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The Politics of Performativity in T.D. Ramakrishnan's *Francis Itty Cora*

Dr. Jeena Ann Joseph

T.D. Ramakrishnan is one of the most significant voices in contemporary Malayalam Fiction, having received both the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award and Vayalar Award for his contribution to Malayalam literature. Ramakrishnan's *Francis Itty Cora* is a postmodern novel that foregrounds multiple discourses within its narrative space, and this multifaceted nature of the novel offers endless perspectives to deliberate on. This paper attempts to delineate the gender discourse implicit in *Francis Itty Cora*, which is just one among the many that captures the attention of its readers. With reference to Butler, this study discusses how unconventional gender roles are curbed by culture and society, thereby limiting gender troubling or resistance against established gender norms. Reading the novel through Butler's concept of performativity and Foucault's theorisation of disciplinary power, this paper examines how *Francis Itty Cora* stages and ultimately forecloses the possibility of genuine gender subversion. The women who populate Ramakrishnan's narrative variously attempt to perform beyond the boundaries of normative femininity only to be surveilled, punished or destroyed by the regulatory apparatus of patriarchal society, confirming that the politics of performativity is never simply a matter of individual subversion. The study is also informed by Mohanty's postcolonial feminist caution, remaining

attentive throughout to the Kerala cultural context within which the novel's gender politics are rooted.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Gender trouble, Performativity, Disciplinary power, Malayalam Fiction.

In T.D. Ramakrishnan's postmodern novel, *Francis Itty Cora*, centuries of social and cultural history converge to construct a world in which female sexuality is simultaneously celebrated and brutally contained. The novels' multifaceted narrative space spanning 15th C Florence, contemporary Kerala, and the battlefields of Iraq, foregrounds multiple discourses, of which gender discourse is among the most sustained and politically charged. This paper argues that *Francis Itty Cora* dramatises the central insight of Judith Butler's performativity theory that gender is not a freely chosen expression of an inner truth but a compelled repetition of culturally mandated norms. The female characters of *Francis Itty Cora* repeatedly test the limits of normative femininity, yet each transgression is met with social retribution. Drawing on Butler's performativity, Foucault's disciplinary power, and Mohanty's postcolonial feminist framework, this study examines how *Francis Itty Cora* contains, punishes, and ultimately neutralizes the very gender subversion it appears to celebrate.

The primary objective of the paper is to delineate the implicit gender discourse within the text and evaluate how the narrative stages, contains, and ultimately forecloses the possibility of genuine female subversion through systematic societal and institutional retribution. To achieve this, the research investigates how the novel dramatises Judith Butler's theory of performativity, specifically exploring how the female characters' deviant repetitions of gender are severely constrained and punished by a culturally mandated script. Furthermore, incorporating Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and normalisation, the study asks how non-conforming bodies are surveilled and destroyed, and how spaces that seemingly celebrate female sexuality are instead transformed into regulatory mechanisms of patriarchal containment.

Theoretical Framework

Gender, as Judith Butler (2010) argues in *Gender Trouble*, is not an innate biological truth but a performative accomplishment—

the effect of a "stylized repetition of acts" that are socially and culturally mandated (p.191). Butler rejects the common distinction between sex as biological and gender as cultural construction, arguing that both are discursively produced. Butler (2010) insists that there is no stable, pre-discursive gender identity underlying these acts; rather, identity is "performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (p.34). Crucially, Butler distinguishes between performativity and conscious performance. While drag or other subversive acts make visible the imitative structure of all gender, performativity itself is an unconscious, compelled repetition of norms enforced by the regulatory apparatus of the heteronormative matrix. The possibility of "gender trouble" — of troubling, fixed gender categories through deviant repetition, is therefore always already constrained by the social script within which the subject is made legible.

Butler's account of performativity is primarily concerned with the construction and subversion of gender norms rather than with the institutional violence the transgression invites. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* attends to precisely this dimension, theorizing how disciplinary power operates through normalisation to correct and contain non-conforming bodies. For Foucault (1995), modern power does not operate solely through overt repression but through normalisation, the production of "docile bodies" that internalise regulatory norms through surveillance and the constant possibility of correction (p.138). The individual subject learns to police herself precisely because deviation is rendered visible and punishable. Foucault illuminates why gender-troubling performances do not simply provoke social disapproval but invite systematic, institutional retribution, as the body that refuses normative gender becomes a site of disciplinary intervention. Furthermore, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that sexuality is not repressed by power but actively produced through discourse. This insight complicates any straightforward reading of sexual liberation, suggesting that spaces which claim to celebrate female sexuality may themselves function as new regulatory mechanisms rather than genuine sites of freedom. Butler provides an opening for subversive action, she calls for gender trouble, for people to trouble the categories of gender through performance. But the

subject is never free to choose which gender they are going to enact since the "script" is already determined within the regulatory frame.

The application of Western theoretical frameworks to a Malayalam literary text raises the methodological concern Mohanty articulates in "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses". Mohanty cautions that such frameworks risk universalizing female experience at the expense of cultural specificity. This study remains conscious of that risk, treating Butler and Foucault as analytical tools rather than universal explanatory frameworks, while attending closely to the Kerala cultural context within which *Francis Itty Cora* situates its female characters.

Analysis

The exposition of *Francis Itty Cora* foregrounds Xavier Fernando Itty Cora, establishing him as the protagonist of the narrative. He is seen browsing the internet in search of some means to regain his lost sexual vigour. He comes across a site which talks about a school in Kerala that deals with the art of love making in a unique way. Here we are introduced to the first female character Rekha who claims to be the 'principal' of the school. Consequently, Itty Cora starts narrating his story of what lead to his erectile dysfunction, which takes the readers through the lives of numerous female characters — introduced, significantly, through the male protagonist's objectifying gaze as physically enticing — beginning with Hypatia, Morigami, Rekha, Reshmi, Bindu, and others.

Itty Cora had joined the US army with the sole aim of raping an Iraqi girl, and he finally manages to do that in Faluja but he claims to have lost his sexual vigour after that brutal act. He has chosen this 'Kerala School of Love Making' especially because of his ancestry. From there on, we encounter the Itty Cora myth which revolves round his great grandfather Francis Itty Cora. Francis Itty Cora was a 15th century Pepper merchant from Kerala who settled in Florence. "He was an excellent lover maker and was famous all over Europe" (Ramakrishnan, 2009, p. 22). He had eighteen wives and seventy-nine children all over the world and their line of descendants came to be called the "Pathinettam Kootukar" (the dark, mysterious cult at

the heart of the novel — a family lineage that has preserved occult rituals and devotion to their mythic ancestor Francis Itty Cora across centuries). Francis Itty Cora was part of the Hypatian School and entrusted his descendants to propagate it, but they deviated from the Hypatian spirit. The two major male characters are thus introduced as figures whose identity is defined entirely by sexual appetite and pleasure. It is shocking to learn that he has even become a cannibal thinking that human flesh might help him in reviving his lost power.

As he narrates 'his story' as well as those of his ancestor Francis Itty Cora, several female characters move in and move out of the narrative. It is said that Francis Itty Cora not only owes his knowledge to the Hypatian School but also belongs to the Hypatian family by way of his mother. We get to know about Hypatia who is considered to be the world's first woman mathematician and astronomer (A.D. 370 and A.D. 410). Hypatia was the daughter of Theon of Alexandria who was a teacher of mathematics with the Museum of Alexandria in Egypt. Hypatia was also a popular lecturer, drawing students from many parts of the empire. Hypatia was more of a scholar or a teacher than a woman. She moved about freely, driving her own chariot, contrary to the norm for women's public behaviour. She even exerted considerable political influence in the city, and when most scholars converted to Christianity to protect themselves, Hypatia resisted. She was conspicuous because she was a pagan and because she was a woman scholar. The historical figure of Hypatia functions in the novel as the founding archetype of what Butler would recognize as a body that refuses the normative script. Hypatia's transgression was not merely intellectual but performative in the fullest Butlerian sense: she moved freely through public space, drove her own chariot, and exerted political influence at a time when such conversion was the socially mandated performance of survival. Her prominence was inseparable from her visibility, she was conspicuous precisely because she was both female and pagan, two categories of non-conformity that the dominant regulatory apparatus could not tolerate. In Butler's terms, Hypatia's daily existence constituted a deviant repetition of gender and religious norms.

What followed was not mere social disapproval but the full force of Foucauldian disciplinary violence. The then bishop, Cyril objected to Hypatia and her teachings, including experimental science and pagan religion. Bishop Cyril incited a mob that dragged Hypatia from her chariot, stripped her flesh from her bones and scattered her body parts through the streets and burned some remaining parts of her body in the library of Caesareum. The savagery of this punishment is disproportionate to any political threat Hypatia posed. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that public acts of extreme violence against transgressive bodies serve a normalizing function: they do not merely punish the individual but send a message to the collective, reasserting the boundaries of acceptable behaviour through spectacular correction. Hypatia's dismemberment is not an aberration but a disciplinary event. That her students fled to Athens and her intellectual legacy survived does nothing to diminish the regulatory intent of her destruction. The martyrdom of Hypatia, of course, did ensure that her name would live on, but the survival of Hypatia's legacy as martyrdom rather than as living scholarship is itself a regulatory gesture which proves that patriarchal culture memorializes what it has already destroyed, converting transgression into tribute only once it poses no further danger.

Parallel to this narrative runs the real track of the novel in which the main three female characters: Rekha, Reshmi and Bindu have taken up the dual responsibility of reviving Itty Cora as well as finding the roots of the Itty Cora Family still existing in Kunnamkulam, Kerala. Ramakrishnan's decision to position Hypatia at the novel's mythological origin is therefore not incidental. She establishes the structural logic that governs every female character who follows: the woman who performs beyond the boundaries of the normative is rendered visible by that very performance, and visibility, within the regulatory apparatus the novel consistently depicts, is the precondition of punishment. The parallel Ramakrishnan draws between Hypatia's fate and the fates of Rekha, Bindu, and Morigami in contemporary Kerala suggests that the disciplinary mechanisms Foucault describes are not historically remote but structurally persistent. The mob that destroyed Hypatia in fifth-century Alexandria and the media that

destroys Rekha in twenty-first-century Kerala are, the novel implies, expressions of the same regulatory logic.

The narrative further reveals the licentiousness of Francis Itty Cora and Itty Cora through chapters titled: Body Lab, Sora (discourse), Pain for Pleasure, Iyyale kotha (Name of a person), Sora Again etc. The chapter titled 'Body Lab' talks about Itty Cora's life in the U.S Military when the 'Salvador Option' was deployed in Iraq. He claims to have learnt the basics of torturing at the 'body lab' which was the special room assigned for torturing the captives. A female named Victoria (she is known as 'Victory' in the camp) who oversees body lab is portrayed as an embodiment of cruelty, unlike the usual concept of women as compassionate. The figure of Victoria presents one of the novel's most provocative and theoretically complex representations of female power. Victoria, the female officer in charge of the body lab during the US military's 'Salvador Option' in Iraq, is portrayed not as a victim of patriarchal violence but as its willing instrument. The brutal yet enticing Victoria trains her subordinates (like Itty Cora) shouting: "Crush hard…. he should not use his weapon again…." (Ramakrishnan, 2009, p. 30). At first glance, Victoria appears to embody a radical subversion of normative femininity: she occupies a position of institutional authority, commands male subordinates, and performs a version of gender that is wholly at odds with the culturally mandated script of female compassion and passivity. Victoria with her rather bold and cruel demeanor might suggest a substitution of male dominion with female dominance. Yet a closer reading reveals that Victoria's performance does not subvert the normative gender order but relocates within it. She does not challenge the structure of dominance; she inhabits it. As Luce Irigaray suggests if women simply become dominant and men subordinate, the current cultural constructs will be further perpetuated eliminating the possibility of a real change. That is, if women simply assume the position of the dominant rather than dismantling the logic of domination itself, the existing cultural constructs are not overturned but perpetuated. The female authority becomes a mirror image of male authority, and the binary that Butler seeks to unsettle remains firmly in place. Victoria's cruelty is not gender trouble; it can be viewed as gender substitution. The masculine script

is performed by a female body, which, far from destabilizing the norm, reveals its fundamental transferability and thereby confirms its power.

As an enforcer of the military's disciplinary apparatus, Victoria is herself a product of the normalizing power she serves — her body trained, her behaviour regulated, her identity constituted by the institutional structure that grants her authority. She is, in Foucault's terms, a docile body who disciplines other bodies, her apparent power inseparable from her own subjection to a higher regulatory order. The body lab she oversees is thus a space explicitly designed for the production of pain and the breaking of resistant bodies. It can be viewed as the novel's most literal instantiation of Foucauldian discipline: a site where power inscribes itself directly onto flesh. And that this space is mirrored in the 'body lab' and 'liberation centre' of Rekha's school in Kerala is one of the novel's most pointed ironies, as both spaces promise transformation, but both ultimately serve the reproduction of existing power relations.

'The school' run by Rekha and her friends consists of a 'Discourse Centre', 'Body Lab', and the 'Liberation Centre' which proves useful for the various categories of customers who visit them. The body labs and the liberation centre within the novel seem to demand sexual freedom while celebrating their existence as women, but the female characters end up as mere receptacles of the male libido. Rekha, Reshmi and Bindu are portrayed as celebrating their feminine identity by entertaining their guests in the respective pleasure chambers. These female characters seem to profess what is referred to as gender trouble, which is an attempt to trouble the categories of gender through performance. This can be clearly understood from the new methods adopted by them like the discourse centre, body lab, liberation centre etc. Moreover, when they try to get to the crux of the Itty Cora family codes regarding the initiation ceremony of the young girls, they are in deep trouble. The society hunts them down to their doom, which is evocative in the death of Bindu. The chapter 'Sora' (discourse) involves discussions in which many eminent people participate-like the novelist, femi-the feminist, and others. They usually converse on literature, music, films, feminism and other art forms and once it turned out to be on a story- "Stand Back, Please, It's the Nobele"- by

Nabaneetha Sen which dealt with the problems faced by Mrs. Sen after her husband receives the Nobel. Another topic of discussion turns out to be on the discourse centres run by 15th century women in Kerala who came to be called as *thevadichi*. The *thevadichi*, loosely translated as female consort but more accurately understood as a class of highly talented, intellectually and artistically accomplished women in medieval Kerala, occupied a social position that was simultaneously privileged and circumscribed. Unlike the domesticated, conjugally bound woman who represented the normative feminine ideal, the *thevadichi* commanded spaces of cultural production. They were practitioners of music, dance, and literature, participants in intellectual discourse, and figures of considerable social visibility. In Butlerian terms, their existence constituted a form of gender performance that deviated markedly from the normative script of femininity available to women of their time and place. Their cultural freedom was real but bounded, their visibility contingent upon their availability to male desire and patronage. They occupied a space analogous to that of Rekha's school in the novel's contemporary narrative — a space that appeared to celebrate female autonomy while remaining structurally embedded within, and ultimately serving, a patriarchal economy. The parallel Ramakrishnan draws between the medieval *thevadichi* and the contemporary women of the school is not merely historical but analytical — it suggests that the apparent expansion of female agency across centuries has been consistently accompanied by its simultaneous containment. That is to say, the terms of women's visibility was always already determined by the patriarchal culture that permits it. This draws our attention to the fact that the *thevadichi* tradition is not a Kerala version of a universal feminist narrative but a culturally specific formation in which female agency and patriarchal containment are so thoroughly interwoven as to be inseparable. What the *thevadichi* reference ultimately contributes to the novel's gender discourse is a historical depth that situates the contemporary female characters not as isolated instances of patriarchal oppression but as the latest iteration of a centuries-old pattern in which Kerala's patriarchal culture has proven remarkably

adept at accommodating female visibility while neutralizing female threat.

The Itty Cora initiation ceremony takes the patriarchal logic embedded in the *thevadichi* tradition to its most explicit and violent conclusion. The narrative details the custom of offering young women to 'Korappappan' during Christmas to initiate them into the Cora family. The initiation ceremony consists of rituals like locking up the female (after making her unconscious) in the cellar for an entire night which is bound with the strict rule that no one should disclose this secret to anyone. It is believed that 'Korappappan' initiates them into the family, and they are now ready to be married to someone else. Thus, we see that societal norms do play a seminal role in the life of women. What is to be noted is that though Francis Itty Cora had entrusted his descendants to follow the Hypatian School, they digressed from its true spirit. The Itty Cora initiation ceremony is where Foucauldian disciplinary power and cultural sanction converge most explicitly in the novel. The ceremony is not presented as aberrant but as normalised community practice, sanctioned by tradition and enforced by silence, and it is precisely this normalisation that makes it analytically significant. The cellar functions as a space of enclosure where disciplinary power is applied with maximum intensity. The female body is rendered unconscious so that consent is irrelevant, confined so that resistance is impossible, and reintegrated into the community as a body now properly subjected to the patriarchal order — deemed fit, finally, to be married to someone else. The enforced secrecy surrounding the ceremony is not incidental but constitutive of its disciplinary logic. From a Butlerian perspective, she does not perform femininity so much as have femininity performed upon her, affirming Butler's insistence that gender is not chosen but compelled. That Rekha, Reshmi, and Bindu are hunted to their doom when they attempt to expose this secret confirms that the ceremony's power lies not in the ritual alone but in the network of enforced silence that sustains it. Every member of the community who keeps the secret can then be seen as an instrument of the disciplinary apparatus.

Morigami, the research scholar who accompanies Itty Cora, represents the novel's most intellectually articulate female subject and

its most important depiction of the regulatory violence directed at women who refuse docility. Unlike Hypatia, whose transgression was embodied, or Rekha and Bindu, whose subversion was sexual, Morigami's threat to the patriarchal order is discursive — she thinks, speaks, and names. It is precisely this capacity for critical articulation that the novel identifies as the most dangerous form of female non-conformity. Morigami's proclamation that "Sex is having a magnificent effect in the formation of one's political and philosophical attitudes" (Ramakrishnan, 2009, p. 306) is not merely provocative but a conscious theoretical claim about the inseparability of sexuality and political thought. When Itty Cora is shot dead at the airport upon his return to Kerala, it is reported that his connection with the US army and the Al Fjar operation in Faluja are the reasons behind it. But Morigami dares to expose her suspicion regarding the 'Itty Cora' family's (Pathinettam kootukar) role in his death. This leads to further investigation and the 'school' and its intricacies are exposed while the real culprits remain untouched. The school finds its place in the newspaper with exclusive pictures of the 'body lab' and the 'liberation room'. Moreover, Rekha's bikini picture is flashed in the newspapers titled 'Malayali Manga of the twenty first century'. Towards the end, Morigami, in her lecture at the university digresses from her research topic and instead talks about 'the school' and how it is blatantly criticised. As for Morigami, Rekha's photograph is an embodiment of beauty and 'the school' is where "She is doing wonderful experiments and innovations in the art of love-making" (Ramakrishnan, 2009, p. 307). She declares her resentment towards how beauty and sexuality are stamped as something offensive and thereby hints at the need to welcome subversive action. Here the gender 'woman' stands contingent and open to interpretation and re-signification through the practice of performance. Morigami performs precisely the gender trouble Butler advocates, re-signifying what it means to be a female intellectual subject. When she digresses from her research topic to publicly defend the school and challenge the culture's hypocrisy, the state's response is immediate — she is arrested and taken away. This is not merely a legal event but a disciplinary one, the regulatory apparatus reasserting its authority at the moment it is most directly challenged.

Conclusion

Beyond its postmodern experimentation, *Francis Itty Cora* is, at its core, an examination of the violence through which gender normativity reproduces and enforces itself. Read through Butler's framework of performativity, the novel's female characters emerge as subjects whose attempts at gender-troubling are never truly free. They operate within a regulatory script that determines, in advance, the consequences of deviation. Hypatia is torn apart by a mob, Bindu is hunted to her death, and Morigami is arrested mid-lecture. These narratives are structurally coherent illustrations of what Foucault terms normalisation, the mechanism by which disciplinary power produces docile bodies and makes visible, and therefore punishable, anyone who refuses compliance.

Equally significant is what the novel reveals about the limits of spaces that claim to celebrate female sexuality. The 'body lab' and 'liberation centre' run by Rekha and her associates gesture toward sexual freedom but, as a Foucauldian reading suggests, function less as sites of genuine liberation than as new discursive formations through which female sexuality is produced, managed, and ultimately appropriated — by the media, by the law, and by the very patriarchal culture they sought to subvert. Rekha's bikini photograph splashed across newspapers is the novel's sharpest irony: the performance of subversion becomes spectacle, and spectacle becomes a mechanism of containment. This study has applied Butler and Foucault as analytical tools while remaining conscious of Mohanty's caution that Western feminist frameworks risk flattening culturally specific experiences into a generic narrative of victimhood. *Francis Itty Cora* is emphatically a Kerala novel — its invocation of the *thevadichi* tradition, the Itty Cora initiation ceremony, and the social fabric of Kunnamkulam situates its gender politics within a historically and culturally specific patriarchal order that cannot be fully accounted for by Western theory alone. Future scholarship would benefit from a more sustained engagement with caste, community, and the specific history of women's bodies in Kerala cultural memory as they intersect with the novel's feminist concerns.

The women in Ramakrishnan's fictional world attempt to subvert societal expectations through performance, only to face retribution and persecution, thereby confirming Butler's central argument that gender is a constrained performance with severe consequences for deviation. The novel makes clear that the consequences of transgressing cultural norms are not merely personal but institutional, that it is rooted in a regulatory apparatus that polices gender expression in both everyday life and in the formal structures of society. *Francis Itty Cora* thus deviates from the original Hypatian spirit it invokes, bearing witness instead to the systematic defeat of every uprising that might have genuinely troubled the categories of gender. As Salih(2007) observes, "one's gender is performatively constituted in the same way that one's choice of clothes is curtailed or even predetermined, by the society, context, economy etc" (p.56) — an observation the novel illustrates with devastating consistency across every female life it traces.

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