

Aesthetics of Subversion: Dramatic Praxis, Gendered Embodiment, and the Re-Architecting of Kerala's Public Sphere

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Abstract

This paper investigates the transformative nexus of theatrical performance, gender dynamics, and social consciousness in twentieth-century Kerala. Moving beyond traditional historiographies that relegate performance to mere cultural ornamentation, this study posits theatre as a potent site of counter-hegemonic intervention and ideological subversion. Utilizing a theoretical framework that synthesizes Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Jacques Rancière's politics of aesthetics, the analysis illuminates how socio-political theatre challenged entrenched patriarchy, caste stratification, and feudal orthodoxies. During a epoch characterized by radical socio-political reconfigurations—most notably the anti-caste reform movements and communist mobilization—theatrical spaces functioned as dynamic arenas where gender roles were systematically destabilized and rearticulated. By examining seminal dramatic texts and performance practices, this research demonstrates how female agency, historically marginalized within male-dominated reformative discourses, was forged through disruptive performative acts. Theatre served not merely as a mirror reflecting societal shifts, but as an active catalyst that reconfigured the distribution of the sensible, altering the socio-cognitive landscapes of spectators and fostering a critical egalitarian ethos. Ultimately, this paper argues that the embodied resistance on Kerala's twentieth-century stage was instrumental in dismantling oppressive socio-cultural paradigms, thereby renegotiating the contours of modern Kerala's socio-political consciousness and emancipatory politics..

Keywords Cultural Hegemony, Gender Performativity, Aesthetic Politics, Counter-Hegemonic Drama, Social Transmutation, Performative Agency...

INTRODUCTION

The historiography of twentieth-century South Asia frequently delineates the Indian subcontinent's sociopolitical evolution through the macro-dynamics of anti-colonial struggle, institutional state formation, and overarching electoral realignments. However, within the regional contextualization of Kerala—a narrow strip of land along the Southwestern Malabar coast—the trajectory of modern social consciousness unfolded through a profoundly localized, culturally embedded, and aestheticized dialectic. The transformation of Kerala from a hyper-stratified, feudal enclave characterized by rigid caste endogamy, severe spatial segregation, and entrenched patriarchal orthodoxies into a highly literate, politically conscious, and radicalized society remains a foundational subject of sociopolitical inquiry (Devika & Thampi, 2010). Central to this metamorphosis was not merely the arrival of institutional parliamentary communism or agrarian land reforms, but the radical reconfiguration of the public sphere through cultural intervention. In this transformative landscape, theatrical performance emerged not as an incidental, ornamental cultural byproduct, but as a primary, epistemological site of counter-hegemonic confrontation, ideological contestation, and socio-cognitive recalibration.

The primary objective of this investigation is to analyze how twentieth-century Malayalam drama served as an instrument for re-architecting social consciousness by intersecting with gendered embodiment, anti-caste agitation, and subaltern mobilization. Early twentieth-century Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin were governed by complex systems of caste-based spatial prohibitions and feudal familial structures that severely subjugated marginalized communities and restricted female agency across all social strata (Devika & Thampi, 2010). High-caste Malayala Brahmin (Nambudiri) women were confined as *Antarjanams* ("indoor people") within the domestic seclusion of the *illam*, stripped of formal literacy, and subjected to institutionalized patriarchal practices such as hypergamy (*Smartavicharam* and *Veli*) (Devika & Thampi, 2010). Concurrently, women from lower-caste and subaltern groups (*Ezhavas*, *Pulayas*, and *Cherumas*) endured systemic economic exploitation, corporal violence, and body-politic regulations, such as the historically enforced prohibition against wearing uppergarments to mark caste inferiority. The convergence of social reform movements in the early 1900s—led by figures such as Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, and V. T. Bhattathiripad—recognized that dismantling

these deeply entrenched hierarchies required a cultural vehicle capable of breaching the literacy barrier and penetrating the communal psyche.

The drama provided this precise site of ideological rupture. Transitioning away from traditional, esoteric, elite-sponsored art forms like Kathakali and Koodiyattam—which operated on Sanskritized aesthetic codes inaccessible to the subaltern masses—modern Malayalam drama emerged as an accessible, vernacular, and politically charged medium. Early reformist plays directly attacked the ritualistic and patriarchal oppression embedded within high-caste households. Works such as V. T. Bhattathiripad's *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathot* (From the Kitchen to the Stage, 1929) explicitly politicized domestic space, positioning the stage as an emancipatory counter-public wherein the hidden violence of the feudal home could be exposed, interrogated, and dismantled (Devika & Thampi, 2010). This dramatic movement catalyzed a paradigm shift, transitioning the theatrical stage from an arena of mythic reenactment into a discursive arena for social justice, egalitarianism, and political awakening.

As the political landscape of Kerala evolved into the mid-twentieth century, the anti-caste reform movement converged with the rising peasant and labor agitations spearheaded by the Communist Party of Malabar and Travancore. Cultural troupes, most notably the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) established in 1950, mobilized theatrical performance to disseminate Marxist-Leninist ideology, class solidarity, and radical land reform discourses across agrarian rural spaces. Thoppil Bhasi's landmark play *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist, 1952) operated as an unprecedented cultural phenomenon, bridging the chasm between intellectual political theory and subaltern rural reality. Through the vehicle of radical political theatre, non-literate agrarian laborers, subaltern women, and working-class masses were transformed from passive spectators of history into conscious historical subjects capable of asserting political agency.

To rigorously unpack this cultural metamorphosis, this study deploys a multi-layered theoretical framework synthesizing Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Jacques Rancière's politics of aesthetics. Gramscian theoretical analysis facilitates an understanding of how the ruling feudal-caste elite maintained dominance not merely through state coercion, but through cultural consent—an ideological hegemony embedded within religious traditions, familial structures, and social rituals. Modern Malayalam drama functioned as an explicit counter-hegemonic mechanism, creating an ideological rupture that unmasked and disrupted feudal consent. Concurrently, Butler's theory of gender performativity illuminates how traditional theatrical representations reinforced normative, patriarchal fabrications of female passivity, and conversely, how the physical entry of women onto the stage disrupted these naturalized gender constructions. The act of a woman stepping onto the public stage in twentieth-century Kerala was not merely a theatrical performance; it was a subversion of patriarchal spatial codes that rearticulated the female body as an agentic site of political resistance. Finally, Rancière's formulation of the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*) frames theatre as an aesthetic re-ordering of what is visible, sayable, and doable within a given community. By rendering visible the hidden labor, domestic confinement, and socio-economic exploitation of subaltern and female bodies, twentieth-century Malayalam theatre altered the perceptual grid of Malayali society, enabling new modes of political subjectivity to emerge.

Despite the transformative impact of this dramatic revolution, classical historiographies of Kerala's modern development have consistently marginalized the crucial role of female performance artists and gendered dynamics in shaping this cultural shift. While male playwrights, directors, and political leaders are widely lauded as the primary architects of Kerala's progressive public sphere, female performers faced severe social ostracism, physical assault, and moral stigmatization for participating in public theatre. The public stage was long constructed as an illicit, hyper-sexualized space unsuitable for respectable women, forcing early theatrical productions to rely on female impersonators (*Velukkutty* tradition) or marginalize women's actual physical presence. When pioneering female actors broke these prohibitions, they performed an act of radical embodiment that destabilized both traditional feudal patriarchy and the implicit masculinism of early communist and social reform agendas.

This study argues that the transformation of social consciousness in twentieth-century Kerala was fundamentally contingent upon this aesthetic, performative, and gendered subversion. By investigating the historical trajectory, dramatic texts, performative practices, and subaltern interventions of Malayalam theatre, this paper demonstrates how performance served as a primary laboratory for modern social consciousness. Far from being a passive reflection of political changes occurring elsewhere, the Kerala stage actively authored modern Kerala's egalitarian ethos.

Dramatizing the Domestic: Feudal Orthodoxy, Anti-Caste Agitation, and the Re-articulation of Gender

The early twentieth century in Kerala witnessed an unprecedented explosion of reformist dramatic literature designed to systematically dismantle the socio-religious orthodoxies of the feudal caste system. The socio-spatial organization of classical Malayali society was governed by strict codes of purity and pollution, where caste status dictated one's spatial mobility, dress, linguistic register, and bodily conduct (Devika & Thampi, 2010). At the apex of this hierarchy stood the Nambudiri Brahmins, whose landed wealth (janmi system) and spiritual hegemony were maintained through strict primogeniture and endogamous marital structures (Devika & Thampi, 2010). Under this system, only the eldest son (Moossad) was permitted to contract a formal marriage (Veli) within the caste, thereby preserving family estate intact, while younger sons engaged in informal hypergamous alliances (Sambandham) with women of the matrilineal Nair caste (Devika & Thampi, 2010). This institutional design created a severe crisis for Nambudiri women (Antarjanams), who were forced into enforced celibacy, polygamous marriages with elderly men, or lifelong domestic confinement within the unyielding physical parameters of the illam (Devika & Thampi, 2010).

It was within this oppressive socio-cultural environment that V. T. Bhattathiripad authored *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathot* (From the Kitchen to the Stage) in 1929, a play that marks a crucial turning point in the history of Malayalam political theatre. The text directly targeted the feudal-patriarchal structures of the Nambudiri community, dramatizing the forced marriage of a young girl, Thethi, to an elderly, decrepit Brahmin man for financial gain. Bhattathiripad's play did not merely critique the morality of Brahminical orthodoxy; it executed an aesthetic invasion of the private sphere, exposing the hidden, institutionalized violence of the feudal home to the public eye (Devika & Thampi, 2010). By staging the inner quarters of the illam, the drama stripped the Brahminical elite of their sacred, inviolable authority, transforming domestic oppression into a matter of public political debate (Devika & Thampi, 2010). The staging of *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathot* was itself a radical performative act, executed by young, progressive Brahmin men who risked physical violence and social excommunication (oshtukal) to tour the play across rural Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar.

The theoretical significance of this reformist theatre lies in its capacity to construct an alternative "counter-public" that challenged the dominant bourgeois and feudal spatial order. Applying Rancière's conceptual framework, early Malayalam reformist plays altered the distribution of the sensible by giving voice to those who were historically deemed speech-less and invisible within the public realm. In traditional feudal Kerala, the *Antarjanam* was legally and socially non-existent in public life, veiled behind the *marakkuda* (large leaf umbrella) whenever moving outside, and forbidden from participating in public discourse (Devika & Thampi, 2010). By placing the plight of the *Antarjanam* at the center of the theatrical stage, the play reconstituted the perceptual fields of Malayali audiences. Spectators were forced to witness the corporeal suffering, emotional degradation, and structural imprisonment of women who had been rendered invisible by sacred tradition. The stage thus operated as a diagnostic and therapeutic space where the sacred myths sustaining feudal hegemony were systematically demystified.

Concurrently, the reformist theatrical movement extended beyond the Brahminical domestic sphere to engage with the complex intersections of caste, labor, and female subjugation among subaltern communities. The reforms initiated by Sree Narayana Guru and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam utilized cultural modes to critique the caste hierarchy and advocate for universal access to education, civil rights, and modern public spaces. Plays authored during this era within lower-caste contexts tackled the dual burden borne by subaltern women, who were simultaneously exploited as agricultural laborers by feudal landlords and subjugated within their own domestic patriarchal structures. In these subaltern dramas, the female body was depicted not as a secluded, passive victim requiring chivalric rescue, but as an active, laboring body subjected to systemic caste-feudal violence. The staging of these realities challenged the prevailing Victorian-colonial and high-caste gender norms that sought to construct female respectability solely around domesticity and chastity (Devika & Thampi, 2010).

However, the representation of gender within early twentieth-century reformist theatre remained deeply contradictory and fraught with patriarchal anxieties. While playwrights like V. T. Bhattathiripad and M. P. Bhattathiripad (author of *Rithumathi*, 1939) advocated for female literacy, the abolition of child marriage, and the right of widows to remarry, their ultimate vision of female emancipation was often bounded by the modern ideal of the companionate wife and educated mother (*grhini*) (Devika & Thampi, 2010). The reformist discourse sought to liberate women from the archaic, explicit violence of feudalism only to re-inscribe them within the disciplined, modernized domesticity of the nuclear, monogamous family (Devika & Thampi, 2010). The female characters in these plays, though central to the plot, were frequently constructed as passive recipients of male-led reformative benevolence rather than autonomous political agents authorized to shape their own destinies.

This ideological limitation was further exacerbated by the material practices of theatrical production during the early decades of the twentieth century. For decades, the physical representation of women on the Malayalam stage was dominated by male actors specializing in female impersonation (*stree-vesham*). Figures such as Ochira Velukkutty achieved extraordinary stardom playing female roles in popular musical dramas (*Sangeetha Natakam*), embodying an hyper-idealized, stylized, and male-imagined version of femininity. This practice of male cross-dressing on stage served a dual function: it reinforced the patriarchal prohibition against real women appearing in public performance spaces while simultaneously constructing a highly regulated, non-threatening representation of female gender identity. The male-constructed female body on stage neutralized the radical potential of gendered subversion, ensuring that the critique of patriarchy remained safely mediated through male performance.

The theoretical framework of Judith Butler provides crucial insight into the mechanics of this performance culture. Butler contends that gender is not an innate biological essence, but a repetitive, stylized act—a performative accomplishment sustained through normative social iterations. The dominance of male female impersonators on the Malayalam stage functioned as a performative iteration that naturalized patriarchal controls over female physical mobility and artistic expression. When women were systematically excluded from performing their own gender on stage, the theatre maintained the illusion that the public realm was an exclusively male domain. Consequently, the eventual breach of this performance barrier by female actors constituted a profound ontological shock to the sociopolitical body of Kerala. The transition from male impersonation to actual female presence on stage marked the birth of a radical gendered agency that disrupted both feudal spatial hierarchies and the patriarchal limits of early reformist ideology.

The Radical Stage: Communism, Public Sphere, and the Embodied Subversion of Female Performers

By the mid-twentieth century, the trajectory of Malayalam drama underwent a revolutionary shift as the focus of social transformation transitioned from socio-religious anti-caste reform to radical anti-feudal, communist class struggles. The late 1930s and 1940s were marked by severe economic depression, agrarian distress, peasant revolts (such as the Kayyur and Karivellur uprisings), and the brutal state suppression of working-class movements in Travancore and Malabar. In this volatile political milieu, the Communist Party recognized the transformative power of cultural activism, leading to the formation of the Kerala People's Arts Club (KPAC) in 1950. KPAC spearheaded a new genre of political melodrama that merged Marxist economic critique with accessible folk music, vernacular dialogues, and emotionally resonant characterizations, effectively transforming the theatre into an ideological engine for political mobilization.

At the center of this cultural revolution was Thoppil Bhasi's 1952 masterpiece, *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist). The play depicts the ideological metamorphosis of an orthodox, conservative high-caste landlord, Paramu Pillai, whose worldview is systematically dismantled as he witnesses the systemic corruption of the feudal elite and the heroic resistance of the impoverished peasantry. The production achieved unprecedented popularity, completing thousands of performances across the rural hinterlands of South India and playing a pivotal role in creating the cultural consciousness that swept the Communist Party to power in the historic 1957 democratic elections in Kerala. The success of *Ningalenne Communistakki* demonstrated that political drama in Kerala had transcended the realm of mere entertainment; it had become an active, participatory arena of public pedagogy where subaltern audiences were inducted into radical political subjecthood.

Through a Gramscian lens, the cultural phenomenon of KPAC exemplifies the deliberate construction of a counter-hegemonic historic bloc. Gramsci posits that a dominant class maintains control over society through a complex web of cultural, moral, and intellectual hegemony that makes the existing social order appear natural and inevitable. To overthrow this dominance, the subaltern classes must execute a "war of position"—a sustained cultural and intellectual struggle designed to build an alternative consensus and break the ruling class's moral hegemony. KPAC's theatrical productions functioned as the primary instrument of this war of position in mid-century Kerala. By staging the structural violence of the feudal *janmi* system, exposing the hypocrisy of caste purity, and glorifying the collective solidarity of agricultural laborers, political theatre systematically delegitimized feudal-capitalist hegemony and fostered a radical, egalitarian class consciousness among the masses.

However, the true radicality of this theatrical epoch cannot be understood solely through the thematic content of its dramatic texts; it must be located within the physical, embodied presence of the pioneering female actors who entered this politically charged public sphere. Breaking away from the long-standing tradition of male female impersonation, courageous women such as K. P. A. C. Sulochana, Vijayakumari, Rajam K. Nair, and P. K. Medha stepped onto the public stage in the 1940s and 1950s. This physical entry of female bodies into the public theatrical domain was an act of profound courage and spatial transgression. In the conservative, patriarchal milieu of mid-twentieth-century Kerala, a woman performing on stage was immediately subjected to severe moral

stigmatization, designated as a “public woman”—a category synonymous with sexual deviance and moral depravity (Devika & Thampi, 2010). Female actors faced violent threats from conservative state authorities and feudal landlords, experienced social ostracism from their families, and endured relentless surveillance regarding their moral purity.

The act of a female actor taking the stage was a direct embodiment of Butlerian subversion. By placing her physical body in the public view, speaking politically explosive dialogue, and embodying characters who resisted caste and class oppression, the female performer disrupted the normative gender codes that dictated female seclusion and passivity. The female actor’s body on stage was no longer an object to be aestheticized or regulated by male impersonation; it became an active site of political agency, physical authority, and subversion. When actors like K. P. A. C. Sulochana sang radical revolutionary songs—such as the famous Ponnaruvial—their voices did not merely convey political ideology; they asserted the female voice as a dominant, commanding force within the public sphere, shattering the patriarchal monopoly over public political speech.

Furthermore, the physical presence of female performers within mobile, itinerant theatre troupes fundamentally challenged the spatial regulations of Malayali society. Troupes like KPAC traveled incessantly in crowded vehicles, staying in temporary rural encampments, and performing late into the night before mixed-gender, multi-caste audiences comprising thousands of rural laborers. This lifestyle required female actors to live and work alongside male comrades outside the protective boundaries of the traditional domestic household, directly defying the spatial regime that organized women’s social respectability strictly around the private domestic sphere (Devika & Thampi, 2010). In doing so, these women pioneered a new model of female public engagement, proving that women could function as autonomous, professional, and politically committed actors within the broader project of social emancipation (Devika & Thampi, 2010).

Despite these transformative strides, the radical political theatre movement contained profound internal gender contradictions that feminist scholarship has increasingly brought to light. While the leftist political plays of the 1950s and 1960s championed the emancipation of the working class, they frequently subsumed the specificities of gender oppression under the overarching category of class struggle. Female characters in plays like *Ningalenne Communistakki* or *Mooladhanama* (Capital, 1958) were predominantly framed through traditional relational roles—as suffering mothers, loyal wives, or tragic victims whose sacrifices served to inspire the heroic political struggles of male revolutionaries. The political agency of women was often validated only insofar as it served the broader interests of the party or the agrarian movement, leaving the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures within working-class households and political organizations largely unexamined.

Nevertheless, the performative disruption initiated by these pioneering female actors created an irreversible fissure in Kerala’s cultural fabric. By claiming physical space on the public stage, female performers demonstrated that the theatre was a dynamic arena for renegotiating identity, power, and citizenship. Their embodied resistance expanded the parameters of the public sphere, paving the way for subsequent generations of radical feminist theatre activists—such as Sajitha Madathil and the modern women’s theatre collectives of Kerala—who would explicitly turn the theatrical lens toward the interrogation of domestic violence, body politics, and patriarchal power structures within both traditional and progressive political movements.

Conclusion

The evolution of twentieth-century Malayalam theatre provides a compelling narrative of how aesthetic practice can serve as a primary catalyst for profound social, political, and cognitive transformations. Far from being a passive reflection of structural changes governed by economic policies or state actions, the theatrical stage in Kerala operated as an active, dialectical arena where modern social consciousness was forged, debated, and institutionalized. By dismantling the esoteric, caste-exclusive artistic traditions of the feudal era and pioneering an accessible, politically charged vernacular drama, the theatrical movement redefined the boundaries of cultural participation. Through this radical shift, performance became a critical mechanism through which a hyper-stratified, caste-oppressed society reimaged itself as an egalitarian, politically conscious public.

The historical trajectory traced in this study demonstrates the progressive expansion of the dramatic lens—from early anti-caste, socio-religious reform plays to the radical, Marxist political theatre of mid-century peasant and labor agitations. Dramatists like V. T. Bhattathiripad initiated this revolution by invading the sacred, private spaces of feudal orthodoxy, exposing the systemic, institutionalized violence inflicted upon women within the domestic sphere, and framing female emancipation as an indispensable prerequisite for societal modernization (Devika & Thampi, 2010). Subsequently, political cultural movements like the Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC) expanded this emancipatory vision to the agrarian countryside, utilizing performance as a Gramscian counter-

hegemonic instrument to break feudal consent, awaken class consciousness, and mobilize subaltern masses toward systemic political transformation.

Crucially, this study underscores that the primary site of radical subversion on the Malayalam stage resided within the physical, embodied presence of female performance artists. The transition from male female impersonation (*stree-vesham*) to actual female performance represented an ontological rupture within Kerala's patriarchal social order. By stepping into the public eye, enduring severe moral stigmatization, and claiming physical and vocal authority before massive, mixed audiences, pioneering female actors executed a Butlerian subversion of normative gender roles. Their physical presence on stage disrupted the traditional spatial regulations that sought to confine female respectability strictly to the domestic sphere, thereby re-architecting the public sphere to accommodate female agency, labor, and political voice (Devika & Thampi, 2010).

Through the theoretical synthesis of Gramsci's cultural hegemony, Butler's gender performativity, and Rancière's aesthetics of politics, this investigation reveals that theatre's most enduring legacy in Kerala was its capacity to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible. By rendering visible the hidden labor of subaltern communities, exposing the domestic imprisonment of high-caste women, and giving voice to the political aspirations of the working class, modern Malayalam drama fundamentally altered what could be seen, heard, and thought within Malayali society. This aesthetic revolution restructured the cognitive frameworks of spectators, fostering a deeply ingrained critical ethos, a high degree of political literacy, and a commitment to egalitarian social justice that continues to define modern Kerala's sociopolitical identity.

Ultimately, the history of twentieth-century Kerala theatre demonstrates that artistic production is not merely an ideological instrument, but a dynamic, material force capable of re-architecting social reality. The embodied resistance performed on Kerala's stages proved that performance can shatter oppressive traditions, challenge dominant power structures, and open new horizons for human emancipation. As contemporary society confronts new iterations of socio-political regression, cultural hegemony, and gendered violence, the legacy of Kerala's radical, subversive stage remains an enduring testament to the transformative power of performance in the ongoing struggle for social justice.

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