Divinity, Selfhood, and Paradoxes: Conceptualizing Kodungallur Bharani Ritual Space as a Heterotopia

Malavika K Pradeep, English and Foreign Languages University, India

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Abstract

The Bharani festival held annually at the Sree Kurumba temple, Kodungallur, Kerala, is noted for its remarkable spectacle of the storming of pilgrims into the temple premises, singing ribald songs, and inflicting self-injury on their foreheads with the holy weapon of the Goddess. The performers hurl abuses at the Goddess while simultaneously submitting themselves to her in rapt devotion, addressing her as *Amme* or the Mother. The act of self-injury in this manner signifies an act of submission of the body as it is believed to engender communion with the Goddess, rendering them as oracles or *komaram.* Most of these pilgrims hail from various subaltern, marginalized groups across Kerala. Thus, as popularly argued, the temple becomes the ritual site where piety becomes a temporary tool to contest social hierarchies and demand visibility. However, as Nimisha Jayan argues in her thesis, power hierarchies are ingrained at every stage of the ritual through instances like the oracles awaiting permission from the Thamburan (the ruler) to enter the temple. She asserts that Kodungallur Bharani consists of various rites of passage for the subaltern and facilitates the temporary suspension of caste hierarchies. Grounding the research against the paradoxical nature of Bharani, I attempt to further these assertions by conceptualizing the temple site as a heterotopia, where "all the other real sites that can be found in a culture are simultaneously represented, converted, and inverted" (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 24). After conceiving Bharani as a heterotopia, I employ psychoanalysis to understand the consequences of it on the performer and how the notions of divinity become operative in this transformation process, promoting negotiations between the social and inner selves of the komaram.

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Introduction

Kodungallur Bharani, an annual festival held at the Sree Kurumba Temple of Kodungallur, Kerala and popularly glorified as a subaltern festival, one of its unique features involves the pilgrims rushing into the temple premises, singing songs that are deemed vulgar, and striking their foreheads using the holy weapon. This phenomenon, called the *kavutheendal*, translates into the "pollution of the sacred grove"; the research exclusively centres around this stage of Bharani. The preparations for Bharani start months before the festival, such as the "velichapaadu" or the oracles pledging their devotion to the Kurumba Goddess by observing penance through specific practices such as abstinence. The oracles reckon this shall maintain the "purity" of their bodies so that the Goddess enters it. The day of "kavutheendal" is the culmination of these long preparations as they make incisions on their foreheads to identify with the Goddess in a trance-like state and commune with the divine. The oracles or the *komaram* circumambulate the temple, blood oozing from their wounds, shouting "*Amme*" (mother) at the Goddess. This research conceptualizes the ritual space as a heterotopia and juxtaposes it with a psychoanalytic reading of the performer/ oracle/ komaram. The oracles report not feeling any pain during the act, and psychoanalytically, the research scrutinizes this willful fragmentation of bodily unity by the oracles, and places this inner world of the komaram against the heterotopic ritual space.

Many myths and legends surround Kodungallur Bharani and the origins of the temple. The two archetypes associated with the temple are the Bhadrakali tradition and the Kannaki/ Pathini cult. I approach the subject in the current study primarily through the popular Bhadrakali narrative. This chronicle treats her as a benevolent protector and addresses her as *Amma,* or the mother. One of these myths celebrates Bharani as the triumph of Goddess Kali over the demon king Darika, who terrorised the universe. An oracle quotes that the oracles perform acts of mutilation to resemble Kali's wounded body following the battle (Online Keralam, 2022). Another myth associated with Bharani is that it is reminiscent of Kannaki's wrath after the burning of Madurai in Silapathikaram. According to the myth, Kannaki, owing to the unfair killing of her husband, rages and burns down the city of Madurai. The belief is that Kodungallur Temple is her final resting place. V R Chandran quotes that the king Cheran Chenguttuvan installed the Kodungallur Temple to worship Kannaki as she was considered a reincarnation of Goddess Durga (Chandran, 1990, as cited in Jayan, 2020, p. 23). Thus, the Kodungallur Goddess is worshipped as Bhagavathi through the Bhadrakali and Kannaki traditions.

This research paper explores how the Bharani ritual space functions as a heterotopia, which will be explained later in this paper. As mentioned in the abstract, Bharani is a contested space; the research attempts to show the paradoxes surrounding the ritual and how they add to the complexity of the hierarchies explicated in Bharani. Even though Bharani is upheld as a subversive festival, social ranks and divisions are inscribed into its fabric. As quoted in the abstract of the paper, not only is the involvement of the royal head pertinent to "allowing" the performers into the ritual space, but there is also a clear-cut social order and structure within the performing groups. This interweaving of hierarchies and social norms perpetuates consequences on the selfhood of the performer. The collective act of performance and undoubtedly the devotion to the Goddess translate into creating the komaram as an individual. Against this rubric, the study critically examines how Komaram's identification with the Goddess plays into this equation. Finally, I attempt to place the ambivalent position of Komaram against the notion of heterotopia.

Figure 1
Oracles at the Bharani Festival

Source. "Bharani Festival- Kodungallur Thrissur," by Salim. I. E. April 4, 2014, https://organikos.net/2014/04/04/bharani-festival-kodungallur-thrissur/

Literature Review

One of the extensive works on Kodungallur Bharani, Nimisha K Jayan's thesis, *Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of the Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival* details the Kodungallur Bharani as a performance that dramatises social structures imperative to the workings of Bharani, where she considers Bharani as an amalgamation of diverse paradoxical behaviours constituted through history. Her method is ethnographic, focusing on the experientiality of the oracles and their metamorphosis through the ritual. She analyzes the interplay of ritualised bodies and society and how it constitutes the concept of the oracle. For this, she employs concepts such as Arnold van Gennep's rites of passage and Victor Turner's liminality to illustrate the transformative effect of Bharani. She identifies the participants traverse through a liminal stage where communitas is achieved. However, there is no permanent resolution, and characterizes Bharani by borrowing from Max Gluckman as a "ritual of rebellion" (Jayan, 2020, pp. 131–132). While she focuses on how Bharani ritual space executes transformation through the concepts of body, space, and ritual by utilising concepts like liminal space and performance theories of Richard Schneider, I approach Bharani ritual through the lens of heterotopia. Although our objects of inquiry may seem similar, this research differs because it demonstrates how Bharani space functions as a heterotopia (a space that represents and subverts the relations it depicts) to facilitate the "outside-the-body" identification with the Goddess and its after effects on the Komaram. Our similarity is that both of us account for the transformation of the Komaram; this study addresses the question through the trialectics of spatiality, heterotopia, and psychoanalysis.

In another article, Nimisha K Jayan (2017, p. 55) argues that Bharani does not account for any real change and views it as a submission practice. Similarly, Manju Edachira (Kerala Museum, 2023) examines this practice through the concept of Bakhtin's carnival, where social hierarchies are temporarily suspended. She argues that Bharani was the only time lower castes were allowed into the temple premises in the past, and the kavutheendal, as a process, sums up the rage of the subaltern towards the practice. However, she asserts that Bharani is not a carnival as it does not promote equality between all sections of people, but a mere "safety valve" to direct their anger and frustration. Thus, she terms it a casteist festival that fortifies caste structures by according specific roles to different castes. Also, about self-

injury, she terms it a sacrificial act where “self withdraws from itself” during the performance and acts as an “offering” for the Goddess and the community (Kerala Museum, 2023). In line with the sacrificial nature of the bleeding caste body for the greater common good, Akhila Vimal (2023, p. 53) points out how the upper caste’s opposition to the festival was ironically on the grounds of the animal sacrifice and not because of the bleeding caste body. These observations cement the notion that power is invariably tied to the ritual, where the bleeding bodies become a spectacle for the general public. These bodies are simultaneously held with awe and abjection. Moreover, these bodies and communities are othered in the mainstream with widespread prejudice against the oracles outside the Bharani ritual space.

For example, an oracle called Subhadra quotes how families refuse to marry oracle women because of the stigma attached to it (as cited in Justin & MS, p. 377). Nimisha K Jayan argues this as a “humiliating experience” for the oracles (2017, p. 55). Akhila Vimal. C also points out how traditions like self-mutilation challenge the region’s “refined belief system” (Vimal, 2023, p. 54). I concur with the notion of how caste power is entrenched in the Bharani ritual. Nevertheless, undeniably, hierarchies are temporarily upended. Also, the idea of faith is far too complex to be seen in black and white terms, and viewing it as something completely coming out of the naivety of the subaltern will be a flawed and condescending stance. Thus, the research considers this notion when speaking about the transition the oracles undergo while they cross the threshold of the ritual space.

Research Methodology

Most of the research on Bharani has adopted ethnographic or historical methods. This research paper relies on secondary material and applies qualitative analysis to the specific rituals of Bharani. Also, these are stories, myths, and practices that I have grown up hearing, and I incorporate the same into the paper as well. The research paper performs this through the theoretical framework of spatial analysis, mainly the concept of heterotopia and psychoanalysis, focusing on the oracles’ willful fragmentation of the body to identify with the mother. Firstly, the three spaces comprising the Bharani ritual space are analyzed. Edward Soja (1996, pp. 66–68) develops Lefebvre’s concept of the trialectics of spatiality to organise space into the first, second, and third spaces. The first space is the perceived space that is empirical, measurable, and tangible. The second space involves the spaces produced from “discursively devised representations of space.” These are “ideational” and are “projections” of the “imagined geographies” (Soja, 1996, p. 79). Here, the emphasis shifts from the material to how the human mind imagines and conceives spatiality. This space is the dominant space in society, and it consists of verbal signs relating to “language, discourse, text, logos: the written and spoken word” (Soja, 1996, p. 67). Finally, the third space is the “lived space,” which is the “space of radical openness, the space of social struggle” (Soja, 1996, p. 68).

The next concept that would be employed is Foucault’s heterotopia. Heterotopias are "counter sites" in society where “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 24). There are various principles of heterotopia, which will be elaborated on later in this paper. The final concept I will use is “excorporative” identification (Silverman, 1996, p. 21), which translates to outside-the-body identification. Psychoanalysis talks about how the primary identification of the self with the image is the basis on which all other future identifications of the child are designed. On elaborating the primary identification, Henri Wallon talks about how, for apprehending the self, the mere existence of the external image

is insufficient. He talks about the proprioceptive ego or "sensational ego," which encompasses the "muscular system in its totality" and which encloses "muscular and cutaneous sensation" (Silverman, 1996, p. 16). For self-knowledge, the "proprioceptive ego" and the "excorporative ego" must be combined (Silverman, 1996, p. 21). However, the relationship between the proprioceptive ego and the visual image or the excorporative ego is weak and talks about "the breaking away of the visual image from the proprioceptive body in states of confusion" (Silverman, 1996, p. 21). In this study, it is argued that this occurs in the trance-like state the oracle enters during *kavutheendal*.

Defining Bharani Ritual Space

Approach Through the Trialectics of Spatiality

Defining the different sites that Bharani encompasses, firstly, it contains the empirical space of the temple, the perceived space, or the "first space" where the action plays out (Soja, 1996, p. 66). Next is the mental space of the participants where the power hierarchies, social norms, and prejudices surrounding Bharani are organized, or the "conceived space"/ "second space" (Soja, 1996, p. 67). As mentioned earlier, this dominant space offers the discourse that structures the second space of Bharani. It codifies the regulations and rituals that the performers and participants (including the audience) follow around it. It establishes the power relations that generate the third space, the site of struggle between hierarchies. The third space is the site of contestation, the "lived" space that the artists inhabit to achieve liberation from oppression. These are the margins or the space of "radical openness, the space of social struggle" (Soja, 1996, pp. 67–68). I would argue that Bharani creates a heterotopia from this third space.

Conceptualizing the ritual space through the trialectics of spatiality, the lived space of Bharani exerts force on the second space temporarily. The fervid and feverish atmosphere is rife with the singing of "obscene" songs depicting sexual acts, desire, and even sexualising the Goddess. It seems counterintuitive to hurl abuses at the Goddess one worships. However, to offer an example, one of the songs describes how the sexual appetite of the *Kodungalluramma* (Mother Goddess of Kodungallur) must be satisfied using the temple flag pole. It is interesting to note that even women, especially older women, participate in singing these types of songs that are deemed vulgar, functioning as a striking articulation of female sexuality. Also, it is noteworthy how women achieve mobility through participation in this ritual. They could travel from their small towns to Kodungallur city and experience camaraderie and companionship. Also, they behave hysterically, beyond the social norms and standards set for the female body. Irigaray argues that hysteria is the "unheard voice" communicated through "somatic symptoms" (Whitford, 1991, p. 26). For theorists like Irigaray, the body is central for women to articulate themselves, and hysteria is a transcendence of social propriety, especially for women. This internal space will be psychoanalyzed later in the paper.

Hence, the oppressed assumes visibility, and an impermanent subversion of social propriety occurs. From the Thamburan, the royal head, to the lower caste performers, it assembles varying social classes and castes under the ambit of piety. The royal head and thousands of onlookers attend this spectacular ritual. Thus, Bharani space can be seen as a microcosm for society, encompassing all the sites and the relations between them. What unites these diverse groups, with exceptions, is devotion to their *Kodungalluramma,* the Mother Goddess.

Nevertheless, the counterargument to this is that Bharani is an upper caste design that proves to be a pretence of liberation. Nimisha K Jayan, in her thesis titled, Gender, Space and Performance: A Study of Visual Narratives of Kodungallur Bharani Festival, likens Bharani to a "psychoanalytical procedure," where the unconscious impulses of the upper castes are projected onto the lower castes (Jayan, 2020, p. 142). Nimisha asserts that Kodungallur Bharani does not entail any real consequences for the subaltern. Even today, the Bharani ritual is stigmatised in the popular imagination. This stigma is evident in the mockery associated with Bharanipattu/ Bharani songs in popular cinema. It becomes a "social drama" where the dominant structure sanctions rebellion to maintain the status quo (Jayan, 2020, p. 142). She argues this along the lines of Max Gluckman's "rituals of rebellion." Max Gluckman's ritual of rebellion involves the "controlled allowance of protest" and thereby maintains social order (Jayan, 2020, p. 134). Although Bharani offers subaltern visibility, power hierarchy is etched into all Bharani's rituals, as at every stage, the Thamburan, the royal head of Kodugallur, must be appeased. For example, for initiating one of the significant stages of Bharani, kozhikkallu moodal, or the ritual covering of a stone with red cloth, an offering or kaazhchakula must be presented to the Kodungallur Valiya Thamburan.

Bharani Ritual Space as a Heterotopia

This research paper views the brief overturning of the established order through heterotopia. As quoted earlier, heterotopia assembles all the social relations in a society, and is "represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 24). Owing to the diverse participation in the ritual, the concomitant representation and inversion of all the sites/ spaces found in society, it can be argued that the Bharani ritual space is a heterotopia. As a heterotopia, it lies outside of all the normative spaces of Kerala society. It partially differs from the social relations it alludes to, the normative social hierarchies, while at the same time covertly depicting them. It must be noted that the komaram or the oracles/ performers rarely have any kind of social ascendence outside the ritual space. They are viewed with abjection as opposed to the time of the ritual, where the public witnesses them with awe and reverence. As quoted earlier, female oracles are treated with prejudice by society. Hence, I would argue that Bharani ritual space can be hypothesized as a "heterotopia of deviation" (Foucault, 1986, p. 25), where individuals who deviate from the established norms are allowed to assume the foreground.

Following the next principle of heterotopia, its gatekeeping nature can be discerned through the initiation ritual of *vettitheliyuka* to become the velichapaadu/komaram. During the initiation ceremony, "vettitheliyuka," the first time they cut their forehead, the head of the young person to be initiated is placed on the lap of the chief oracle from their sect. Next, the chief oracle offers the ritual sword to them, and they make incisions on their forehead with it. Foucault & Miscowiec argues that the entry into the heterotopic space is controlled through specific mechanisms. Other rites of purification include sexual abstinence. These practices prove that the entry of the Komaram into the ritual space is carefully regulated through particular acts of penance. In the case of the public, entry for women as onlookers is difficult as they will be hurled abuse at. Nevertheless, female believers do enter the space as participants and witnesses. It is simultaneously inaccessible yet penetrable for women and completely closed for children. Thus, several cultural and ideological factors regulate entry into the heterotopia.

Looking at Bharani through the following principle, as a heterotopia, it houses several "incompatible" sites (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 25). As cited earlier, it brings together

several conflicting social groups and hierarchies in reverence directed towards the Mother Goddess. It houses mechanisms of ideological and caste power exerted by the social order, such as the police, royal head, temple priests, etc., and spurts of rebellion simultaneously. Furthermore, heterotopias are commonly associated with time, as "heterochronies" (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 26). Induchudan asserts that Kannaki's remains are preserved underneath the temple, standing alongside Foucault's example of the cemetery as a site that symbolizes loss and permanence simultaneously (Induchudan, 1969, p. 118). Access to this chamber is closed now, while specialised access to the head priest was provided before. Moreover, the ritual involves hanging temporary decorations and covering the *kozhikallu* (ritual stone) with red clothes to mimic the appearance of blood. These practices are conducted only during the Kodungallur Bharani, and thus, the ritual space becomes a "chronique," where time is fleeting (Foucault & Miscowiec, 1986, p. 26). Finally, it proves to have a function concerning the other spaces it constitutes. To reiterate Nimisha's (2020, p. 134) argument, it acts as a space where rebellion is permitted so that complete reversal of the social order does not occur. It is therefore a heterotopia of "compensation" (Foucault, 1986, p. 27), a perfected place that presents the illusion of rebellion and social visibility for the oppressed without any tangible change.

The Excorporative Identification of the Komaram

Next, I seek to define the individual subjectivity of Komaram in relation to being placed inside this heterotopia. For that, the research attempts to scrutinise the notion through psychoanalysis. Nimisha K Jayan argues that psychoanalytically, for the Komaram, it involves a return to the imaginary. I seek to further this notion in this research paper. Here, the Komaram identifies with and idealises the Goddess, an identification outside the body or "excorporative" (Silverman, 1996, p. 23). Lacan characterises the mirror as the "threshold of the visible world" (Lacan as cited in Silverman, 1996, p. 11), as the subject enters from the imaginary to the symbolic, forming the ego. All the future identifications for the child depend on the child"s primary identification with the reflected image in the mirror. Likewise, the Bharani space or the "kavu theendal" becomes a threshold space where a reversal of the same occurs. As argued by Nimisha K Jayan, the crossing of the threshold space re-enacts the process of primary identification. I would add that this process reverses the primary identification precisely because the "komaram" consciously identifies with the image. The image of Bhagavati already exists, and the Komaram imitates the Bhagavati, incorporating her iconography into their dressing, complete with "Armani"/waistband, "chilamb"/ anklets, and red silk. As opposed to the mirror passively reflecting the image of the self, during Bharani, the "komaram" imitates the image of the Bhagavati. Hence, reversal ensues.

In Bharani, a trance-like state is induced as the bodily unity is willfully disintegrated, that is, by the act of splitting open their heads. Simultaneous dread and jouissance are part of the primary identification, as characterized by Lacan. The infant experiences elation by witnessing wholeness in the mirror; this becomes the ideal ego for the infant, but it is immediately fragmented. However, the mother restores unity. Mother holds the infant to the mirror; without her, the infant's body is again fragmented (Bandhopadhyay, 2021, p. 316). In this fragmented state, the "komaram" loses his sense of his ideal ego, replaced by the image of the Goddess. To paraphrase Manju Edachira (Kerala Museum, 2023), there is a withdrawal of the self from itself. Despite that, like the infant clinging to the mother to restore bodily unity, the oracles attach themselves to their Mother Goddess. Here, faith is a potent tool to feel empowered, and this can be seen as a by-product of the subaltern's subjugation. For Nimisha (2020, p. 142), kavutheendal is a process through which repressed instincts from the

performer's unconscious mind are transferred to the conscious level and then sublimated into something more noble, presented as piety. Additionally, she interprets the longing for the mother goddess expressed in folk songs about Kodungallur Devi as the devotees" separation from her and their entry into the symbolic order. Therefore, for the "komaram," the event represents a return to the realm of the imaginary from the symbolic order.

During primary identification, the mother not only holds the child to the mirror but also offers the "imaginary alignment of the child with the reflection" (Silverman, 1996, p. 18). As interpreted above, Komaram holds onto the image of the Mother Goddess in a delirious state. She helps the child in the process of identification, and instead of identifying with their ideal ego, they identify with the Mother Goddess, facilitating a feeling of power. Additionally, concerning the role of the Mother Goddess, during the initiation ceremony, *"vettitheliyuka,"* the first time they cut their forehead, the head of the young person to be initiated is placed on the lap of the chief oracle from their sect. Next, the chief oracle offers the ritual sword to them, and they start cutting their forehead with it. This process mimics the primary identification as the oracles play the mother figure role, aligning the infant with the image. The only difference is that the image is not of themselves, but of the Goddess. As a result, the Mother Goddess functions to allow another identity for the komaram, something larger than their ordinary lives.

Nevertheless, although the subject momentarily returns to the imaginary and excorporatively identifies with the mother, the subject cannot completely attain the fullness it experienced during the pre-mirror stage. The Komaram's self-concept, having been initiated into the symbolic order, is already split. In other words, the momentary wholeness the subject experiences during the ritual resembles heterotopia's simultaneous "real and mythic" contestation of social relations depicted by it (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). There is a struggle against the symbolic order that cannot reach its fruition. Furthermore, Bharani fails to enable any real improvement, which can be answered through the question of gaze. Kaja Silverman argues that "the subject can only successfully misrecognize him/herself within that image or cluster of images through which he or she is culturally apprehended" (Silverman, 1996, p. 18). Here, the lack of systemic change in Kerala society towards the lower caste groups participating in Bharani and the sustained stigma surrounding the festival and its practitioners disallow the Komaram from recognizing themselves outside the ritual space beyond what they are culturally ratified.

Against these varied social phenomena, Bharani proves to be a complex, ambivalent phenomenon. Bharani's second space develops from the symbolic order, and the second space counteracts the rebellion from Bharani's third space. As argued earlier, the third space generates a heterotopic space of Bharani. Thus, the second space opposes Bharani as a heterotopia. Consequently, Bharani's ambivalence extends from the external heterotopic space to the performer's selfhood. This internal space of selfhood mirrors the heterotopic space that both originates in the paradoxical position of the Bharani performer as a social subject.

Concluding Observations

This research paper compares the notion of space to the performer's selfhood to provide a conclusive argument about how the external and the internal are akin to each other by being placed inside Bharani's heterotopic space. The analysis began by detailing the three different levels of spatiality: the first (perceived) space, the second (conceived) space, and the final

third (lived) space. It was hypothesized that the Bharani's second space consists of the various ritual stages, regulations, and popular discourse surrounding Bharani, which is inevitably structured by language. The third space is outside this level, where resistance emerges from. Third spaces are the culturally significant meeting places of diverse social sects, and Bharani proves to be the same.

Next, the idea of Bharani as a heterotopia was scrutinised. It was argued that Bharani is a ritual space that obeys the principles of heterotopia. Bharani encompasses and assembles varied social classes and ranks while depicting and challenging their relations. Moreover, it was observed that Bharani restricts entry into it by emphasizing certain factors, rendering it a heterotopia. The Bharani ritual space was recognized as a heterotopia of deviation and compensation. Finally, it has a function related to all its other sites, with rebellion and its controlled regulation. For the subaltern, entry into the space entails feeling empowered while the dominant classes conduct a ritualised acting out of rebellion without any radical change. Following this, the subjectivity of the Komaram while being placed within the heterotopia was elaborated. It was determined that, akin to the paradox of Bharani, the selfhood of the Komaram is paradoxical. It oscillates between the symbolic and the imaginary during the *kavutheendal* stage.

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Contact email: malavikakpradeep26@gmail.com