Performing Disfiguration:

Construction of 'Primitive' and the Ambiguities of Representing Pain in Kathakaḷi

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Transformation from *Laḷita to Kari; Siṁhika* in *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ.*
Photo by Author

Kathakali is a highly stylized dance-drama practice from the south Indian state of Kerala, and it is regarded as one of the eight classical dance forms of India. This paper explores the complex performative construction of the primitive and pain in a process that I term "performing disfiguration". Disfiguration is a violent and powerful act of deforming which is imprecated in power relations. The Oxford dictionary defines disfiguration as "a state of wound" as well as "spoiling the appearance of something"

(Hornby, 2002). It includes such actions that "blemish, damage, deface, deform, distort, impair, injure, make ugly, mar, mutilate, ruin, scar or spoil." In Indian mythological texts, disfiguration comes across as a result of a "sanctioned" and open violence (Doniger, 2009). The case of *Śūrppaṇakha*[1] from the epic *Ramayana*[2] can be seen as an exemplary case of disfiguration, where her nose and breasts are mutilated by *Lakshmana*. The body of a woman who is ready to express her sexual desire mutilated as a result of violence and punishment is a known motif in the Indian epics. As Wendy Doniger pointed out, "There are many instances of open and sanctioned violence against sexual desire. It has always been there in Indian mythology" (Doniger, 1995, p.16). This paper looks into a nuanced understanding of the word "disfiguration", in terms of identifying the process in performing/representing such bodies as mutilated bodies, "ugly" bodies and bodies of "ogres", by focusing on the specific problems they raise in the field of performance.

In order to understand the process of disfiguration in the context of Kathakali, I will analyse the *kari-veṣaṁ* (black costume) or the role which represents the *rākṣasi* (demoness) and her mutilated bleeding figure as a special Kathakali *vesam* called *niṇaṁ* (blood). I will specifically take up the following three *kari-niṇaṁ — Siṁhika*[3] of

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[1]*Śūrppaṇakha* is a demoness in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki. She is the sister of *Ravana*, the anti-hero of the epic Ramayana.
[2] I have used the I.A.S.T. scheme for the transliterations.
[3]*Siṁhika* is a demoness who appears in the *Kathakaḷi* play *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ* by Kottayam Tampuran. (17th century), *Siṁhika* is the wife of the demon *Sarddula* and the sister of *Kirmmīra,* a demon king. *Sarddula* got killed by *Arjuna* in an encounter. To take revenge, *Siṁhika* decides to abduct *Draupadi* and take her to her brother *Kirmmīra*. Suspecting something, *Draupadi* refuses to go. *Siṁhika* then transform into her original form and abducts her. Hearing *Draupadi*'s cries, her husband *Sahadeva* enters and cuts off *Siṁhika's* nose and breasts. The source of this story is the *Mahabharata*.

Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ, Śūrppaṇakha of *Khara Vadhaṁ[4]* and *Nakratundi[5]* of *Narakāsura Vadhaṁ*. There are five types of *Veṣaṁ-s* in Kathakali, namely *pacca* (green) for noble characters, *katti* (knife) for anti-heros, *kari* (black) for demons and people from the lower castes, and *tāṭi* (beard), which is white for *Hanuman* and red for villains, *minukku* (prettying up) for noble women characters and sages. These categorizations of *vesa-s* come under a larger structure of classification — *Ādyāvasānaṁ,[6] Iṭattaraṁ[7]* and *Kuṭṭittaraṁ.[8] Kari* comes under *iṭattaraṁ vesam,* for an important role in the plot. Even though, in Kathakali, *pacca* is the noble character, usually the *katti* character — the anti-heroes who are vanquished onstage — receive more attention as they get to use spectacular elements like the *tiranottam[9]* on stage, where the *katti* enters the stage with *tiraśśīla[10]* and starts performing with magnificent costume accompanied with the *cĕṇṭa[11]* and other instruments. Kathakali is a product of Hindu royal patronage which has left a deep mark in the practice as well as in the ideas behind it. Death/killing acts are the central trope in most of the performances. Historically, Kathakali is only performed on stages inside palaces, and in upper-caste houses and temples. Consequently, it was only accessible to what were deemed as "non-polluting" castes. In contrast, due to the

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[4] It is a segment of Kottarakara Tampurān's *Rāmāyaṇam āṭṭakkatha.* It contain eight sections, one of them is *Kharavadhaṁ* (killing of *asura* called *Kharadushana*).

[5] *Nakratuṇḍi,* a wild and ferocious woman who hung tiger cubs as earrings, goes off to heaven to bring heavenly women for offering to *Narakāsura.* Who got mutilated by *Jayanta,* son of *Devendra* for expressing her sexual desire. She appears in the *Narakāsura Vadhaṁ*–Kārttika Tirunnā   (1724 to 1798). This story is taken from *Bhāgavata purāṇa.*

[6] *Ādyāvasānaṁ* characters are heroes or the main characters of the performance who act from the beginning to the end.

[7] *Iṭattaraṁ* characters have an important role in the play but they are not the main characters.

[8] *Kuṭṭittaraṁ* characters are people who just have one event to perform.

[9] *Tiranottam or tiranokk,* The entry scene of *Katti, Tāṭi and Kari,* can be translated as 'curtain-look', the character holds the curtain with both the hands, brings it down slowly in the beginning while showing emotions of *sringara* (love), *veera* (majesty). When the tempo rises, the movements turn fast. There are two kinds of *Tiranokk, Katti Tiranokk* and *Tāṭi Tiranokk, Kari* perform *Tāṭi Tiranokk.*

[10] *Tiraśśīla* is a curtain used in Kathakali which is held by two men on two sides of the stage to denote the entry and exit of characters or to show change of scene.

[11] The *cĕṇṭa* is a cylindrical percussion instrument used widely in performances in Kerala.

attempts of nationalization of the form as one of the "classical" dance forms of India, it is now accessible to many more if not all. (Zarrilli, 2000, p. 6)

Kari and *niṇaṁ* are considered to be two forms of representation, because, unlike other characters which have a variety of styles,[12] these two have very similar movements and gestures which cut across various plays and characters. *Siṁhika's niṇaṁ-veṣaṁ* is the same as *Śūrppaṇakha's* even though the narratives and the circumstances are different. Moreover, the *niṇaṁ* on stage is generally called *Śūrppaṇakhāṅkaṁ* even when *Simhika* is on stage. Here, the transformation of the female *kari* characters is seen as the transformation of performance codes rather than the individual characterizations. Through the process of mutilation, the disfiguration actually takes place on stage. The paper explores how the *niṇaṁ* and her performance has agency to confront the act of violence against them, unlike the dead, disfigured bodies (*katti, tāṭi*). The *katti, tāṭi* are the central characters of the play and do not have any scope to represent their pain. It is as if their positioning against the protagonist — the superior *pacca* — denies them any agency to live or to express their pain while dying.

When the embodiment of disfiguration occurs on stage, it is more ambiguous and even has the potential of destabilizing the norm. For instance, *Siṁhika*, a demoness, appears in the Kathakali play *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ*. She comes on stage first as *kari* and transforms into *laḻita* (the beautified and disguised *Siṁhika*) and then again to *kari* (demonized *Siṁhika*). Once mutilated, she appears on stage again in the disfigured

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[12]*Attaprakaram* (acting style) of *Pacca* and *Katti* characters are different according to their roles, for instance acting style of the *Arjun*, *Yudhiṣṭhiran* and *Bhīma* are different in *Kathakaḻi*.

form, *niṇaṁ*. As *niṇaṁ,* accompanied by the beats of numerous *cĕṇṭa* (drums), she appears at the back of the audience aided by two assistants and completely drenched in blood, beating her breasts fiercely with her long arms and screaming loudly as torchbearers follow her to the stage, gun-powder is sprinkled on the fire which flames and exaggerates the bleeding body of the *niṇaṁ*. In such transformations, i.e., from *kari* to *laḻita,* and again to *kari,* on stage, and the re-entry as *niṇaṁ* after the mutilation, one can see a complex process of disfiguration demonstrated in the performance. However, disfiguration cannot be studied only as a result of mutilation. Rather, this paper identifies the notion of "ugliness" of *kari* as disfiguration, since it is usually/traditionally compared to the ideal and beautiful figure of *minuku*. This paper regards such embodiment of disfigurations as a productive category instituting as well as destabilizing the normative standards of Kathakali. I will further argue that certain iconic representations of such "different bodies" need to be seen as involving a process of disfiguration. It is only through such a critical lens that we can enter into the question of embodied dimensions of disfiguration.

The objectives of this paper is to conceptualize how Kathakali deals with articulation/manifestation of disfiguration and how the carefully controlled body of a Kathakali performer negotiates with differing terrains and modalities of performing disfiguration. This paper raises the following research questions:

1. How does performing disfiguration both stabilize the structure of classical performance as well as allow certain ruptures?

2. How are ambiguities in representing pain crucial in the context of Kathakali? How

does *niṇaṁ* portray pain when the very idea of pain is missing from the repertoire of Kathakali?

   3. How does Kathakali construct (the category of) the primitive through the presentation *of kari?*

The Question of 'Classical' in Kathakali

   "Classical dance forms" is an umbrella term used to refer to a number of performances that are codified according to the rules of the *'Nāṭyaśāstra'.* According to Kapila Vatsyayan, Indian classical dance forms can trace their theories and techniques to the prescription of Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra.* (Vatsyayan, 1974, p.6) Therefore, an intrinsic power play exists in the selection of what qualifies as classical dance. This relationship evolved through the colonial and post-independent scenario in India where the Sangeet Natak Akademi used the term "classical" in order to denote the performing art forms that are based on the *Nāṭyaśāstra.* When a system tries to put all qualified art forms under an umbrella term, it is difficult to escape the politics behind it. As Urmimala Sarkar Munsi argues, "[T]he pure form of dance had come into existence virtually through an elaborate process of cultural engineering, wherein the grammar was systematically structured, the link with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was deliberately sought and established, and in most cases, even the name of the form was newly invented." (Munsi, 2010, p. 220).

   Kathakali shares a complex relationship with the manuals of *Nāṭyaśāstra,* much like other forms. It is a dance-drama that has more theatrical elements than dance. A

deeper analysis of Kathakali will take us to more complex levels of categorization. If observed closely, it is difficult to miss the serious and deep cracks in this construction of Kathakali as a classical dance form. There is a thorough process of alteration which took place in the "classicalization" of Kathakali. This was/is mainly done through a systematic removal of the so called non-classical dimension/elements. *Niṇaṁ* is something that was specifically diminished through this process of elimination due to the aestheticization of the form.

There are two modes of performance practices in the portrayal of *niṇaṁ* in Kathakali. The first is with the *niṇaṁ* on stage, and the second without the presence of the *niṇaṁ*. The absence and presence of a blood-soaked body involves different processes of disfiguration. The blood-soaked body of the *niṇaṁ* appears on stage to show that cruelty was inflicted on her by the *pacca* character. It might be a disturbing and disgusting scene to witness, but at the same time a sequence of this kind gives an agency to the bleeding mutilated body to raise his/her voice against the noble *pacca* character. However, the *niṇaṁ* episode of *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ* is nowadays often not presented on stage through the disfigured blood-drenched body of *Siṁhika*. If presented, it is done only through a scream which is heard by the audience. Also, *Kirmmīra* enacts and embodies the pain of the disfigured *Siṁhika*. Such an enactment is called *Pakarnnāṭṭaṁ*.[13] Phillip Zarilli highlights how, in the aestheticization of *niṇaṁ*, as the body of *Siṁhika* "recede[s] into the background as this aestheticized version

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[13] When *niṇaṁ* is on stage, the performance of *katti* on reaction to *niṇaṁ*-s is called *ilakiyattam* and when it is not there it is called *pakarnnattam*. There are different opinions on this as well, *Vadakkan* style (*Kalluvazhi chitta*) which is prominent in the northern Kerala, generally goes against the idea of *pakarnattam* of *niṇaṁ* by *katti vesa*-s and they follow *ilakiyattam* even when the *niṇaṁ* is not on stage. But , the *Tekkan* style(*Kaplingadan chitta*) prominently depicts *pakrnnattam* of the *niṇaṁ* on stage when *niṇaṁ* is not present on stage.

comes into the foreground" — as *Pakarnnāṭṭaṁ* starts substituting *niṇaṁ* — one can see its link to the Victorian "cleansing". He argues that the preference for performances without blood reflect the colonial/Victorian "cleansing" of representational practices like these in Kerala which is associated with the rediscovery of the *Nāṭyaśāstra,* and the increasing use of Sanskrit tropes of aestheticization, such as *nāṭyadharmi* to justify changes in stage practices as well as aesthetic taste. (Zarrilli, 2000, p. 134) The argument that Zarrilli brings provides an important context. However, I argue that along with Victorian cleansing, the changed scenario of these practices affected the performance and viewership of these forms.

There are a number of opposing positions about the *pakarnnāṭṭaṁ* as well. Vazhenkada Kunju Nayar, a famous Kathakali performer, argues that, "*Pakarnnāṭṭaṁ* should not be performed on stage because one actor enacting the sequence of a co-actor on stage is against the logic of the play. Thus, actors should not enact more than one character at a time, especially the enactments of *niṇaṁ* by *katti* when they are not on stage. Through *pakarnnāṭṭaṁ*, the proper transmission of *rasa* would not be possible." (Achuthankutty, 2013, p.240). At the same time, however, Prof. Ambalapuzha Ramavarma, in his book *Kathakali nirūpaṇaṁ*, critiques this argument. He says, "This kind of thinking is wrong; only performers who are masters in *rasa* can perform this sequence; one who fails to act *pakarnnāṭṭaṁ* on stage will say such things" (Ramavarma, 2009, p.108). He further says that *pakarnnāṭṭaṁ* is more appealing than the presence of *niṇaṁ* on stage. K G Palouse, noted Sanskrit scholar, argues that Kerala theatre does not strictly follow the tradition of *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the matter of presentation of violence and that is why theatre in Kerala extols the glories of anti-

heroes. Bhasa,[14] and not Bharata, influences the Kerala psyche. (Paulose, 2016, p.113)

It also appears from the several interviews that the character of *niṇaṁ* and its portrayal is not seen positively by most people, including actors who perform *niṇaṁ,* and academicians interested in or conducting research on Kathakali. Dr. Vellinezhi Achuthankutty, author of two Kathakali-related texts, in an interview claims, "There is no possibility of *abhinaya* in *niṇaṁ*. It is just a form to represent the non-classicalization of Kathakali. As one of the audience, I never felt sympathy towards *Śūrpaṇakha* in the *niṇaṁ veṣaṁ*. Rather, I felt disgusted. *Niṇaṁ* is a burden on Kathakali. Even when we have to perform it on stage, it should not be prolonged. It is just to show the characters. Some actors of Kathakali usually come on stage and perform lengthy gestures that look disgusting at times. There are certain *Padaṁ*-s for these *niṇaṁ* characters, which are normally not used in the plays. The actors who undertake the prolonged performance of *niṇaṁ* ask the singers to sing those elongated *padaṁ*-s which is, again, disgusting."[15]

Kathakali and the Question of Figure

The idea of disfiguration hardly finds a place in the theoretical discourses on performance. It is primarily considered as a medical concept. In Sanskritic aesthetic theories, the situations of disfiguration are generally contextualized with a combination of categories of the *roudra* (anger) and *bībhatsa* (disgust) *rasa*s. The visualizations of blood, death and pain, etc., are particularly seen as creating *bībhatsa*, especially in the

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14 Bhāsa is a famous Sanskrit playwright, dated between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE. His plays celebrate the anti-heroes who occupy the central stage while the real heroes of the epic are pale in contrast to them. Bhasa's plays celebrate the tabooed elements of performance such as death, pain, blood, etc.
15 Interview taken on 22 November, 2013

acting (*abhinaya*) mode of *Lokadharmi. Lokadharmi* is a form of *abhinaya* that, according to the categorisations of the *Nāṭyaśāstra,* gives freedom to go beyond the codified mode of acting. It is regarded as more realistic than *nāṭyadharmi* or the conventionally stylized practice of *nāṭyadharmi. Kari-veṣaṁ* can be analyzed through the concept of *Lokadharmi* because the performance of *kari* shows more realistic movements than the stylistic Kathakali movements. Kathakali follows *Padārtthaabhinaya,* the form where each and every word of the song's lyrics is enacted with gestures and body movements. But the *kari* character has freedom to do the *lokadharmi abhinaya* which crosses the boundary of *padārtthaabhinaya*. They are allowed to portray their relatively 'unrefined', 'primitive', less-stylised, i.e., *lokadharmi* improvisations (*manodharmaṁ*) on stage.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* says "the odious sentiment arises in many ways from disgusting sight, taste, smell, touch and sound which cause uneasiness." (Ghosh, 1950, p.115). Here, the stress is on the emotion one feels. The features of *kari* (black) and *niṇaṁ* (blood) trespass the fixed structures of *bībhatsa rasa*. In order to be free from these limitations and to have a more effective lens to see through, it is necessary to develop an idea that not only incorporates the concepts analyzed before, but also broadens its scope. Here disfiguration is posited beyond these ideas.

Kathakali celebrates a larger than life character in performance. Narratives from the epics appear differently with a higher degree of theatricality. Playwrights borrow plots from the epics and develop new characters that are apt for creating an effective dramatic ambiance for the performance. For example, the character of *Siṁhika*, in

Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ is a creation of Kottayath Tampurān, who was inspired by the character of *Śūrppaṇakha*. K G Paulose in the preface to the book '*Kathakaliyile Stree Kathapathrangal'* (Female Characters in the Kathakali) argues that in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Śūrppaṇakha* is mutilated through the cutting of her nose and ears. However, according to the 9th century text *Kamba Rāmāyaṇa* (*Śūrppaṇakha Padalam*, song number 94), her nipples get chopped off as well. Again, in the 14th century *Rāma Kathā Pāṭṭ* by Ayyipilli Ashan, it is mentioned that *Lakshamana* cut her breasts. It might be that the *Cākyār* performer of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* adapted the scene involving the *Niṇaṁ* from the latter versions. (Paulose, 2008, p.10) This becomes one of the most expressive visual imageries in the domain of *Kūṭiyāṭṭam*. Kaplingad Nambuthiri[16] borrowed this mutilated disfigured character from *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* and introduced it into the pantheon of Kathakali. *Śūrppaṇakha* in *Khara Vadhaṁ* is the first *niṇaṁ* in Kathakali and influenced Kŏ aya Tampurān to create *Siṁhika* in *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ*. It also inspired Kartika Tirunal to create *Nakratuṇḍi* in the play *Narakāsura Vadhaṁ*.

Kari is one of the *uddhata*[17] characters in Kathakali according to her characterisation. Even though *niṇaṁ* is associated with the *kari* character, not all *kari* characters have their *niṇaṁ* version. For instance, the central character *Hiḍuṁbi* in *Bakavadhaṁ* and *Kritṛika* in *Aṁbarīṣa-caritaṁ* are *kari* characters without *niṇaṁ*. The movements, gestures and the acting of these characters, along with their eventual death, are similar to those *kari*-s that have a *niṇaṁ* version. However, the way by which they meet their end is different in these two variations. I argue that the disfigured body

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[16] Nārāya an Nambuthiri of *Kaplingad Mana* renewed the existing version and created a new style of *Sambradayam* that is known as *Kaplingadan Sampradāyaṁ*.
[17] The word indicates the meaning violent, intense, rude, arrogant and ill behaved. The red-beard and *kari* charecters in Kathakali is called *uddhata* because of the nature of the character.

of any *kari* character does not only have the aim of making manifest *bībhatsa rasa.* Rather, it is also a claim for space on stage.

Through the symbolic representation of her primitiveness, the *kari* challenges the notions of beauty in Kathakali. Ugliness of the *kari* characters create laughter in the audience even though the story of the characters and the situations are not amusing or funny; rather, they are grim and tragic. In Kathakali, for instance, the character of *Siṁhika,* whose husband is killed and who herself lusts for revenge and gets mutilated in turn, shows how the presence of the character, though in a tragic context, evokes laughter. The situation is of '*vipralambha śringāraṁ'* (love in separation), where she is enduring separation from her husband. This portrays pathos that also stimulates laughter and *bībhatsa*. With her voluptuous body, black costume, conical breasts and all kinds of eccentric accessories, she becomes the embodiment of *bībhatsa*. Regardless of their situation, in all representations, the motif of *śringāraṁ* is constantly present. However, what is crucial to note is that the *bhava* she feels and the *rasa* that is elicited are not the same. Even when she is in *śoka* (despair) or *krodha*(anger) or *śringāra* (love), the dominant emotion communicated is *hāsya* (laughter) and *bībhatsa*.

Kari is an active female in the Kathakali compared to other female characters in the repertoire. We discussed other female characters, such as the *minukku*, which literally means "prettying up"— they are noble female characters whose high and respectful position reflects in the way they are dressed and presented on stage. The body of the *minukku* character, even though performed by men, is dressed respectably and behaves with extreme reserve on stage. Through this, a demarcation between the noble

body and its features as the example of beauty, and the features of *kari* who is a *rākṣasi* with an ugly body, is created. At another level, the passivity of the *minukku* characters, accompanied with their beauty, deemed as the ideal, is compared to the active agency of the female *kari*s who are regarded as deviant, but whose presence destabilizes the normativity of the idealized *minukku*. Even when the ugly body of the *kari* is transformed to *laḷita*, a relatively beautified version, she retains some aggressive movements that hint at her origin. The constitution of ugliness associated with the discourse of the non-*Āryan* presence as against the enlightened *Āryan* presence is reflected very markedly in the performance of Kathakali, which has always been an upper-caste performance practice. On the other hand, *kari*, which means 'black', represents primitive characters. *Minukku* is an ideal figure on stage who uses white costumes, and *kari* with the black costumes stands starkly in opposition not only in terms of the *āhārya,* i.e., outfit, but also the characteristics. Using black as the predominant color represents the color-dichotomy — the *Āryan*-s are the fair ones (pacca*)* and all others, being low, are dark in complexion. Ugliness is set up in a similar way in the *angikam* (gestures) and *vachikam* (verbal) aspects as well.

Kari Tiranokk; *Siṁhika* from *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ.* Photo by Author

When the *kariveṣaṁ* enters the stage with branches of trees in her hands, and the *tiraśīla*, the song (accompanied by the sound of the *cĕṇṭa*) describes the physical ugliness of the character. The song narrates that *Nakratuṇḍi* is a cruel demoness with large canine teeth who kills people from upper clans, human beings and gods by drinking their blood. She wears lion cubs as her ear ornament. Her flaming eyes are horrifying. Her voice is harsh like iron, and when she treads with heavy steps, everyone is frightened. (Achuthankutty, 2013, p. 132) The entry of the *kari-veṣaṁ* shows the grotesque nature of a primitive type in her *tiranokk,* while songs describe her as a creature who screams and howls in anger. She moves her *tirasila* rigorously following the rhythm. During *tiranokk* she jumps on to the stool and turns her body rigorously and howls shaking the branches of the tree that she holds.

The entire sequence of *kari* after her *tiranokk* is called *karivaṭṭaṁ.* In *karivaṭṭaṁ,*

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she first turns the stool around in a dancing motion. Subsequently, she tries to become a prettier figure. She tends her knotted hair, cleans her ear and ear ornament, applies *pŏṭṭ (*the red dot on the forehead*)* and *Kaṇmaṣi* (collyrium) in her eyes. These instances are laced with humor. She is then seen catching lions to wear as earrings.

The main sequence of *karivaṭṭaṁ* is a collage of three different dance styles from the non-classical culture of Kerala. First she does the combination of *sari*[18] and *kummi*[19] dances of Kathakali in a comic way. Followed by the dance movements she brings out another style of movement called *pantaṭikkal where* the *kari* character plays with a symbolic ball and circles around in dynamic dance movements*.* The character of *Laḷita,* i.e., the disguised *kariveṣaṁ*, also has a similar kind of dance. She repeatedly performs the *tĕruppa akkal,* until she has covered the whole stage. *Tĕruppa akkal* is another dance form from the non-classical tradition where the dancers rapidly move in a circle sitting on their toes and stretch legs one by one with hands moving in opposite directions. The *niṇaṁ veṣaṁ*, the disfigured *kari*, does not have any codified performative movements; rather, she runs and howls in her pain and suffering.

Typically the *vācikaabhinaya* in Kathakali only includes two singers who stand at the back of the stage, but the *kari* is allowed to make a booing sound while she performs. The sound that she makes (poo poo pooi) is still very common in everyday life of Kerala, suggesting a lower caste shriek. The *Maṇipravāḷaṁ* script of *āṭṭakkatha* with this basic sound of communication constitutes a cultural mesh of stylization and

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[18] A female dance sequence of Kathakali where the *minukku* characters move gently holding hands.
[19] A form of folk dance that is popular in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, danced mostly by women in a circle with rhythmic clapping. Kathakali uses *kummi* movements and the rhythm and tune of *kummi* songs in the dance movements of female characters.

everyday practice.

De-codifying the Body: Training and Performance

The performer's body is another way of understanding disfiguration in the context of beauty. There are two types of roles in Kathakali— *cŏlliyāṭṭa-pradhānyaṁ* and *abhinaya-pradhānyaṁ*. The first one is focused on body movements and training, while the latter is based on facial expression. The latter is comprised of roles where the performers do not need to practice being in the role; rather, they would mostly react to the action of other characters, who would then come under the first category (Nair, 2000). Most of the *minukku* characters do not perform *Cŏlliyāṭṭam* because they are mostly passive characters who do not have *kalāśa,* i.e., vigorous dance movements. The first two among the three *kari*s included in this paper — *Siṁhika, Nakratuṇḍi* and *Śūrppaṇakha* — have a *Cŏlliyāṭṭam* in *kaḷari* (practice room).

Cŏlliyāṭṭam is a long process where the performer infuses the character into her/his own body. The movements that they do not perform on stage might take place during the *Cŏlliyāṭṭam* as a practice. It is highly stylized and codified. *Cŏlliyāṭṭam,* literally, is a combination of two words: *cŏll,* i.e., verses, and *āṭṭaṁ,* i.e., performance. Together, it means dancing or acting with *vācika*m. In *Cŏlliyāṭṭam*, *āṭṭaprakāraṁ* and *abhinaya*s are performed with instruments and songs, as a mini-performance in itself. Before *Cŏlliyāṭṭam* takes place, a practitioner of Kathakali has to go through rigorous practice without musical instruments accompanying the practice. It is with *Cŏlliyāṭṭam* that a performer performs to the accompaniment of instruments. Through this s/he is to prove

her/his ability to perform and this is the process that enables the master of a performer to choose the latter for a role. In *Cŏlliyāṭṭa Kaḻari*s, the performer has to follow the codification and the stylization that describes a particular character. In *Cŏlliyāṭṭam* there is no question of *manodharma* of a performer or *lokadharmi* style in a performance. In the training, it is not allowed. However, *manodharma* is allowed on stage during the actual performance, provided it does not break the *sthāyibhava*[20] of the character. For *kari, Jugupsa* (disgust)[21] is the *sthāyibhāva*. The performer who performs the *kari* has to go through rigorous practice along with developing the sportive capacity to express *manodharma* on stage.

Usually, the performers who perform *kari* are broadly structured with an imposing physical presence. They are the people who also do *tāṭiveṣaṁ*, the large bodied anti-heroes. As a corollary, it can be said that in *Kathakaḻi,* people with a big physique play the characters of *kari* and *tāṭi*.[22] It appears that this big physique is another way to portray these characters as larger than life — those who do not fit into the so-called well-bodied figures. This is also seen in the case of the women who perform Kathakali. Women with larger figures often do the *kari* characters. They are also recommended not to perform *niṇaṁ* for its exaggerated sexualised presence, especially the mutilation of the feminine body parts. According to Sreenivasan Kunnambath, a Kathakali scholar, *patraswabhava* (nature of character) is important while choosing an actor for a role. If someone with a small figure performs *kari/tati* it is considered not to do justice to the

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[20] The enduring mood.
[21] *Jugupsa* is the *stayibhāva* of *bhibatsa rasa* or disgust.
[22] For instance, the early performers like Bāli Ŏtikkan and Chambakkulam Pachu Pilla, the contemporary performers such as Rāmachandran Unnithan, Kottkkal Devadas and Hari R. Nayar

character.[23] As described earlier, the *āṭṭakkathā*s also describe these characters as huge. For instance, *Siṁhika* owes her name to the very fact that she wears heads of lions as her ear ornaments, thus proving not only her power but also her huge size. This huge structuring of *kari*s makes them stand in direct opposition to the docile *minukku* characters with soft feminine features and ideal womanly bodies.

The carefully controlled, codified-through-*Cŏlliyāṭṭam* body gets de-codified on stage through the expression of *manodharma* because as Rāmachandran Unnithan says, in Kathakali, the "stage is a loose space compared to *Cŏlliyāṭṭakaḷari*. On stage a performer can use *manodharama* but in *kalari* it is compulsory to follow the rules."[24] *Kari*, where the *aattprakaram* is designed to portray the primitive and ugly, the *manodharma* also supports the idea of ugliness. For instance, when *kari* tries to dress her up, she takes some powder and mixes it with her breast milk to put a *pŏṭṭ*. Nowadays, however, many performers replace it with the *kari* plucking leaves from trees and smashing them to make a *pŏṭṭ*, as these actions are considered "uncultured" and "vulgar". However, in *manodharma,* the performers are allowed to show it.

Kari and *niṇaṁ* with their raw and vulgar styles of performance may seem like deviations in the otherwise refined imagery of Kathakali, but their portrayal serves the vital task of depicting the complexities of performing disfiguration.

Niṇaṁ: Challenges of Performing Pain

Proceeding from the performative construction of the primitive in the previous

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[23] Interview taken on 04/06/2016
[24] Interview taken on 12/02/2013

section, this section analyzes the problematic performance of pain in Kathakali in performing disfiguration. The process of disfiguration in Kathakali will be more vivid when seen through the lens of violence and pain. In Indian aesthetic texts, such as *Nātyaśāstra, Daśarūpaka*, etc., there is no mention of pain being staged. It is interesting to note that in the entire array of thirty-two *Vyabhicāribhāva*s that discuss almost all human physical and mental *avastha*s or states, there is no mention of *vedanā* or pain.

Marla Carlson in her book *Performing bodies in pain* asks, "Why perform pain?" and, "Why watch such a performance? Why this type of pain at this particular time?" (Carlson, 2010, p. 6). These questions are relevant in the context of Kathakali.

> ...we stage and watch spectacles that feature the body in pain...The types of pain vary, as do the types of presentation. Because pain so powerfully solicits the spectator's engagement, aestheticized physical suffering plays a vital role in creating communities of sentiment and consolidating social memory, which in turn shapes the cultural and political realities that cause spectators to respond in different ways at different times. (p.2)

However, the building of community and the political question of performing martyrdom does not exist in the context of Kathakali. Rather, in the context of Kathakali, niṇaṁ with her pain are considered a disgusting site or a punished body. Thus, relating with her feelings would kill the community experience of the viewers who belong to upper castes.

Pain is always considered a clinical concept, something not-quite-normal. This is,

therefore, only to be dealt with by experts in the respective fields, specifically medical experts. Experiencing pain is, however, not a part of medical knowledge. The base line of *Āyurveda* is *Ruk-pratikriyā* or the reaction to pain. (Amarasimhan, 2000, p.116). Therefore, it is apparent that medicine, and its entire endeavor, revolves around reaction towards mitigating pain and not the action of pain per se. It is thus always one step removed from the body of pain. Pain is, therefore, always regarded as negative both in its experience and expression. To analyze the performer in pain, it is important to look into pain, communication, and cognition in the medical order to explore the ways in which we know that the performer is "in pain" and if the pain is real or simulated. (Carlson, 2010, p.11).

Scene of Mutilation of *Siṁhika* from *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ*. Photo by Author

Śūrppaṇakha is the victim of sanctioned violence. In the *Rāmāyaṇam, Laksmana*,

an *uttama* (noble) character, mutilated her.[25] In the epics, if a woman is killed by the gods or the *uttama* characters it leads to her salvation from curses.[26] The result of sanctioned and conscious violence that has pre-occupied the notions of the traditional knowledge system is that mutilation does not mean to kill but causes a perpetual state of pain and permanent disfiguration.[27]

In Sanskrit philosophy, theories of aesthetics, other *śāstras* and medicine are interconnected. In *Āyurveda,* pain is a deep sensation which is a *lakṣaṇa* or symptom of *roga* or disease. (Vagbhata, 2001). The action of medicine is a reaction to that pain, which can cure the pain. The pained body in performance is an action or a representation, which does not fall under the domain of medicine. The experience of pain and its performance on stage represents the pain of another body. In Kathakali*,* the *kari* character, who gets mutilated on stage but does not die on stage, is one of the most vibrant visual representations of performing pain.

The *aharya* of niṇaṁ is important to manifest a mutilated body on stage. Preparing the *niṇaṁ* is a process that the performer has to accomplish. The process prepares the performer to be *niṇaṁ* and makes him well aware of the texture and material of the costume, so as to avoid difficulty in performing.

The main ingredients of the niṇaṁ mix are *maida* (refined flour), quicklime (calcium oxide) and turmeric powder mixed with water and boiled till it acquires a thick

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[25]"She is freakish, knavish and overtly ruttish, oh, tigerly man, it will be apt of you to deface this paunchy demoness" Thus, *Rāma* said to *Lakṣmaṇa*. (Valmiki, pp.1891-1894)
[26]The story of *Tāṭaka* from Ramayana indicate another mode of killing where the person who killed by the god will achieve salvation from curses. (Valmiki 1891-1894)
[27]In *Mahābhārata*, *Aśvatthāmā* the only character who was cursed of an eternal life and the wound on his head would keep bleeding for all eternity and he will be a wanderer without a companion and without being able to talk with anyone 3000 years (Vyasa 2012).

consistency. For a deeper/darker shade, *kozhichayam* (a kind of artificial color) or beetroot is added. Prior to the performance, a mix of coconut water, pulp and banana is added too. When the blend is ready, the actor will soak himself in this mixture and apply this it to the half-carved areca spathe to create a heavily-bloodied appearance that would create aversion. When the *niṇaṁ* enters, there are three figures that are drenched in blood; however, when the mutilation occurs, only one body gets mutilated. To show exaggerated pain, all the three bodies move in synchrony. This exaggeration conveys that the pain transcends the body. Technically, the role of *sahāyis* (helpers) is to help the performer to move after sinking in the mix and slipping. While it comes to the visual and affective realm, the entire sequence creates a representation of collective pain.

When *pakarnnāṭṭaṁ* replaces the *niṇaṁ* on stage, *Rāvaṇa* or *Narakāsura* enact the pain and suffering of the mutilated *kari*. Kottakkal Devadas says that these characters (*Rāvaṇa* or *Narakāsura*) do not feel sympathy or empathy towards the *kari*s. Rather, they just perform it with distanced indifference, as though only narrating the pain. These characters are concerned about the *niṇaṁ*s as if the latter are their relatives, but do not share their pain. The *bhāva*s used in these *pakarnnāṭṭaṁ*s are disgust and anger. When *Kirmmīra* enacts *Siṁhika*, the performer shows the *bibhatsa*. In the *pakarnnāṭṭaṁ,* there is no practice of performing the pain. Kottakkal Devadas opines that it is difficult to portray the pain of the *kari* in the costume of *kattiveṣaṁ*. [28] He states that he preferred to do *Narakāsura Vadhaṁ* with *niṇaṁ* instead of *Kirmmīra Vadhaṁ* because the audience sympathizes with the character of *Siṁhika* who becomes vengeful when her

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[28] Interview taken on 12/05/2014

husband gets killed. At the same time, *Nakratuṇḍi* in *Narakāsura Vadhaṁ,* is a character who goes to heaven for snatching women for her brother and gets attracted to *Jayanta*, and expresses her sexual desire to him and gets mutilated. She has more of an impact on the audience because the expression of sexual desire by a *rākṣasi* to an *uttama* character is forbidden. He holds that in this case, people do not feel any sympathy towards her. The *sthāyibhāva* of *Nakratuṇḍi* is more prominent than the *Siṁhika*, who has the victim's role.

While *kari* gets attacked by the *pacca,* the expression of pain, rather than *bībhatsa rasa,* gets staged. The expression of pain with howling and screaming sounds (ayya ayya ayyayoooo) is portrayed—the *Vācika* of the *niṇaṁ* uttered before leaving the stage. This sound marks the transformation of *kari* to *niṇaṁ* and the arrival of the *niṇaṁ* even before she physically enters the stage. The pain due to is mutilation first expressed performatively through the *Vācika abhinaya*. This becomes the mark of uncontrolled pain. "The question, whatever its content, is an act of wounding; the answer, whatever its content, is a scream. This identification of the physical and verbal acts is consciously or unconsciously acknowledged in the language of the torturers themselves." (Scarry 1987 :54) After the cry, the *kari* disappears backstage, and then, the *niṇaṁ* enters, walking amidst the audience with two companions/helpers. When the *niṇaṁ* is about to appear amidst the audience, one of her companions puts a bloody hand print on stage, announcing her entry. Then, the *niṇaṁ* is seen at the rear of the audience howling and fiercely beating her breasts—crying and showing pain. Kottakkal further comments that only through the *Vācika* abhinaya is there representation of pain; the bloody body is to create the *bībhatsa rasa*. Even if that is the case, it is difficult in

practical terms to separate the representation of pain through sound and words, and through physical movements and postures. Without the body, the words might only induce *karuṇa,* and without the words, the body's presence emanates *bībhatsa*. When combined together, they successfully communicate the emotion of excruciating pain on stage. If there is no pain in the body of the mutilated, it will be very difficult to comprehend.

Niṇaṁ on Stage: Performance of Collective Pain; *Nakratuṇḍi* in *NarakāsuraVadhaṁ.* Photo by Nisha Menon Chembakassery.

Performing pain invokes sympathy towards the character in the audience. Yet, it does not happen in this case because *Śūrppaṇakha* is a *rākṣasi*, an enemy of the *nara-nārāyaṇa* (men and gods), and therefore sympathizing with her would be outrageous. Therefore, the possibility of performing pain in Kathakali is not explored by the performers. Some performers use dialogues with gestures to communicate the *niṇaṁ's* suffering. For instance, in *Nakratuṇḍi*, there is an extended sequence where she

vindictively tells her brother that she had been brutally mutilated by *Jayanta* and that he has to kill him for revenge. Eventually, the extended performance of *ninaṁ* was removed from the repertoire of Kathakali. Kottakkal Devadas argues, "... this practice kills the performance. If *ninam* starts showing the gestures with *padaṁ*, it creates funniness (*tamāśa)* and kills the *sthāyibhāva* of *jugupsa*."[29] At the same time, it creates ruptures in the stylized performance.

Conclusion

Kathakali uses un-realistic, larger-than-life characters on stage in the performance of pain. The "ugliness" of *niṇaṁ* and the performance of *bībhatsa* bar the possibility of creating a sympathetic atmosphere. The howling and the gestures of the *niṇaṁ* create the code of performing pain, but it is not (and should not be) transmitted to the audience. The performers themselves do not want to transmit this emotion. It is interesting that the identification of the act of performing pain hardly ever takes place even though their pain is performed. The pained body in the performance space destabilizes the normative structure of the performance and, therefore, subtly reaffirms it. Thus, it can be said that *niṇaṁ* actually has a dual relationship with the performing repertoire. While on the one hand, it is violent and vulgar and potentially destabilizing, if identified with performing pain (which questions the act of violence), on the other hand the same violence and vulgarity affirms the position of the normal and the elegant in terms of portraying characters. This aspect of the performance is necessary to maintain its hold over the practice.

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[29] Interview taken on 12/05/2014

In relation to the use of "performing disfiguration", I have followed an un-conventional trajectory that deviates from the general trend of analyzing Kathakali. Moving further, this paper uses performative re-presentations of "pain" and the "primitive" as two significant categories to understand the potential of performing disfiguration in Kathakali. The appearance of *kari* and *niṇaṁ* in Kathakali challenges the "classical" aesthetics that Kathakali put forward. Through the ambivalence in pain, as well as an ambivalence of primitiveness, *kari* and *niṇaṁ* enhance the power of performance to stabilize and destabilize norms.

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