

## Body as a Sign: Reading *Thumpunkal Chathan*

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### **Abstract**

“Body is historical and cultural agency in generating, shaping and interpreting changing meanings”, says Simon Featherstone. The body became an inevitable discursive domain in cultural studies. Modern man has destined to dwell on and interact with various manifestation and concepts on and around human body. *Thumpunkal Chathan* , an oil painting by K P Reji is based on a popular myth in Kerala. This paper analyses this oil on canvas applying body politics, body theories which refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as struggle over the degree of an individual and social control of the body. My attempt was to read this painting focusing on how the body acts as a sign to show the precarious lives of the marginalized based on the social, political, cultural and economical context of Kerala.

**Keywords:** Marginalization, body, subaltern, caste



This paper is an attempt to evaluate 450cm\*300cm oil on canvas by K P Reji entitled *Thumbunkal Chathan* based on a popular myth in Kerala related to agriculture. Through this pivotal painting of the Kochi Biennale 2012-13, he tried to articulate the subaltern past and present of Kerala. He portrays his locale Chandiroor village of Alappuzha district. The issues of caste, slavery and Dalit question are evocatively but powerfully put forth by K P Reji in a dexterous way. Rather than following the traditional painting techniques, the portrayal of abstract images and universal concepts, this painting focuses on to create a concrete image which is accessible to a common man. See the agricultural slave in the painting, the pulaya (a lower caste) chathan in the foreground sacrificed on the bund in the paddy field. Thumpunkal Chathan (a lower caste man laying in the small bund in paddy field) is a representation of many agricultural slaves who immolated their lives so far in order to conserve the prosperity of their masters. Even then Chathan is considered as a tragic hero. The image of Chathan positioned in the painting to seeks the attention of the viewer easily. It acts as a semic code to articulate the life in the periphery and the presence of the past in the present. Barthes' defines semic code as the code of signifiers or connotative code. Here Chathan's body, children, colour pallets are signs that signify new realms of body politics. The cultural life of Kerala is vividly incorporated in the

painting through the rural landscapes and visions of agriculture elements: Chathan, paddy fields, ducks, birds, goat, lake etc. However, the cultural life was intervened by the caste system. Reji's paintings are open commentaries about events and incidents which we encounter in our day to day lives. Rather than pushing the viewer into the realm of the unknown or invisible through the symbolic representation, he attempts to depict the reality behind. In his paintings tragedy and violence are shown not in loud expression but as an ordinary occurrence. His characters are generally those who had been forced to remain in the margins in relation to dominant imperial culture. The peripheral characters that are generally pushed to the background get a self-description and assertion in his paintings. The plight of the oppressed is marked on the backdrop of development structures of big cities and urban spaces as we see in this particular painting. The military ship stands as a symbol of hegemony. The images of Chathan and the children who are engaged in different activities in the painting support this argument. They vividly portray the plight of the marginalized section of the society in past and present respectively.

Here I make an attempt to analyze the *Thumbunkal Chathan* applying body politics which refers to the practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as a struggle over the degree of an individual and social control of the body. Body discourse became predominant in the contemporary society after undergoing many regulations and modifications over the years. As a cultural concept, the body encodes the society's values through its shape, size and ornamental attributes. The body is a part of nature, culture and society. As we closely examine the painting, it can be divided into three horizontal layers, the first one where the body of Chathan which protects the bund and the agricultural land, in the second layer a group of children engaged in different sorts of activities and the third layer shows the image of a ship which overpowers these marginalized. According to the economic determinism in Marxist theory, human society consists of two parts: the base and superstructure. The base comprises the forces and relations of production- employer, labour, physical and economic resources. The superstructure of a society includes its culture, institutions, political power, rituals and state. The base determines the superstructure. "The essential Marxist view is that the latter things are innocent, but are determined by the nature of the economic base." (Barry, 152) The artist has positioned the pulaya man who is lying down in the lower half as the foreground in the middle panel which seeks the attention of the viewer. This image of the Chathan can be considered as the base. Society's base is the physical power of the subalterns, whose labour directly influence the growth of the economy. The modern developments, luxuries are structured on the suppressed bodies of the subalterns.

The evolution of an industrialized postmodern urban space is at the cost of the lives of the marginalized class of the society. Chathan stands as a symbol of all those who are dispossessed during the making of the mainstream. As we examine Kerala history we can find that certain sections of the society are always relegated to the corner due to their differences in caste, colour and creed. The privileged class enjoyed all benefits as a result of the hard work of the underprivileged. As per the conventional notion, physical objects and human bodies cannot exist without the intervention of spiritual power. The upper caste considers their body as sacred and practiced untouchability in their relationships with other lower caste. But they never tried to fulfill their responsibilities and they went on exploiting the 'marginalized' both physically and

mentally. Foucault speaks of the history of the body in the ancient Greek civilization in *The Use of Pleasure*. They never saw the body as something to be subjugated to extract labour power out of it. The physical traits stand as the markers of the dignity of an opulent class. On the contrary, the marginalized seems to lose their dignity because of their physical traits. Even though their body is their God which helps them to earn their bread and butter, while the elite class believed in supreme God by neglecting the efforts and pain of the 'other' whose sweat is their vittles.

We can trace the offshoots of the negation of human bodies in Christianity and in the philosophies of Plato. Plato considered the human body as the citadel of love and lust that defile the pure and unblemished soul. Philosophers could never think that body could exist by its own power without the support of a spiritual substance from outside. The negation of human bodies started in the early time of modernism. Human bodies devalued and regarded as a scattered object. Abstract ideologies attained dominance over the belief of holiness of the body and its expressions. The ancient culture incorporates the mind and body while the modern civilization controls the body in order to meet the materialistic production in the modern industrial world. The precarious situation and atrocities faced by Chathan and marginalized people in the modern world are nevertheless same, the ways are different. Both prevented from participating in social life which in turn leads to further isolation. In the postmodern era also, the exploitation of the ordinary man prevails. Chathan is a victim of caste and class distinction, in the postmodern era, the ordinary man is discarded based on their social and economic possession. For the benefit of multimillionaires, corporate and business tycoons, the ordinary workers are crushed. Their physical labour turns to be an integral source to stabilize the economy and increase the material production.

According to Nietzsche, the body does not require an external principal or mental substance for instigation of its movements and thoughts with the announcement of Death of God, he was actually free of all external control of a spiritual substance (*Nietzsche for Beginners*, 56). He replaces it with a force that is an attribute of the body itself which is the will power. The libido theory of psychoanalysis put forward by Sigmund Freud explains the body was under control of the instincts from the unconscious mind and body has libidinal desire as its force which is prior to all social stratifications. These theories led to the evolution of postmodernism which marked the flux from self to physical body.

The painting also speaks about the women of ancient times, the injustices they have come across and as well as how an upper-class woman's experience differs from a lower class'. The female body is stereotyped as an object of sexual pleasure and to arouse desire. Irrespective of class and colour distinction every female body is to fulfill the womanhood and motherhood, in the case of a lower-class woman she needs her body to work in the paddy fields along with her spouse and share equal responsibility to meet the family expenses.

With the advent of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and feminism in the 20th century, they began to interpret the body as a crude matter organized by a rational self or transcendental spirit weakened. Foucault confines articulation of human body to the body within history, marked by culture. This marking gives meaning to the body. His theory meant to evolve a

program for resistance against the forces that wanted to take away the joy of the body through subjugating and imprisoning it for maintaining the interests of the dominating power of the society. His political concern leads him to perceive the human history from the side of the marginalized other. Therefore, his investigations are basically directed to uncover the suppression of human bodies in modern societies by various regimes of administrative control to make it useful for production of benefit. Foucault never conceives power as a force or essence of the body like Nietzsche. Instead of perceiving desire as an attribute of the body, desire is seen as something discursively constructed by culture (Foucault,85). When people like Chathan became the victims of imperial power due to their lack of resistance, what we can witness in the postmodern context is the resistance and regaining the strength of physical body to combat against the tribulations and injustice due to the class system. Modernism and postmodernism brought significant changes in the social realm, instead of distorting the state of downtrodden. Even now and then, the marginalized have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them.

The canvas gives us a realistic notion of ecology. The colour pallet used in the canvas is green and grey. In semiotics green symbolizes the life, growth, renewal, health and the grey, an intermediate of black and white symbolizes neutral, achromatic, sadness, melancholy and boredom. This colour combination indicates life in death and death in life. The greenery in the foreground stands in contrasted with the murky grey shade of the metallic ship and sky with grey.

This painting is a critique on contemporary Kerala and a visual representation of the Spivakian title “Can the Subaltern Speaks?”. Through the multi layers of meanings embedded in the images/codes in the painting, it proves how a subaltern can speak about his/her agonies. The Chathan buried alive by the landlords in the paddy field to protect the bund is a political representation of the history and culture of a multitude who abided in the modern imperialism. Human beings who are born brought up and work in the soil are not mere scapegoats, they too have equal right to prosper in the society. Modern developments and innovations in Kerala are proliferated on the martyrs like Chathan. Many Dalit lives were trampled even in the 20th century. Reji’s painting is an outlook, surveillance, sight, speech and open commentaries from the bottom level of the racial discrimination. What we get through Reji’s canvas is not different from the literary works of Dalit writers like K K Kochu, C Ayyappan, S Joseph who raised voice for the voiceless class. The emergence of modernism, mechanization, information technology, global villages etc is flash forth in the background of *Thumpunkal Chathan*.

Along with human rights violation, corruption in the government schemes to upgrade the lives of marginalized drives them to the more pathetic condition. Color and body complexion of the children who carry weapons in their arms in this picture emphasize the torments encountered by them. The Indian constitution provides that it shall be the duty of every Indian citizen to provide education to their children up to the age of fourteen years, this right stays far off from the children from the marginal section. Even if anyone finds an opportunity for free schooling, they become the victims of class distinction both from the teachers as well other students. Through the image of a girl in the painting who is trying to put off her school uniform, the

painter is trying to elucidate the agonies of children. As we examine the statistics of the crimes and violence that happened in Kerala, most of the criminals are from the subaltern class. The armed children in the painting remind us of a degrading society that forced the helpless man to opt the path of violence. You can see a girl and boy defecating in the open and this is the extremes of deprivation of basic amenities amidst all the modern advancements.

With the passage of time and materialistic progress in the postmodern social scenario, the oppression and atrocities faced by the marginalized also take various forms. The idea of an inclusive development is still far beyond the comprehension of the modern world. So isn't it the high time that we rethink the notion of development and social wellbeing? My attempt was to read this painting focusing on how the body acts as a sign to show the precarious lives of the marginalized. In this paper, the painting is placed in the social, political, cultural and economical context of Kerala. Thus it is a politicization of aesthetics. Yet, the painting offers a vast scope for multiple readings and it can be taken to new realms of thought and discussion.

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