

Performing the Poetics of Protest: Genre, Gender and Justice in *Kali Natakam*

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Abstract

This paper examines Sajitha Madathil's play *Kali Natakam* (2016) as a significant contribution to the evolving genre of hybrid theatre performances in India. Drawing upon the ritual traditions of Kerala's temple art forms, such as 'Mudiyettu' and 'Kalamezhuthu', and critically engaging with contemporary socio-political issues, the play becomes a dynamic site of genre blending and social critique. This paper reads *Kali Natakam* in the light of Dalit feminist thought and Ritual Performance theory to examine how the play politicises ritual space and foregrounds the multilayered marginalisation of Dalit women. The creative fusion of folk, poetic, performative and narrative elements, combined with the strategic embodiment of the Goddess Kali by a Dalit woman, makes the play a powerful critique of caste, gender and society. The paper is based on the English translation of the play by Anand Haridas, which earnestly attempts to carry the political and aesthetic force of the original Malayalam text.

Keywords: Ritual, folk theatre, Dalit feminism, performance, caste, gender

Introduction: Theatre as Protest and Pedagogy

Indian theatre has a long history of being closely connected with social and political resistance. From the anti-colonial work of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in the 1940s and the 1950s to the radical street theatre of the 1970s and the emergence of Dalit performance traditions today, theatre in India has consistently challenged power and authority. Performing a play in India is rarely a neutral act. It often

becomes a space where dominant beliefs are challenged or reshaped. Sajitha Madathil's *Kali Natakam* (2016) continues this tradition by creating a theatre piece that brings together ritual, protest and the need for change. It is better understood as a theatrical performance than a regular play. Based on the ritual form of 'Mudiyettu', a ritual temple art form of Kerala which incorporates folk elements and enacts the myth of the war between Kali and Darika, *Kali Natakam* presents a powerful socio-political critique through visual and physical performance, made for the stage. It challenges the prevailing ideas of caste, gender and justice not only through the plot but also through the innovative style of its performance.

First staged in Kochi in 2016, the play later travelled to many places, including Delhi, Tripura, Meghalaya and Sikkim. This journey demonstrates a clear effort to bring Dalit feminist voices into the national cultural space, transcending language and region. Its reception in these places indicates that its themes of exclusion, memory and strength resonated with people across the country. The English translation of *Kali Natakam* by Anand Haridas has expanded the play's reach further, enabling serious discussion among those who do not know Malayalam. Though the translation preserves the rich poetry and deep political meaning of the original, it is important to remember that the original performance is closely tied to Kerala's unique ritual and caste context. The power of *Kali Natakam* comes not just from its script but also from its setting, culture and language. The play combines myth and contemporary experience, employing a layered structure that challenges both established representational norms and cultural hierarchies. Rather than following a straight storyline, the play unfolds through a series of episodes, reflective monologues and ritual moments that skilfully expose the social tensions within the performance space.

Theoretical Context: Intersectionality, Dalit Feminist Praxis and the Politics of Genre

The study of *Kali Natakam* necessitates a critical ground that addresses the complex interplay of caste, gender and performance. The play functions not merely as a written text but as a live event that foregrounds the intersecting realities faced by marginalised communities, particularly Dalit women, within the traditionally exclusionary space of ritual performance. In this context, critical and theoretical approaches such

as Dalit feminism and intersectionality are useful for understanding both the content and structure of Madathil's theatre. These perspectives help illustrate how the play challenges dominant ways of representing caste and gender, and how it reconfigures ritual theatre into a space of embodied protest.

Intersectionality, a concept discussed by Crenshaw, provides a framework for understanding how various systems of oppression, such as caste, class or gender, are interrelated and influence one another. In India, this theory has been propagated by thinkers like Rege, who argues that Dalit women's experiences cannot be understood by looking at caste or patriarchy alone since class, caste and gender intersect with each other. In their introduction to *Intersectionality in India*, Arya and Rathore assert that "in the Indian context, caste, gender and class would seem to constitute the crucial intersection for Dalit feminism" (2020, p. 171) and

Dalit women are most prone to violence from the caste-class-gender axis through untouchability, labour control, gender control and control on Dalit women's sexuality, which defines their everyday hierarchical relationships with dominant caste men and women, as well as with Dalit men. (p. 171)

Kali Natakam articulates the complexities of intersectional marginalisation through its central character, a Dalit woman named Kali, whose performative embodiment of the goddess Kali transcends mere symbolism and becomes a powerful site of political and cultural assertion. Her transformation becomes a deeply political and performative act, shaped by shared historical suffering and driven by a will to resist. Here, *Kali Natakam* attempts to reclaim ritual space to express the unheard stories of Dalit women, combining personal memory with collective resistance.

Madathil's dramaturgy places at its centre what Rege describes as a "Dalit feminist standpoint" (Arya & Rathore, p. 12) where lived and embodied experience becomes a form of knowledge that challenges dominant caste narratives. Rege emphasises that a Dalit feminist perspective is shaped by the lived realities and ongoing struggles of Dalit women, and it aims to question and reshape the social systems that uphold caste and gender-based hierarchies. Such voices "forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression,

struggles and resistance” (p. 132). For Rege, they are testimonies rather than literary expressions, aiming to convey the lived experiences of oppression, captivity and resistance of marginalised communities.

In *Kali Natakam*, the protagonist’s transformation into Kali on stage is therefore not a passive imitation of being possessed by the divine, but a deliberate statement of ritual power. The act of wearing the *mudi*, the grand, decorative headpiece denoting divinity, which marks the arrival of the goddess, is no longer a mythical or spiritual moment alone. Instead, it becomes a political act that affirms identity, history and resistance. The body of the female performer becomes a site filled with political meaning, at once invoking ritual tradition and disrupting the caste-based rules that control who can access sacred performance spaces. *Kali Natakam* may be seen as participating in what Indian thinkers like Guru and Sarukkai (2012) consider to be the challenge of asserting Dalit experience within cultural production—not merely to introduce new content, but to reshape the very form through which experience is conveyed. Madathil’s play does not merely insert a Dalit woman’s voice into an existing theatrical tradition; it alters the grammar of that tradition. The formal dissonance enacted on stage becomes a mirror to the social dissonance that structures the lives of marginalised women. Techniques such as abrupt shifts in mood, poetic interruptions and politically charged improvisations function not as stylistic flourishes but as devices that hold the audience in a state of productive discomfort.

What emerges is a mode of performance that neither abandons ritual nor bows to its normative expectations. Instead, the play engages in a critical negotiation, one that reclaims traditional forms while simultaneously recoding them. This process is not one of preservation, but of transformation, where inherited structures are made to speak differently. By foregrounding conflict rather than resolution, voice rather than silence, and dissent rather than transcendence, *Kali Natakam* reimagines the stage as a contested space in which marginalised bodies do not seek permission but assert their presence. The performance, in this light, becomes not a return to tradition, but a reworking of it to expose its exclusions and reclaim its potential as a space for justice.

***Kali Natakam*: Plot, Performance and Embodied Justice**

In the ritual art of ‘Mudiyettu’, the performer’s preparation to embody the goddess is crucial. This preparation involves adherence to specific

disciplines and a mental focus shaped by customary and ritual practices that affirm the performer's readiness. The ceremonial headpiece, a significant component of the performance, is handled with ritual care and placed upon the performer by senior or experienced members of the performing community following well-defined rituals and ceremonies. This moment signifies a transformative shift in the performer's identity, who ceases to be viewed as an individual and is instead regarded as the living presence of Goddess Kali. From this point onwards, the performer's gestures, expressions and utterances are interpreted as direct manifestations of the deity. This act of ritual transformation is central to the performance as it reveals the deep interconnection between faith, inherited tradition and the collective cultural memory of the community.

'Mudiyettu' includes storytelling, strong drum rhythms, ritual floor drawings called 'kalamezhuthu', (in which intricate images of deities are created on the floor using coloured powders), use of handmade masks and costumes, especially the tall headpiece (*mudi*) worn by Kali. The story depicts the battle between Kali and the demon Darika, symbolising the triumph of order over chaos. Traditionally, the performance is carried out by upper-caste men from the Marar and Kuruppu communities, while Dalit groups are restricted to supporting roles or preparatory work. The role of Kali is also played exclusively by men. Madathil disrupts this convention by casting a Dalit woman as Kali. This is not merely a casting choice but a powerful act of protest against established caste and gender norms as it brings a subaltern presence into a sacred space that has historically excluded it, encouraging a rethinking of ritual as a site for social dialogue. The play itself reinforces this challenge to tradition when the character called President declares, "Kali is played by the daughter of the Bhadrakali Pattu Singer . . . daughter of Chathan ... This female Kali will be no less than anyone in fury and rage" (Madathil, pp. 102–3). These words affirm both her lineage and her legitimacy as a fierce embodiment of divine power. Casting a Dalit woman in a role historically reserved for upper-caste men is not just a creative choice but a politically charged gesture; it rewrites ritual and questions the power structures.

Kali's entrance is carefully planned and full of meaning; she appears "with all glory . . . ready for battle. She moves in a ritualistic manner, complete with rhythmic steps" (Madathil, p. 108). This stylised entry draws from traditional ritual performance but also moves beyond its

usual limits. The act of becoming Kali by wearing the *mudi* is no longer just a spiritual moment—it is a reclaiming of social and political space to express both divine anger and the voice of the oppressed, directly challenging caste and gender-based injustice:

Kali: What a woman's might is,
 You will know.
 I will make you know.
 I shall teach you the right lesson
 And cure your pride. (Madathil, p. 110)

Here, Kali's voice is not only a symbol of mythic justice but also an expression of lived resistance. The ritual form is turned into a tool of protest, transforming traditional signs of divine anger into acts of feminist and caste-aware rebellion. The performer's body is no longer a passive vessel for divine possession; it becomes a space where historical pain, shared memory and political struggle are expressed. Placing a Dalit woman in the role of Kali not only challenges ritual customs but also triggers reactions that reveal deeply rooted caste beliefs and conflicts, embodied in the character Rama Kurup, who plays Darika. He moves away from the script and adds lines that reflect his caste prejudice. Addressing Kali, he sneers: "Don't talk nonsense Kali/This won't last long./You are going to end up/As blood and mass./You, low born creature...." To which the chorus of singers echoes, "You low born,/You untouchable!" (p. 110). These lines are not simply insults; they reveal the social strictures that aim to deny a Dalit woman her place in a sacred role. The stage, then, becomes a contested space where caste power is not only shown but actively questioned. Kali's trance does not take her away from the world; instead, it is rooted in her experience of caste and gender injustice.

This layered structure allows the play to explore the consequences of disrupting traditional roles. At its centre is a play-within-a-play, where a local theatre group prepares to perform 'Mudiyettu', the ritual story of Kali's battle with Darika. The choice of who will play Kali becomes the crux of the play, not simply because of artistic concerns but because of the caste-based challenge it poses. The selected performer is a Dalit woman whose inclusion breaks long-standing ritual norms, causing unease among both the villagers and the performers. Her casting interrupts the silent caste codes that control who may step into the role of the divine in ritual contexts.

This tension is further deepened by the incorporation of aspects of 'Kalamezhuthu' into the play, the sacred floor drawing of the goddess. 'Kalamezhuthu' is also typically performed by upper-caste men with ceremonial discipline, but it is reinterpreted in *Kali Natakam*. When the Dalit performer enters this sacred space, she assumes both visual and political force. The ritual symbols are not erased but given new meaning—they become charged with her body, her voice, her anger and her memory. The goddess depicted on the ground becomes a mirror of the actress herself, creating a strong parallel between the sacred image and human experience. This merging of symbol and self invites the audience to reconsider the boundaries of ritual, power and performance.

Throughout the play, performance and lived experience merge effortlessly, with no clear boundaries. The protagonist's lines blur the distinction between the mythic figure of Kali and the Dalit woman present on stage. Her portrayal of the goddess is neither symbolic nor emotionally distant; it is direct and forceful. Her rage is expressed through guttural utterances, embodied gestures and fiery dance movements which can be interpreted not merely as the fury of a mythic character but also as a response to long-standing caste and gender oppression. She asks:

...I am angry, enraged. Then they danced *Padayani* to make me happy. Showed me how enraged I am by drawing these patterns on the floor. They waited for me on my path as children to trigger my maternal instincts. Even then, my rage won't fade... Iron is Kali's might. Iron that I won. Iron is my strength. When the same iron is forced into the vaginas of my women, how can Kali be at ease? Kali cannot hold back her anger. (p. 124)

This fusion of the performer's self with the role disrupts conventional modes of perception, blurring the lines between the divine and the human. The voice that emerges is both that of the goddess and the woman, making it impossible to separate spiritual authority from lived reality.

This confusion comes into sharp focus during a key scene. At the climactic moment of the ritual, where Kali is meant to destroy Darika, the performer deviates from the script and turns to confront the male actor Rama Kurup, who represents both the demon and the broader figure of the oppressor. She calls him a rapist. He is "accused of the rape and murder of a girl named Neeli" (p. 120). What begins as a ritualistic

enactment shifts into a moment of truth-telling and exposure. The slaying becomes more than a myth; it is a moral, personal and political act. The stage is transformed into a space that is part courtroom, part battlefield and part confession. The community's reaction to this unscripted moment reveals its divided stance—some perceive it as divine justice, while others view it as a violation of sacred custom.

This disruption is reinforced through the use of sound, costume and lighting. Instruments traditionally used in 'Mudiyettu', such as the *chenda* and *elathalam* (the traditional cylindrical drum, played with sticks and the small metal cymbals) do not merely enhance the ritual atmosphere but also subvert it. When the Dalit woman dons the *mudi*, the act reflects ritual art, but also confronts caste and gender norms. Her appearance unsettles the social order. The use of *choottu*, or fire torches, borrowed from folk and ritual performance traditions, combined with deep red lighting and sudden silences, intensifies the charged tension between devotion and defiance. The atmosphere remains ritualistic, but it is charged with a sense of political urgency. As the performance unfolds, the actress screams, breathes heavily and merges with the goddess. She acts as if in a trance. The line between the divine and the human begins to dissolve, making it difficult to decide whether she represents the mythic Kali or channels the pain and rage of oppressed Dalit women. Yet to the devotees, every movement and every word is a mark of the Devi. Her gestures and actions closely mirror the traditional iconography of the goddess, reinforcing the ritualistic faith of 'Mudiyettu'. But when, at one decisive moment, she shouts:

Yes... yes...
 For honouring our six mothers...
 For abusing the entire womanhood
 I led the one in dark to light
 Slashed him... again and again...
 His blood gushed over my arms...
 Pulled out his guts for my army
 We need to win
 Though we fail always...
 Need to keep winning (p. 123)

The performance reflects the larger history of how subaltern voices, especially those of Dalit women, have been pushed out of India's ritual and theatre traditions. The play, rather than offering resolution, forces

the audience to recognise this erasure and reflect on its own role in upholding such silences. In its final moments, *Kali Natakam* resists a return to order. It does not conclude with reconciliation or spiritual closure. Instead, the protagonist's final stance—neither anonymous nor subdued—remains in the space as a challenge. Her performance is not only remembered for its dramatic force but for the truth it forces the audience to confront. In doing so, the play demands a serious engagement with the politics of caste, gender and sacred performance.

Recasting Ritual and Performance: Genre as Resistance

Kali Natakam does not follow the patterns of a single theatrical tradition. It draws from various forms such as ritual performance, poetic drama and political theatre to create a structure that is both fluid and purposeful. This mixture of styles is not only for decoration but to challenge fixed ideas about art, belief and power. Madathil uses this flexible form to question who has the right to perform the sacred and how ritual can be used to express protest. The familiar elements borrowed from traditional performances, instead of reinforcing social order, are used to show conflict and inequality. The transformation that takes place when a Dalit woman wears the *mudi* is not just spiritual; it is reclaiming space that has long been denied to her. The sacred is no longer separated from the everyday struggles of caste and gender. Her presence challenges the belief that only certain bodies can inhabit ritual spaces. The tradition is not broken, but redirected to express lived resistance instead of inherited authority.

The slaying of Darika, a key point in the story, is also transformed. The actor playing Kali breaks from the script to accuse Darika of rape. This shift from myth to present reality turns the stage into a space where uncomfortable and unacknowledged facts can be spelt out. It is no longer only a ritual playing out of good conquering evil, but a moment where the violence faced by real women is brought to light. The audience is forced to confront what ritual hides and what performance can reveal. By refusing to conform to fixed theatrical forms, *Kali Natakam* creates space for diverse voices and experiences. This blend of traditional and political elements allows the play to challenge not only social practices but also the artistic forms that support them. The performance style itself becomes part of the protest.

The play also demonstrates how theatre can be used to challenge systems of power. It does not end with peace or resolution. Instead, it leaves the conflict open, prompting the audience to reflect on its own collusion with such forms of violence. The discomfort people feel is not just emotional—it is ethical. They are asked not only to watch but also to bear witness. In this way, *Kali Natakam* becomes more than a performance. It is a form of resistance that speaks through body, voice and symbol. By placing a Dalit woman at the centre of sacred ritual, Madathil not only reclaims tradition but redefines it. The theatre space becomes both stage and battleground, where the past and present meet and where the power of performance breaks the silence.

Conclusion: Towards a New Dramaturgy

The strength of *Kali Natakam* lies in its refusal to separate the sacred from the political. The performance does not offer spiritual comfort or aesthetic closure. Instead, it reveals the hidden violence within ritual forms, highlighting caste discrimination, sexual violence and the exclusion of marginalised communities from cultural narratives. The figure of Kali, reimagined through the body and voice of a Dalit woman, becomes a symbol of resistance, challenging both divine order and human injustice. In doing so, the play offers a new dramaturgy—one that is responsive to lived experience, attentive to social inequality and capable of exposing the mechanisms of silence and erasure. This approach to theatre does not rely on traditional ideals of harmony or transcendence but engages directly with conflict, memory and resistance. It demonstrates how performance can serve as a tool for critical reflection and collective healing.

By transforming ritual into a site of protest, *Kali Natakam* shows the potential of theatre to address structural violence and question dominant narratives. It resists being absorbed into mainstream cultural or religious frameworks and instead speaks from the margins. In this way, the play offers not only a critique of existing forms but a model for how theatre can participate in wider conversations about justice and dignity. Madathil's work calls for a theatre that is ethically engaged, formally flexible and politically aware. *Kali Natakam* reminds us that performance is not only about representation—it is about intervention. It challenges scholars, artists and audiences alike to rethink the purpose of theatre in a society marked by deep divisions. In refusing to remain

silent or safe, the play creates a space where truth can be spoken, where ritual becomes a form of resistance, and where the stage becomes a site of struggle and transformation.

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