

## The Politics of Aesthetics: Understanding the Space Occupied by 'Manavatti' in 'Oppana' as a Competitive Performative Art

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### Abstract

Oppana, is one among the popular art forms that owes its origin to the Malabar region of Kerala. With the expansion of digital media and technology, this art form which actually belonged to the Muslim community, especially in the Malabar region, has won a much wider consent and acceptability which helped it to shift its domain from a partly-marriage celebrative art form to that of a competitive performance as part of co-curricular activities. This transition has led to the incorporation of various drastic changes especially making it a commodity for arresting the attention of the mass. This commodification is what majority misconceive as aesthetics and that has actually got fixed as a bench-mark in determining the quality and Islamic aesthetics of this artistic form, when it is performed as a competitive item. 'Manavatti' (literally means the bride) is a role played by a white, beautiful, young, affluent female figure with certain deterministic emotions like coyness. The problematics of this paper circulates around this female figure and its various deterministic qualities that influence a jury in determining the quality of Oppana as a competitive art. My paper is aimed at making a comprehensive understanding of 'whiteness' in defining the performer called 'Manavatti' and its aesthetic dimension.

**Keywords:** competitive art form, performativity, whiteness, Islamic aesthetics.

### Introduction

Oppana, as a performative art carried out by women who, mostly, belonging to the Muslim community in Kerala, is noticed for its dynamic and lively movements and equally vigorous accompanying song often called Oppana pattu (Oppana song). Oppana originated as part of wedding ceremony, inviting the bride to be seated as the chief spectator while a band of, about, fifteen women dancers entertain the whole members by singing and dancing around the bride. Whilst these mirthful events like singing and dancing take place, the bride remains in her position of being seated in a couch, enjoying the event. Oppana now brings to the mind of many, not the traditional wedding related performative art but rather a competitive art form that which is performed over stage as part of Youth Festival and other co-curricular programmes. This transformation from a festive related art to a competitive item has often led to the incorporation of innumerable supplements in order to make it look more a commodity product thereby increasing the chance of winning a competition. The main concern of this research paper is analysing the aesthetic productivity of the figure called manavatti and how it become a powerful metaphor in carrying the ideology of white-superiority. The transformation which I have mentioned above is often evidently reflected in the performer called manavatti with the additional incorporation of whiteness and coyness. This element of whiteness is what can be understood as the axis around which the whole research paper revolves and its ideological domain in influencing and shaping the public opinion regarding the various benchmarks that define the concept of beauty and thereby the aesthetics of a performative art.

### Manavatti: The Passive Performer.

Manavatti, is a very important part and parcel of Oppana when it is performed as a competitive item over a stage. Oppana, but, in its traditional form doesn't demand such a kind of an essential or consequential role to manavatti for it can be performed for various other occasions like 'sunnath kalyanam' (circumcision) and 'nalpathu kuli'. But this paper isn't about doing a geneological study of this art called oppana but rather something that is specifically intended to look at the functioning of whiteness as an ideology in defining the concept of manavatti when it is performed over a stage. Ususally, when oppana is performed over a stage as a competitive item, a total number of fifteen participants are allowed to step on to the stage including manavatti. Excluding the one performer called manavatti, the rest fourteenn will carry on with the dance and singing, leaving the manavatti to remain in a static, passive position addressing the audience.

Manavatti in many cases maintains her passive position of being seated in a couch, with body covered in jewells, simulating coyness and with a make-over of thick white coating covering her face, completing the competency of being a manavatti. The passive attitude maintained by manavatti in relation to her co-performers is not what makes her role as a performer a dubious one but rather her exterior outlook and skin tone. Passivity isn't a trivial quality that which evades the benchmarks of aesthetics while evaluating a performative art. In fact, we live in an age where sedentarism is often regarded as a counter cultural choice for defending the 'fast-culture' as promulgated by the capitalist class. The passivity that which is imposed upon manavatti is often taken to be a quintessential aspect of this character which but cannot be criticised through the rigid framework of a traditional feministic conceptualisation because these are demanded for the completion of this art. Passivity often slips through the gap of tradition by drawing justification artistic liberty and aesthetics, but it gets out in the open when it is studied in relation to whiteness. Whiteness is more than just a skin tone that which defines the concept of beauty of manavatti but rather it takes along with it a number of other co-elements for its completion, like, passivity, innocence and ignorance. These qualities when converged in manavatti completes her feminine module. According to Shona Hunter, whiteness demands a 'hyper-visibility' through its invisible-ignorance-innocence traid (2). she goes on to explain that,

...the hyper-visibility of whiteness is key to how contemporary global colonial whiteness works through commodification; through knowing itself declaring itself to be problematic and then cleaning-up itself, itself to re-archive innocence. But this relies on the same passive, narcissistic mastery logic of coloniality, whereby the white subject knows and controls mind over matter. (13)

This research paper isn't intending to delve into such depts as explicated by Shona Hunter in her work *Routledge Handbooh Critical Studies in Whiteness*, but there are certain elements that which can be identified in the character manavatti when she is deliberately embracing a white skin tone. Whiteness according Hunt isn't that should be restricted to mere skin tone but rather it opens up a much wider discourse that which throws light into the politics of passivity and politics of innocence. She explains, "...politics of innocence is fundamental to the dialectical production of global whiteness and the human material and symbolic hierarchisation on which it depends." (6) Passivity is a crucial component of whiteness which facilitates two important advantages, one, innocence and two, safety and comfort. One cannot be blamed if he identifies these privilages being enjoyed by manavatti because the location or subject position of manavatti is an institutionalised, strategic space of white innocence. This innocence is what differentiates her from her co-performers. She enjoys a much more comfort zone not because she is the icon of the show, that is the bride, but rather she is a 'space' co-constituted in the hypervisibilisation of racial others. Here the politics of passivity is much more exposed. Crediting the words of Hunt,

...the politics of innocence produces institutional stasis, a stuckness within a racialised human hierarchy, which is in reality actively produced. This stasis is dependent on ignorance about the unspoken marker in racialising practices, which is whiteness. (22)

### **The Politics and Productivity of White Aesthetics.**

The white superiority speaks of the historical legacy and privilege often attributed to things/subjects that which is maintained through epistemological, heteropatriarchal and capitalistic demands. The narcissistic-mastery logic of whiteness, that which aids in the formation of a superior sense gets even more acceptability from the public sphere when it is transformed into a legitimate myth. The politics of whiteness is described in an in-detail manner in the former section and what lies here is its association with production of aesthetics. The question is, is whiteness productive? See, whiteness is an ideology that acquires a material position when it is imposed over a society with the intention of enjoying a hegemonic superiority with the help of various institutions like art, religion, fashion, family, etc. So, in every manner whiteness is productive because it produces a binary that which legitimises a hierarchical order in society. But, the question can be more precise, like, whether whiteness produces aesthetic sensibility?

While looking into the aesthetic dimension of an art there are few things that one expects to find, they are, the beauty of the art, the element of creativity, inclination towards traditional rules and regulations, role of entertainment and role of originality. Beauty of Oppana as a competition art is determined by various conditions like literariness of the song, the systematic mobility of dancers, their facial and bodily expressions, etc. While evaluating a Oppana performance, according to a jury, whom I have enquired regarding the marking system, has said that about thirty to fifty percentage of marks is decided upon the 'performance' of manavatti. This isn't what concerns me, I am so much frustrated to know that no a dark skin-tone manavatti had ever dared to present before the jury for the reasons of fear of failing to arrest the aesthetic attention of the jury. This is what I intended by the title 'Politics of Aesthetics'. Beauty of an art is completely reduced to a particular colour tone and that which is powerful enough to swing the clock towards the chance of victory. So beauty is more about white skin-tone than the performative aspect being presented by the artists, which is a sad thing to know. When it comes to creativity, there are certain basic aspects demanded by tradition that which is necessary for the art to be identified as it is. It means any radical change in the name of creativity can never be appropriated into an art for the reasons of its very identity. So creativity in Oppana is mostly adopted in the exterior extravaganza like colour of the dress, pattern of the dress, more jewells, and after all the 'whitening' make up, than that of the minor changes that can be identified in the literariness of the song and rhythm of dance. Creativity in Oppana is mostly done over manavatti in making her more and more a commodity in accordance to the demands of the whiteness culture. Creativity in decorating manavatti seems to be a replica of the ideology of the Global North, which ensures security and comfortness for the 'white' in comparison with the rest of the tones. Creating novelty in whiteness by exploring different shades of whiteness, ensures aesthetic productivity. Aesthetics of beauty and creativity, therefore, get limited to the whiteness of manavatti. And when it comes to the question of entertainment, manavatti completes her performative role of being a commodity by behaving in accordance to the demands of a white, capitalist, heteronormative male spectator. The primary function of an art is to entertain the audience and thereby generating pleasure inside them. Entertainment happens in two ways, one, through attachment and two, through detachment. With the introduction of capitalism and the ideology of class division, identification and attachment acquired a more political dimension. But this also had far reaching consequences, like xenophobia and reluctance towards knowing the unknown. Hence realism acquired more prominence and men got more and more detached from

novelty and creativity. Things got even worse when the capitalistic class invaded the creative domain of art thereby seizing the power of human consciousness. They propagated capitalist oriented 'creative' ideas in the form of commodities thereby winning the consent of the mass and securing a stable and much dominant status in society. Whiteness is one such ideology which won the public consent when it got adopted into the domain of art. The commodification of whiteness by incorporating certain values and morals that which facilitated a hierarchisation of racial communities, won public consent when it was propagated in the form of art which men believed to be justful and neutral institution. So, when it comes to the aesthetic productive dimension of Oppana, manavatti dominates the realm since she is taken to be an assemblage of passive, narcissistic mastery logic of whiteness.

### Conclusion

Manavatti isn't a biological being with flesh and blood but rather its a structural space for the white discourse to enforce its hyper-visibility. Who ever occupies this space is possessed with a 'performativity' role that which is predefined by the Global North. When it comes to the question of productivity of manavatti, two of 'her' aspects need to be analysed, one the productivity of sedentarism and two, the productivity of whiteness. Assuming sedentarism to be an unproductive aspect is a capitalist style of enforcing the proletarian sect thereby ensuring hype in the commodity production. But here sedentarism is more a sub-quality and privilege enjoyed by the white class. It becomes a matter of concern when the same sedentary feature changes into a vice when performed by anyone who doesn't belong to the white class. In other words, a non-white manavatti's sedentary performance will never be counted as an aesthetic quality because it doesn't generate beauty and pleasure inside the spectators. Now, moving on to the second aspect, the productivity of whiteness, manavatti exhibits her real power. She is the centre that which defines and dictates the whole functioning of the system called Oppana. A major division of aesthetic production of Oppana is dependent and defined by the white manavatti. She is reduced not to her genuine beauty but rather to certain benchmarks dictated by the Global North. Hence she serves herself as a propagandist of white superiority logic.

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