarchy. The chosen deity by the performer for a transitory symbolisation expresses the collective outrage of the oppressed and exploited people. This research paper enquires about the anti-structural characteristics exhibited by the performance of Theyyam. In the context of Richard Schechner's performance theory, it attempts to trace the characterisation of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque, Victor Turner's liminality and social drama in the transitional performance of Theyyam that mostly relies on interim separation and reintegration. The expression of antipathy to the hierarchy in Bakhtinian carnival, the anti-structural emphasis in Turnarian liminality, and the deconstructive-reconstructive stages in social drama elucidate the symbolic delineation of the performance of Theyyam.

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questions about the helplessness experienced by those routinely subjected to discrimination. The play exposes the severity of caste inequalities and social intolerance through the Theyyam performance, transforming Theyyam into a tool for dissent and criticism. There are similar folk performances in India like, Buta Kola, Periandavar<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>, Kherai Puja<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>, Pandikoil<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>, and Jagar<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup> which presents unique practices and beliefs. While these rituals are deeply revered and celebrated, they also reinforce social hierarchies and discriminatory practices.

### Politics of Translation

In this section the researchers attempt to look at how Theyyam as a performance empower the Theyyam performer with divinity and aids him transcend the clutches of casteist oppression and the role of translation to effectively convey this idea. By providing accessibility to the play and by retaining cultural specificity, the translation has effectively put across this idea to a larger audience. The title of the play, *Dreamhunt* (Mal. *Swapnavetta*), draws inspiration from the urgency of pursuing dreams. The word 'hunt' conveys the hostile or forceful search for something, often associated with capturing or killing wild animals. Similarly, each character in the play embarks on their own quest to attain different dreams in pursuit of a better life. The underlying thought is on how the fulfilment of dreams in reality has a lot of social, emotional and political hurdles. Moreover, the skilful use of words in the narrative and the retention of original terms like 'ediye,' 'ettan,' and 'kavu'<sup>\*\*\*\*\*</sup>, along with the incorporation of cardinal directions like 'vadakku' for North, also establishes the cultural identity of this Malayalam Dalit play.

However, as S. Armstrong discusses the politics of translating Indian Dalit Drama, there is a politics inherent in a text involving the approach of the author, the translator, and even the publisher. "The translator's relationship to the text he/she has taken up to translate is enmeshed in a matrix of power relations" (196-97). In an interview with *The Hindu*, Thankamma about her translation of Paul Chirakkarode's novel *Pulayathara* says, "Looking back, I realise what pain, hurt and a sense of 'woundedness' can

\*\*\*\*\* The tribal community, Kaniyan, which resides in the Tirunelveli region of Tamil Nadu in South India. This festival involves the worship and celebration of a male deity over a period of fifteen years.

\*\*\*\*\* Celebrated by Bodo-Kacharies of Assam

\*\*\*\*\* Festival in Madurai in Tamil Nadu and the deity worshipped here is Pandi Ayya

\*\*\*\*\* Celebrated in Kumon in Uttarakhand

\*\*\*\*\* Ediye- is a culturally specific word to informally address a woman or a girl, whereas ettan is used to address a brother or husband, and kavu means grove

do to the human psyche. In a sense it sensitised me to the debilitating pain and sense of vulnerability that haunted the underprivileged castes..." (Jayasree). Similarly, in the play while preparing the noose to hang himself, Prabhakaran says, "But before I die, I must tell you (Sreedevi, his lover) at least what I wanted to tell the world. This society, which is out to grab everything – if I had emerged first in its race, if my pockets were full, I would not have lost you tonight" (Shanthakumar 176). These lines elaborate how the society is on a race where privilege and being privileged matters. The word 'race' also means the human race and the existing hierarchies within the society. It speaks about Prabhakaran's experience as a victim of the depravity which causes him to end his life. Through the word-play, Thankamma has taken the translation beyond being just an interpretation; to assist non-native audiences in internalising the oppressive system and adding a caste lens to it.

A glossary or footnote in a translation aid in a better understanding of cultural-specific vocabularies like Vrishchikam month, Chenda, Gulikan Theyyam, rooster blood, and Kooman Hills. These are culturally specific, locally rooted vocabularies and hence any attempt for translation would only result in them being irrecoverably 'lost in translation.' For example, Vrishchikam month according to the Malayalam calendar is a time when the Theyyam season begins and it lasts for the next seven months. During this time, the Theyyam performers are celebrated and worshipped like a divine being unlike the other months. A reader who is not specific to the region may not comprehend this significance if there is an absence of detail. Therefore, it is within the power of the translator to explain these details to help the audience understand the inherent complexities in comprehending the difficulties of casteism.

Translations like these would help a wider audience understand the issues of caste. However, translations must also maintain clarity of ideas and accurately convey the context of the original text. In the contemporary state, theatre translations are situated at the crossroads between literature and performance, navigating the complexities of textual production and reproduction (Marinetti 310). It is essential to consider the impact of translated texts on the receiving culture and the subsequent web of communication and response. In the following section, the research article concludes by reinforcing the major arguments presented, emphasizing their significance and the contributions they make to the field of Dalit writing.

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, the research paper delves into the profound social dynamics present in folk performances and rituals across different regions of India, offering a nuanced understanding of their significance and the underlying contradictions they embody. One aspect explored is the Theyyam performers, who experience a temporary elevation to a divine status during the ritual, commanding attention and devotion from the devotees. However, as soon as the performance concludes and the paraphernalia is removed, they revert to their ordinary lives, with their caste identity once again becoming the focus. This observation brings to light the extensive caste consciousness that permeates religious contexts, revealing the stark irony of how individuals can be revered and worshipped during the ritual but face discrimination and marginalisation in their everyday lives.

Furthermore, the paper encourages further study in similar folk performances and rituals, uncovering their rich cultural complexities. By examining these diverse cultural practices, the research paper expands its scope, providing valuable insights into the contradictions embedded within religious systems. The study underscores the need for critical examination and reflection on these rituals to foster a deeper understanding of the inherent challenges and inequalities they perpetuate. It calls for ongoing dialogue and efforts towards social inclusivity and equality, urging society to confront and address the contradictions between the reverence bestowed upon individuals during rituals and the discrimination they face in their daily lives. Overall, this research offers a comprehensive exploration of social dynamics, caste consciousness, and the complexities of traditional religious systems. By acknowledging and analysing these intricacies, we can strive towards a more inclusive and equitable society. The findings of this study lay the groundwork for further research, encouraging scholars and practitioners to delve deeper into these issues and work towards dismantling discriminatory practices within religious contexts.

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