

Analyzing Kuthu Ratheeb with pain, based on “Performing bodies in pain”

(Medieval and Post modern Martyrs, mystics and artists):

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Abstract: *Kuthu Ratheeb is a ritual performance which stems from Sufi culture and it is the huge and blend of Shiite Muslim and Sufi culture. Basically, Kerala's kuthu Ratheeb and its origin come from Kondotty, Malapuram district, Kerala, India. Though, Ratheeb is another version and form of Kuthu Ratheeb. There are some similarities of religious ritual performance with Kuthu Ratheeb in Kerala. Though, there are some section of people in Kerala located in Ponani, they are also practicing Kuthu Ratheeb but they are the followers of Sunni religious section. Kuthu Ratheeb is performed at ritual festivals, mosques and homes. At homes they are done to escape from incurable diseases and to fulfil the aspirations of the people. The word "Kuthu Ratheeb" is a mixed form of Arabic verbal noun "Ratheeb" (which means something done repeatedly) and Malayalam verb "Kuthuka" (which means to stab or to use any weapon upon someone's body. This ritual performance is taking place in Iraq by maintaining commemoration of Husain's death in Karbala war, In Kerala this ritual performance is used to propagate religious ideologies.*

Key words: *Body Art, pain, performativity, ritual, culture.*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

What cultural function does Kuthu Ratheeb and other painful ritual practices like that perform through spectacles? All the painful ritual practices has cultural, historical, social, political or economic context. In the book ‘Performing bodies in pain (medieval and post modern martyrs, mystics and artists)’, it is said that pain creates an urgent demand to communicate things which generally are not interestingly listened by any one. When communal and religious rituals like Kuthu Ratheeb, dedicates pain in front of the audience, the pain, which comes in between audience and the performer by self torture of the body as part of the performance, become communicable. Through Kuthu Ratheeb, the performer, in a super human way, is able to present spectacles which feature body pain. Martyrdom, Plays about suffering; in these types of plays, in performance or in practices, the pain inflicted on oneself can be presented as a conceptual art form. Through the pain inflicted upon by self harm in the practice of Kuthu ratheeb, the northern Muslims of Kerala are able to understand the ideologies of the greats who received martyrdom and the stories of them performing super human spectacles. Not in the beginning itself of Kuthu ratheeb does the performer communicate pain through self torture but on the other side, its according to the tightening of the rhythm of Daffu or Arabana and of the intensity of the presentation of the performer, the intensity used to torture different parts of the body differs. During Kuthu Ratheeb, according to change of nature of the performance, the nature of pain also differs.

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The spectators of Kuthu Ratheeb could understand the difference in the spectacle according to the level of pain they use in the performance because pain strongly demands the spectator to engage says Marla Carlson in her book ‘Performing Bodies In Pain (Medieval and Post modern Martyrs, Mystics, Artists). Aesthetical bodily harm leads to the creation of emotionally vibrant society and also in consolidating social memory does it play a crucial role, says Marla Carlson’s writings. This book of Marla Carlson inquires about the performance of bodily harm. Live actions in its way, the performer either pretend or actually experiences bodily pain. In Kuthu Ratheeb, the performer actually experiences the pain. Medieval cruelty might be a mirror held in a distance for contemporary cruelty, discusses Marla Carlson in her book. Theatrical pain is generally used to enter into the consciousness of the people who reside in their bodies. There by it serves to be a call to action for the spectators. Even it’s by injury or by illness, bodily harm calls on cruelty and violence. During the early phase of 21st century, two types of holy wars had happened. First one was between the Industrialized Christian countries and the International Islamic movement. The second one happened between fundamental religion and the secular and humanist society. In each struggle, both the sides got to know the value of pain. Marla Carlson identifies pain like this; why express pain? Why one should watch such a performance? Why this kind of pain at a

particular time. These types of questions are asked along with pain that is actually experienced or pretended, along with a warning that pain cannot be classified or resolved into bodily, mental etc. It is in bodily performance does Marla Carlson is interested in, that means not in verbal explanations but in bodily actions, pain not as a concept or a symbol, not to portray the body as a metaphor but it's in the real body that expresses pain does the experience of pain exist. It includes pain and pain behaviours. Pain is included in the purview of social relations, also in the formation of these relation does pain helps. The experience of pain also creates cultural formation. By performing pain, the Muslim ritual Kuthu Ratheeb attracts the attention of the audience and presents a variety performance among them. When these types of performances are presented in Kuthu Ratheeb, this presentation style gains a speciality. It's like this, among the Muslim community of Kerala, Kuthu Ratheeb has able to create a religious folk culture using violence and the pain generated of it. The time, music and performance style used for the presentation of Kuthu Ratheeb aids the Kuthu Ratheeb performer to reach trance. After, it's by communicating the state of pain does the presentation of Kuthu Ratheeb improves. To communicate pain, the performers hurt their body themselves and experience it. In these types of ritual performances which proclaim solidarity to martyrs and to the greats who did miracles, pain through self torture is kept as a medium of communication for the audience. The pain used in Kuthu Ratheeb breeds and cements the social relation among the respective communities that conducts the ritual and also cements cultural formation. When Kuthu Ratheeb is placed in its historical context, we could know who experience the pain? The pain is experienced by the performer and same time, the audience as well. These types of practices are observed by the performer and audience according to historical values. Religious, cultural and communal factors come into these practices. Based on this, according to the beliefs of the spectators, they reach an inference and receive it. By practising Kuthu Ratheeb, believers do offerings in the name of martyrs and great men. Through offerings, believers ask these great men to pray to God for the believer. The believers believe that after the prayers, their wishes get fulfilled. During the presentation, when the performer communicates pain into the audience by wounding his own body, the audience also experience pain in a different level. This is what is created in the audience when they have the experience of watching the ritual Kuthu Ratheeb. But it's according to the beliefs of the spectators does the experience of spectators exist. As they experience bodily pain directly, the spectators also can enter the state of violence. Afterwards, the spectators also reach a state of trance. The performer understands the body and the spirit and places the performance to the historical context of Kuthu Ratheeb. In the scattered public spheres of post- modern culture, to form ordered public actions, theatrical pain plays a vital role, argues Marla Carlson. Also the society of medieval industrialised culture thought that to accomplish this mission, Saint Plays are not required. The understanding of pity that exists from eighteenth century onwards explains how we extend ourselves in imagining the pain of death without hurting ourselves. For ages, it's male performers who did Kuthu Ratheeb. Women do not participate in Kuthu Ratheeb. Most part of the twentieth century has its common conception of pain based on Descartes conception three centuries before, which explains the nerves as a bell rope that is pulled by painful sensations (for example, like fire burning the human skin) and thus pain bell is ring in the brain. From the discovery of endorphins in 1970 that added the term 'Runners high' into the lexicon, even if most of the theatrical deployments about pain assume a clear cause and effect relation between wound and pain, scientific research has led to alter the common conception about pain.

What Melzack and Wall says is that, it is not because there are no words to describe pain does language gets dried, but one gets only little chance to use them. More than that, words often seem absurd. The medieval people had more interaction than us with death and bodily sufferings. There is no reason to think that they had little sensation towards pain or that their spiritual understanding has made them be able to receive it calmly. Suffering was part of their day to day life. But they perceived it with fear. On examining pain, from Hippocratic corpus to hitherto, to the "silence and discard for pain" in the medieval ages, Roseyline Roy attributes Stoics more than Christianity as the reason. (Stoics: The ancient Greek philosophy which envisioned goodness towards the other to be self constraint, moral conduct and high tolerance). As moral virtue to be the highest good, considered Stoic philosophy and had thus devalues the body. Aristotle, like that of Plato has considered pain and pleasure as the passions of the soul. But Aristotle had acknowledged the relation between passions and sense of touch. Central to his concepts of mind and sensation were blood and heart with waves of pain and pleasure travel to the heart through blood vessels. Hot blood or soft heart can create pain. Galen, like Aristotle had believed that external objects create impressions on the soft stuff of the body and stimulation above saturation creates pain. But he had shifted the centre of control and perception to nerves and brain. We are tempted to move from the understanding of considering plague as a positive force for change to an understanding which metaphorically unifies plague and theatre, in Artaud's manner, which slides all too easily into a stereotype of plague everywhere and always which trails, trail by ordeal, the Inquisition, boiling oil. The late medieval social life had weaved the commemoration of martyrdom along with public execution and private torture. As part of practical spirituality does pain was portrayed by medieval performing arts. Pain is used in Kuthu Ratheeb as a part of spirituality. By self forgetting the body through self torture, pain is made as a part of spirituality. Also the

spectators had reacted with compassion in the pre modern sense of co suffering. Properties used in plays also can produce pain. Irritating and creaking sounds can be used as music to produce pain. We do recognize pain by the perception of its physical manifestations. Actors use this for communication. In this book, Marla Carlson says that, according to one study, generally four types of facial movements do pain produces, "brow lowering, orbit tightening, levator contraction and eye closure". Another study reveals that subjects succeeded in masking pain. Of smiling than that of pain, is action more characteristic of and may be related to happiness or embarrassment. If the non verbal expressions of pain and other emotions is learned behaviour, then it's subconsciously do most of the learning occurs and subtle are the variations. Marla Carlson also adds that, if she walk with neutral countenance over broken glass pieces, then we understand that she has some way, took control of her pain. Maybe she had controlled her facial expressions or had overcome the sensations. If the grimace is without her will, then she is not performing pain (in the sense in which she used the word) because she haven't intended anything with the grimace – providing that we understand her grimace to be involuntary. We read an intentional meaning to her behaviour if we believe that on purpose did she grimace and consider it as a performance, although she does not. If someone has put her in a platform and produce grimace in her by poking her with a sharp stick, then we attribute an intention to the character that poked her. Also we attribute intention to different people whom we think had made this interaction. Playwright and director are the persons most likely to be included in this. On our conception of acting depends, our attribution of any intention to her other than to embody the character.

During Kuthu Ratheeb performance, when the performer reaches the state of trance, his consciousness is different from that of normal state. Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach argue that the ability to experience varied states of consciousness differs according to individuals and this can be developed. Ariel Glucklich defines the mechanics of this process as, if one applies more irritation in body in the form of pain, the central nervous system produces only less output from the centres which regulate signals on which a sense of self is dependent on. Modulated pain diminishes the individual's experience as a 'discrete agent'. It makes 'body-self' transparent and helps in the emergence of a new identity. Metaphorically, pain generates an embodied "absence" and leads to a new, bigger "presence"¹. To an extent, it is the performer's pain that helps the performer to attain trance in Kuthu Ratheeb. Neuroscience says that trance has a major role in pain experience. In this book, it is said that through pain, mystics empty themselves and paves way for a new emergence. When passed through this absence, what they generally find is what they seek to find out, that is determined by their system of belief. The medieval saint has understood herself to transcend the physical by rupturing to another higher realm. Their vision was both physical and spiritual, a merging with God. If we look at any ritual of Kerala, there was a state of union with God and they bless the audience. In Kuthu Ratheeb also, praying for others and blessings happen. All the Sufi saints who have come to Kundotti in Kerala dedicated their bodies to God and had found spiritual path. When the performer self torture by making continuous wounds during the Kuthu Ratheeb performance, the pain experience lead them to trance states and nullifies the pain to an extent. According to neuroscience, trance states have large influence in pain experience because those who experience ritually induced pain cannot sit still for measuring brain activity. Like Judith Becker said, evidence for this primarily comes from hypnosis research Wolfgang H.R. Miltner² and Thomas Weiss had found out that Hypnosis and Distraction reduces the electrical response of brain towards pain. The study on more emotionally efficient subjects says that, hypnosis work by destructing the communication between nervous systems involved in the processing of pain³. The religious women of late medieval period have seen the character of self injuring as an alternative to the emotional intensity that comes along with affective mystical experience and also a way to enter these trance states when normal prayer and meditation fails, argues Kroll and Bachrach Marla Carlson⁴ says that the female mystics of medieval times have come to purification and redemption through a process of degradation. This process reminds them of their difference from Christ. She speaks cries, starves, harms herself, drinks the puss filled water she gets after, she washing the feet of a leprosy patient. Like Bynum argues, these kinds of sufferings are not to harm or even punish the body but to understand the humanity of Christ during his death time. Both self harm and illness act as instruments to merge with Christ, both had merged into the elated imagery of erotic union. Affective spiritual ecstasy also guides the Kuthu Ratheeb performer to trance states.

¹Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 207

²Judith Becker, "Music, Trancing, and the Absence of Pain," in *Pain and Its Transformations: The Interface of Biology and Culture*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Kay Kaufman Shelemay (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 167–68.

³Wolfgang H.R. Miltner and Thomas Weiss, "Cortical Mechanisms of Hypnotic Pain Control," in *Hypnosis and Conscious States*, 53–59.

⁴Kroll and Bachrach, *Mystic Mind*, 126.

Some performers sometimes slip into it. In other times or for others, it is very difficult to attain transcendent states.

The knowledge about women mystics of the thirteenth century came from the biographies written by male clerics. The Muslim women of Kerala and generally Muslim women, if their husbands die, for four months and ten days, stay in a single room with spiritual involvement by engaging in prayers, without seeing other men. This is done to end their pain of separation. It is like this, Elliot refers to about women such as Mary of Oignie (d.1213), Lutgard of Aywières (d. 1246), and Margaret of Ypres (d. 1237), that they are "relics before their times" and have gone through a "white" martyrdom through purification and voluntary self hurting. But they were not brutally martyred (The "red" martyrdom of early ages). Their bodies have performed miracles, always related with pain. Their ruptures were similar to the state that of death. Rapture is considered as an "out-of-body experience arises in interaction with the divine". Even when appearing dead in this world, mystics were transported to other places or have physically levitated⁵. In rapture, there might be intense physical expressions. When prayed, Christina Mirabilis had "curled up like a hedgehog". Rapture had made her "roll and whirl like a hoop"⁶. In other times, it is self hurting that induced rapture. Once Mary of Oignie remembered, having consumed meat and watered wine in order to defend an illness had cut out a big chunk out of her side. The pain that aroused has induced a "mystical ecstasy in which Mary understood herself to be standing beside a Seraph"⁷. The followers of mystics induce more pain to examine the raptures for authenticity. It is to withstand the criticisms against the mystics after their death. Franciscans had thrown Margaret of Cortona (d 1297) around the room. Charles of Anjou had Douceline "jabbed with nails and chisels and even had molten lead poured over her feet"⁸. The mystics, by relishing their ecstasies, by performing penance, had lived in the medieval towns among the close examinations by the sceptical neighbours. The hagiographers of the mystics are the only ones who venerate them during their lives, argues Nancy Caciola⁹. By finding loopholes in body art, Kristine Stiles argues that, its ambiguity makes it fit as a vehicle for "the languages of the oppressed who long to speak for themselves" onto the face of the ones who seek to "impose a uniform language"¹⁰. Stiles say that art actions draw spectators into a "committed relation" because, instead of passive contemplation or consumption, it demands the spectators to engage in active interpretation¹¹.

Amelia Jones says that body art creates such difficulty in allowing a historian or a critic to produce judgement from a "disinterested" position about the meaning and value of the work. Because of that, body art has the capacity to "destabilize the structures of conventional art history and criticisms"¹².

Depending upon the concepts of mind and sensation during each period, Marla Carlson argues for the use of different ethical and emotional structures to see pre- modern and post modern pain. Post modern theatre stages plays in order to raise human rights issues. By ideally actualising what Luc Boltanski calls as the 'politics of pity' which is capable to bring social change, the spectators respond with empathy. Opposite to it, the medieval theatre staged pain as a component of affective spirituality. In the pre- modern sense of co-suffering, the spectators responded with sympathy. In both these times, theatrical pain reveals a moral obligation. But the nature of the obligation differs.

II. CONCLUSION

Thus post modern martyr plays instigate fury and public action. But the medieval saint plays encouraged private spiritual practices. It is the arrival of Islam religion and Sufi saints associated with it, to Kerala during the medieval times that had caused the formation of communal practices among Muslims. Customs commemorating martyrs and Auliyas who bless by removing illness had come to Islam. The practices of Mappila Muslims of medieval Kerala were not completely distanced from the ancient native cultures and practices of Kerala. So there is a speciality in all the customs. As a part of affective spirituality does, the rituals

⁵Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 182.

⁶Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 183

⁷Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 52, 54, citing James of Vitry, *Vita B. Mariae Oigniacensis*, AA SS, June, 5:552, trans. Margot King, *The Life of Marie d'Oignies* (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Peregrina, 1986).

⁸Elliott, *Proving Woman*, 184, citing Kleinberg, *Prophets in Their Own Country*, 121–25.

⁹Caciola, "Mystics, Demoniacs," 270, 279.

¹⁰Kristine Stiles, "Inside/Outside: 'Balancing between a Dust hole and Eternity,'" in *Body and the East: from the 1960s to the Present*, ed. Zdenka Badovinac (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 29

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¹²Jones, *Body Art*, 14, italics original.

of Muslims and those of other religions occurred. In order to undertake the rituals with complete spirituality, observing penance, disconnecting relations with women are practiced. Rituals in verbal forms should never be made into mistake. In Muslim ritual Kuthu Ratheeb also, the performers for its performance, it is that should 'get ready'. It is as a component of spirituality does Kerala Muslims also practice Kuthu Ratheeb. By taking penance, by discarding other pleasures, the performers when they reach affective spirituality do, are able to an extent to injure body, to reach trance and to control pain. The ritual Kuthu Ratheeb, by enriching private spiritual practices reaches to presentation and with the energy of the other components that aids the presentation reaches to the completeness of the presentation. As it was a unified commune during the medieval times, many practices that are social and communal had originated in Kerala. In such nature did, Kuthu Ratheeb also come to Kerala. The pain experienced through body torture in the presentation creates empathetic relations. It is not to attract spectators do performers undergo struggles in Kuthu Ratheeb.

During medieval times, the notion of spiritually useful pain was new. Medieval theology starts with two notions of pain. By receiving indifference or the ability to withstand pain from Stoics, the Christian martyrs of early times have put forward the idea that God has helped them in overcoming completely the pain that is, to be indifferent. The martyr might be indifferent but the spectators get tormented. This is the point of meditation on individual images or witnessing theatrical performances, says Marla Carlson through her book.

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