

## AN ESSAY ON CROSS-DRESSING WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KOTTAMKULANGARA CHAMAYAVILKKU

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### ABSTRACT

*The term cross-dressing refers to an action or a behaviour without attributing or implying any specific causes for that behaviour. It is often assumed that the connotation is directly correlated with behaviours of transgender identity or sexual, fetishist, and homosexual behaviour, but the term itself does not imply any motives and is not synonymous to one's gender identity. In any society, the perception of femininity and masculinity is not necessarily dependent on female or male genitalia. Cross dressing, gender impersonation, and long term masquerades of the opposite sex are commonplace throughout history<sup>1</sup>. The clothing included in cross-dressing can technically be anything, but generally involves gender signifiers. These **signifiers**, such as the color pink, dresses, or revealing clothing are linked strongly in people's minds with their use by one particular gender. Most signifiers in Western culture are female in nature; male clothing is often considered gender-neutral. Because of this, the most visible cross-dressers are male. In the past, cross dressing was for the most part practiced more often by women than men. The practice of wearing the clothing of another gender figures largely in many media, literary, and popular culture sources. In this article it is tried to explore cross dressing, including its definitions, how practice is viewed differently in different cultures, and the psychology behind it and an attempt is made to correlate the term with a unique ritual called Chamayavilakku, existed in a famous temple in Kollam.*

*Key-terms: cross-dressing, transvestitism, transgenders, bisexual, homosexual*

### Introduction

Cross-dressing has been practiced throughout much of recorded history and in many societies. There are many examples in Greek, Norse, and Hindu mythology. A reasonable number of historical figures like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Sulthana Raziya, Rdhramma Devi etc., are known to have cross-dressed to varying degrees and for a variety of reasons. There is a rich history of cross-dressing found in folklore, literature, theatre, and music. Examples include *Kabuki and Korean shamanism*. One of the 2018 Malayalam movie, 'Njan Merikutty' explains the concept better. It was once considered taboo in Western society for women to wear clothing traditionally associated with men, except when done in certain circumstances such as cases of necessity (as per St. Thomas Aquinas's guidelines in *Summa*

*Theologiae II*), which states: "Nevertheless this may be done sometimes without sin on account of some necessity, either in order to hide oneself from enemies, or through lack of other clothes, or for some similar motive<sup>2</sup>.

Cross dressing, quite simple, is the act of wearing clothes that are typically reserved for the opposite gender. It is most commonly used to refer to male dressing in female clothing, though technically speaking it could also refer to female dressing in male clothing, but female wearing male clothing is perfectly acceptable in today's society, though an argument can be made that the intent is often different. The present paper deals primarily with males dressing as female because it is rare and some interesting rituals associated with it in Kerala.

### **Conceptualizing Cross-Dressing**

*Gender identity* refers to a personal identification with a particular gender and gender role in society. It is interesting to note that crossdressing is entirely a social construct. According to social identity theory, an important component of the self-concept is derived from memberships in social groups and categories; this is demonstrated by group processes and how inter-group relationships impact significantly on individuals' self-perception and behaviors<sup>3</sup>. The groups people belong to therefore provide members with the definition of who they are and how they should behave within their social sphere.

Categorizing males and females into social roles creates a problem, because individuals feel they have to be at one end of a linear spectrum and must identify themselves as man or woman, rather than being allowed to choose a section in between. Globally, communities interpret biological differences between men and women to create a set of social expectations that define the behaviours that are "appropriate" for men and women and determine women's and men's different access to rights, resources, power in society and health behaviours. A *transvestitic fetishist* is a person (typically a heterosexual male) who cross-dresses as part of a sexual fetish. Some people who cross-dress may endeavour to project a complete impression of belonging to another gender, including mannerisms, speech patterns, and emulation of sexual characteristics. This is referred to as passing or "trying to pass" depending how successful the person is. An observer who sees through the cross-dresser's attempt to pass is said to have *read* or *clocked* them. *Female masking* is a form of cross-dressing in which men wear masks that present them as female<sup>4</sup>.

The other term for cross-dressing is transvestitism. Someone who engaged in transvestitism is called a transvestite. Crossdressing individuals may be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. Though wearing the clothing of a different sex is part of the behavior of many transgender individuals, it is not necessarily the same as cross dressing. Transgender describes people who feel that their gender identity is different from their biological sex. When transgender people dress according to their gender identity, it is not necessarily the same as cross dressing. Some of these factors certainly may overlap and not all sources will agree with the specifics used here.

As stated elsewhere, Cross-dressing is the act of wearing items of clothing and other accoutrements commonly associated with the opposite sex within a particular society. Cross-dressing has been used for purposes of disguise, comfort, and self-expression in modern times and throughout history. Almost every human society throughout history has had expected norms for each gender relating to style, color, or type of clothing they are expected to wear, and likewise most societies have had a set of guidelines, views or even laws defining what type of clothing is appropriate for each gender<sup>5</sup>.

Why people crossdressing? There are a number of reasons. Causes can be either genetic or environmental. Being transgender and cross dressing are often related, but are by no means the same thing<sup>6</sup>. The first reason someone may cross-dress is linked to an individual's culture. Not every culture has a distinct line between the two Western genders. Some cultures, like Eastern Indian culture, recognize more than two genders. In India and nearby countries, the Hijra are typically men transitioning into a third gender, neither male nor female. Generally, Hijra form their own communities and have been legally recognized as a third gender in several parts of the East. Further examples of cultural cross-dressing include some Native American cultures that feature men dressing as women for particular rituals and dances, which is explained under the head 'chamayavilakku'.

Some individuals also cross-dress as part of a type of performance art called drag. What differentiates drag from other forms of cross-dressing is that the dressing is part of a show. Drag is a special form of performance art based on the act of cross-dressing. A drag queen is usually a male-assigned person who performs as an exaggeratedly feminine character, in heightened costuming sometimes consisting of a showy dress, high-heeled shoes, obvious

make-up, and wig. A drag queen may imitate famous female film or pop-music stars. A faux queen is a female-assigned person employing the same techniques. A drag king is a counterpart of the drag queen but usually for much different audiences, and is defined as a female-assigned person who adopts a masculine persona in performance or imitates a male film or pop-music star<sup>7</sup>.

Some people cross-dress as a matter of comfort or style, out of personal preference for clothing associated with the opposite sex. In this case, a person's cross-dressing may or may not be apparent to other people. Some people cross-dress to shock others or challenge social norms. **Gender disguise** has been used by women and girls to pass as male in society and by men and boys to pass themselves off as female. Gender disguise has also been used as a plot device in storytelling and is a recurring motif in literature, theater, and film. It is a common plot device in narrative ballads. Historically, some women have cross-dressed to take up male-dominated or male-exclusive professions, such as military service. Conversely, some men have cross-dressed to escape from mandatory military service<sup>8</sup> or as a disguise to assist in political or social protest, as men did in the Rebecca Riots

Cross-dressing is generally not received well, but at the Kottankulangara Devi temple, it's different - hundreds of men cutting across religions dress up like women as part of a traditional ritual to please the deity and get their wishes fulfilled. The festival has also turned out to be the largest congregation of the transgender community in Kerala as it offers them a space to celebrate their identity.

### **Kottankulangara Chamayavilakku**

The annual festival held at the Kottankulangara Devi temple in Kollam is a unique one. Akin to every temple festival, Chamayavilakku of Kottankulangara Devi Temple has processions with beautiful ladies holding lamps in their hands. But here if you take a closer look, you can see that it is not ladies who bear the lamps but men! Men from across the State doll up as damsels wearing sarees, shimmering trinkets, jasmine garlands and elaborate make-up take part in this unique ritual. Disregarding caste, creed, age and gender stereotypes, men dressed as women hold the divine Chamayavilakku (traditional lamp) and walk around the temple to

the accompaniment of the traditional orchestra, as a symbol of their devotion for the presiding deity and to get their wishes fulfilled.<sup>9</sup>

The Chamayavilakku procession falls on the 10th and 11th of the Malayalam month *Meenam* (Mid-March). The annual eleven-day festival starts at 1st of *Meenam*. On the festival days the temple premises came alive with a string of studios and green rooms to transform the male devotees into damsels. There were also stalls offering every accessory on hire including wigs and lamps for the participants.<sup>10</sup> Though a local festival, hundreds of men from various parts turned up at the temple, cross-dressing to seek the blessings of the goddess.

Goddess Bhagavathy, the deity of the Temple which is believed as ‘Swayam Bhoo’(Self Origin). This famous temple is the only temple in Kerala having no roof, the sanctum sanctorum. The cross-dressing is part of traditional ritual festivities. The uniqueness of this temple is that the boys and girls dress themselves as girls and ladies to hold the traditional temple lamp. It is believed that the first poojas of the temple were conducted by the cowboys wearing the clothes of women, which eventually led to the unusual custom.<sup>11</sup>

The plot of land where the temple is situated was once part of a forest, a tranquil area surrounded by a thick growth of trees, plants and creepers. On the northwest corner of the plot there existed a small deep pond known as Bhoothakulam. People living in the area believed it was a shelter for poisonous snakes. On the eastern side there was a huge extensive deep pond. During days of rain, a stream originated from there making the surrounding area fertile and cultivable. As this place was full of grass and pure water, the cow-herders from the neighbouring area would congregate there with their cattle<sup>12</sup>. There are many stories about the origin of the festival. The most popular version is that a group of cow-herders got a coconut from this place. They found a stone on the southern part of Bhoothakulam. When they hit the coconut on the stone (intending to remove the husk), they found drops of blood dripping from the stone. They explained the phenomena to the elders. The astrologer suggested that the stone contained supernatural powers and poojas should be started immediately after constructing a temple. The elders and cow-herders constructed a temporary temple using poles, leaves and tender leaves of coconut palm. It was a custom in ancient days that balikas used to prepare flower garlands, lit the pooja lamps in ancient Kudumba temples.

Accepting this tradition, the cow-herders wearing female attire, offered poojas in the temple. The milky liquid prepared from coconut kernel was boiled, the medicinal oil (Urukku Velichenna) extracted and solid substance taken (Kottan) was offered to the goddess as Naivedyam<sup>13</sup>.

It is believed that faith draws thousands of pilgrims to Kottankulangara Sree Devi Temple every year. Previously only the locals would take part in this ritual at the temple but today, not just Keralites but men from outside the state and even foreigners from New Zealand and London who joined the festival. As stated earlier, Chamayavilakku is also a much-anticipated event for the members of transgender community, as it offers them an opportunity to celebrate their real identity. The community members wait for the festival all the year. During the past few years, there has been a steady inflow of trans persons not just from Kerala, but all parts of the country. Last year the temple witnessed, we had more than 6,000 men who came dressed as women and prayed to the Devi (goddess). In 2019, the Chamayavilakku festival will be celebrated on 24th and 25th March.

The actual determination of cross-dressing is largely socially constructed. For example, in Western society, trousers have long been adopted for usage by women, and it is no longer regarded as cross-dressing. In cultures where men have traditionally worn skirt-like garments such as the kilt or sarong, these are not seen as female clothing, and wearing them is not seen as cross-dressing for men. As societies are becoming more global in nature, both men's and women's clothing are adopting styles of dress associated with other cultures. Some females may wish to dress as a male, and vice versa<sup>14</sup>.

In most parts of the world it remains socially disapproved for men to wear clothes traditionally associated with women. Cross-dressers may begin wearing clothing associated with the opposite sex in childhood, using the clothes of a sibling, parent, or friend. Some parents have said they allowed their children to cross-dress and, in many cases, the child stopped when they became older. The same pattern often continues into adulthood, where there may be confrontations with a spouse. Married cross-dressers experience considerable anxiety and guilt if their spouse objects to their behavior. Sometimes cross-dressers have periodically disposed of all their clothing, a practice called "purging", only to start collecting other gender's clothing again. The historical associations of maleness with power and

femaleness with submission and frivolity mean that in the present time a woman dressing in men's clothing and a man dressing in women's clothing evoke very different responses. A woman dressing in men's clothing is considered to be a more acceptable activity.

### **Social assignment and gender fluidity**

The World Health Organization defines gender as the result of socially constructed ideas about the behavior, actions, and roles a particular sex performs. The beliefs, values and attitude taken up and exhibited by them is as per the agreeable norms of the society and the personal opinions of the person is not taken into the primary consideration of assignment of gender and imposition of gender roles as per the assigned gender. Intersections and crossing of the prescribed boundaries have no place in the arena of the social construct of the term "gender".

According to gender theorist Kate Bornstein, gender can have ambiguity and fluidity. The assignment of gender involves taking into account the physiological and biological attributes assigned by nature followed by the imposition of the socially constructed conduct. Gender is a term used to exemplify the attributes that a society or culture constitutes as "masculine" or "feminine". Although a person's sex as male or female stands as a biological fact that is identical in any culture, what that specific sex means in reference to a person's gender role as a woman or a man in society varies cross culturally according to what things are considered to be masculine or feminine. These roles are learned from various, intersecting sources such as parental influences, the socialization a child receives in school, and what is portrayed in the local media<sup>15</sup>. Learning gender roles starts from birth and includes seemingly simple things like what color outfits a baby is clothed in or what toys they are given to play with. However, a person's gender does not always align with what has been assigned at birth. Factors other than learned behaviors play a role in the development of gender. The cultural traits typically coupled to a particular sex finalize the assignment of gender and the biological differences which play a role in classifying either sex as interchangeable with the definition of gender within the social context<sup>16</sup>.

In this context, the socially constructed rules are at a cross road with the assignment of a particular gender to a person. Gender ambiguity deals with having the freedom to choose,

manipulate and create a personal niche within any defined socially constructed code of conduct while gender fluidity is outlawing all the rules of cultural gender assignment. It does not accept the prevalence of the two rigidly defined genders "man" and "woman" and believes in freedom to choose any kind of gender with no rules, no defined boundaries and no fulfilling of expectations associated with any particular gender<sup>17</sup>.

This is one of the many issues being addressed by third wave feminism as well as the modern-day masculinist movement. The general culture has very mixed views about cross-dressing. A woman who wears her husband's shirt to bed is considered attractive while a man who wears his wife's nightgown to bed may be considered transgressive. All this may result from an overall gender role rigidity for males; that is, because of the prevalent gender dynamic throughout the world, men frequently encounter discrimination when deviating from masculine gender norms, particularly violations of heteronormativity.<sup>18</sup> A man's adoption of feminine clothing is often considered a going down in the gendered social order whereas a woman's adoption of what are traditionally men's clothing (at least in the English-speaking world) has less of an impact because women have been traditionally subordinate to men, unable to affect serious change through style of dress. Thus when a male cross-dresser puts on his clothes, he transforms into the quasi-female and thereby becomes an embodiment of the conflicted gender dynamic. Following the work of Butler, gender proceeds along through ritualized performances, but in male cross-dressing it becomes a performative "breaking" of the masculine and a "subversive repetition" of the feminine.<sup>19</sup>

Transvestism is a way of tapping into our birthright of universal citizenship: it's the most dramatic protest against being imaginatively bounded by the particular gender-province we happen to have been born into. Crossdressing enacts the great philosophical principle expressed by the Roman playwright, Terence: *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*: I am human, nothing human (including mini skirts or a hair band) is alien to me. It may of course be a bit disturbing to sense that one is really not so firmly anchored to the gender one was born into. It may be bewildering to have to accept that one is at heart, in the semi-conscious mind, always going to be something far more diverse, multi-faceted but also perhaps interesting than a mere 'man' or a 'woman'.

We shouldn't be scared. Across a range of important fields of life, we can accept that our



original identity and status shouldn't be regarded as decisive; and know the value of extending our sympathies through art, travel and the work of the imagination. The transvestite is doing nothing more than practicing some basic empathetic moves with which we are already very comfortable in many areas. Although we haven't fully recognised it yet, cross-dressing is a very normal thing to do.

When they planned a protest last month, a group of youngsters in Kochi could never have thought they would spark a national movement. They had a limited agenda: to protest an attack on a coffee shop by a Hindutva group in Kozikhode, which claimed that the establishment's young patrons were engaging in public displays of affection that were "against Indian culture". They decided to come out on the streets and display their opposition to moral policing by smooching, and thus Kiss of Love was born. Nearly four weeks later, hundreds of students and others have turned out for Kiss of Love protests in five cities across India. Some demonstrated for their right to express their love. Others called for equality on college campuses. But they all have one thing in common: putting up a front against the growing tide of moral policing.

A couple of months before, students at the English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad came out to protest after the administration said that all men in the hostels were threats to the female students. Demanding gender sensitisation for the authorities, the students cross-dressed to demand gender equality. It is clear that crossing dressing is not necessarily done for the purpose of sexual pleasure, it does not make one homosexual, bisexual or transsexual. Even though it is not accepted by the mainstream society, it is not illegal to crossdressing in public. But moral policing is the main issue faced by the cross-dressers or Transvestitis. Hence growing tide of moral policing must be checked by the authority in order to protect the fundamental rights of these group as citizens and must provide a safest atmosphere for choosing gender fluidity (gender fluidity or sexual identity is one or more changes in sexuality).

## ENDNOTES

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