

Discourse Analysis and Ritualistic Traditions- A Study on *Theyyam* Art Form of Kerala.

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Abstract: The paper is a critical reading on the ritualistic art form namely *Theyyam* in Kerala which is having thousand year old tradition. The theoretical formation of the concept on discourse analysis is having a philosophical entity has not much exposed in the cultural studies. Since *theyyam* is an indigenous art and undergone various studies in folklore which is prolific with a number of discourses in its history and current status as a folk ritualistic art form.

Key Terms- *Theyyam*, Discourse, *Thottam* Songs, Performance, Rituals, Culture, Myths

Theyyam is a very celebrated and illustrious art form of Kasaragod and Kannur districts of Malabar region in Kerala, India. It is a ritualistic art form based on the myths of local heroes, heroines, animals, serpents and other supernatural things performed as a dance drama with the aid of songs and percussions in a decorative manner in shrines which is generally termed as *Kavus* in Malayalam. It is recorded that more than 400 different types of *theyyam* art forms are now performed in Kerala which is having thousand year old tradition. It is a colourful art form which is performed by the members of the particular class or communities in Kerala whose familial job itself is the *theyyam* performance.

The application of the term Discourse Analysis has started the critical reading of the ritual studies and folkloric genres by the academicians in a very recent period. The term is applicable not only to the genre of language but also for the study on events and texts in all kinds of art forms. Discourse is a term that scholars have developed to analyze the systems of thoughts, ideas, images and other symbolic practices that make, following anthropology, generally call Culture. Most of the critics use the term discourse in adjoining with Michel Foucault's concept, Critical Discourse Analysis. According to Foucault, discourse is a culturally constructed representation of reality and thus the cultural texts which creates knowledge is the product of different discourse related to it. Marianne Jorgensen and Louise J. Phillip explained the term Discourse that,

in critical discourse analysis, it is claimed that discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups – for example, between social classes, women and men, ethnic minorities and the majority. These effects are understood as ideological effects.

According to the sociolinguist Fairclough, in the Discourse Analysis there are three interrelated process of analysis; one is the object analysis which includes the verbal and visual text; second is the process by which the object is produced and received; the last one is the socio historic conditions that govern these processes. The text analysis, the processing analysis and the social analysis are the different

methods of analysis according to Fairclough. Here the analysis of rituals in critical discourses especially with reference to *theyyam* has been done by considering different cultural concepts in the performance.

In Kerala there are so many kinds of rituals which needed close study since they are indigenous in nature. The people of Kerala are having different caste systems according to the jobs they are doing over centuries. The word *theyyam* or *theyyakolam* or *theyyatam* denotes the dance of God in Malayalam. The major themes of this ritual dance are the myth of heroes in legendary wars, local stories which agitated the minds of the common men, the suppressed women who later turned to goddess etc. Thus according to the theme itself the performance becomes a discourse genre. The dance was usually conducted in front of the shrines namely *Kavus* or *Sthanas* where the hero had their residence according to the myth. The village people assemble there to watch the performance and a cultural bondage is formed there. The performance is festival kind where the different communities meet, different persons meet and different discourses formed. Thus the whole process of *theyyam* festival itself is a discourse formation process.

The history of *theyyam* ranges from Tulu tradition to the northern districts of Kerala which is border to Karnataka. In Tulu tradition *theyyam* is known as *Bhoothakola* representing the same nature of *theyyam* in its verbal and non-verbal discourses. The meaning of *Bhootha* and *Theyyam* is different in meaning in Sanskrit but both of them are indigenous and related to the common men and their life. The *thottam* song in Malayalam is known as *Pardhana* in Kannada. Thus the study on *theyyam* is also the study of the history of Kerala and Karnataka. The names of some of the popular *theyyams* in Kerala are *Muchilottu Bagavathi*, *Vishnumoorthi*, *Pulikandan*, *Pullikarimkali*, *Kathivanoorveeran*, *Puthiya Bagavathi* and *Muthappan* etc.

The period of *theyyam* is the time for the starting of good harvest as it is a symbol of prosperity and wealth. The season is collecting the previous years harvest and prayers for the next year's excellent harvest. The performance of the *theyyam* outside the premises of temples and shrines is common. Sometimes the *theyyam* runs over the paddy fields and sometimes he climbs the coconut tree according to the myths. Sometimes the *theyyam* namely *Ottakolam* jumps over the fire ember by wearing the coconut leaf strip costume around the body. Other *theyyam* including *Puthiya Bagavathi* fasten the fire wicks on the body and dances gorgeously. The physical fitness of the *theyyam* dancers must be good enough to get along with the performance. Some of the *theyyam* hunts and some others slaughter chickens. The *theyyam* namely *Karimchamundi* slaughter the chicken by biting it and chews it as such. They act in a way that they drink the blood of the live chicken as the myth of that particular *theyyam* demands that visual effect. Most of the *theyyam* consumes alcohol during the performance. The deities are indigenous and perform the discourses as such to depict the real effect of the presence of God in front of the common men. There are multiple ways in which the dancers converse with the audience. The communication over the musical instrument is one among them. Native musical instruments they are using and thus the powerful percussion creates other worldly experience among the audience. The instruments such as *chenda* or drum, *kuzhal* or pipe are used generally in *theyyam*. As the rhythm toughens the dance movement changes in an extraordinary manner. He may forget the world and states himself as the God. The one who views the performance also consider him as the God and opens up his problems to the Man-God.

The prime discourses in *theyyam* are the verbal and non verbal narration that is occurring during the particular period. The verbal discourse of the *theyyam* is the *thottam* songs where then non verbal includes the performance, body and the different events used to assist

the artist. The *theyyam* song is also known as the *thottam* songs which is sung and carried from generation to generation by the *theyyam* communities orally. The critic Dilip Menon opined that it is believed that most of the songs versified by the community members themselves and among these the Malayan community played a major role. The legendary poets or the gifted artists generated and circulated the oral songs preserved through generations is the most surprising phenomenon in their history. Thus the songs served as a way to the world by a socially backward community like Malayan, Vannan and Pulayar etc. The assimilation of community to the outer world is possible with such discourses and the social adherence is possible through such experience.

The rhythm of the *theyyam* differs according to the nature of different *theyyams*. Sometimes there will be continuous performance occurs and sometimes the short duration performance occurs. Both of them convey their own concerns over the myth. In the totality of the *thottam* songs, musical instruments and powerful performance *theyyam* turns as mind blowing. The *theyyams* having different kinds of body and facial decorations according to the character they are conveying. They use only the natural materials like turmeric powder, rice paste, coconut oil and different colours of leaves for the facial make ups. They use coconut leaves for the covering of dress and adorns with different ornaments of bronze. They wear different kinds of headgear with different sizes made by themselves crafts the *theyyam* performance as elegant one.

In a discourse there must be a mediator and here the mediator is the *theyyam* performer who transforms himself from Man to God. Since *theyyam* is a complete process which needs the help of organizer community, the *theyyam* community and as a festival there is the audience as the active participants of the performance. The prime importance lies on the main performer of *theyyam* which were the members of the communities like Vannan, Malayan, Pulayan and Koppalan so on. Here the taboo of a myth is attributed to the performance by considering the laws of cosmology and reinstates the concepts that man is the supreme power himself, so is God. Thus the general concept on the humanism is insisted here just after the performance is announced.

A work of art is the reflection of its period thus in, *theyyam* performances too reflected the then prevailing social system and social structure of North Malabar region. The era is recreated again and again in the art forms with the myths and stories in it. In Kerala the insignificant and the deprived of power, that is the *avarnas* or the law class are the originators of *theyyams*. They are trying to represent their own spiritual and mythical believes by identifying them with the god or spirits or their ancestors in different mode. At the same time the non-brahmanic and other backward clans are having their own deities and shrines particularly. There occurs many rituals namely *Kaliyattam*, *Perumkaliyattam*, *Thira*, *Vadakkemvathil*, *Pooram* and so many other rites conducted as dance forms. The communities namely Thiyya, Vannan, Maniyani etc are conducting the festivals in shrines and do the daily rituals in *Kavus* or shrines.

The common man becomes the addressee by presenting himself in front of *theyyam* and conveys his problems to the God. Here the man-God *theyyam* works as the healer of all the problems. The issues can also be about the locality or village and thus this later leads to the way of analysing the issues of the whole community and the locality. There the village becomes the place of addressee and the performer as the man-God suggests solutions for it. Thus there forms an emotional bond between the addressee and the performer. Since the performing community is the lower clan in the hierarchy of the caste discrimination system in Kerala and the discourse conveys strong indigenous issues based on the heroic myths of *theyyam* is purely the art of the oppressed. The other classes might use their power to take the credit of the

performance and apart during performance the community of performers stay lower according to the social class system. The concept of discourse functions in all aspects of cultural critics and critiques. Thus we can conclude that the ritualistic art form *theyyam* is a discourse formed with the association of tradition, history, sense of place, and belonging.

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