

# The Perception of Power in Determining the Orature with Reference to Cennannūrāti

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**Abstract:** *The peculiarities of the oral text and the written text will constitute the utmost inquisition of this paper. The oral literary traditions are manifestations of a subjugated community with secondary or third rate status; then, what are the idiosyncrasies of those heroic epic songs about Chengannur Kunjathi, a slave, which has been circulating among the Parayas of Central Travancore, Also the paper tries to analyze it with the Foucauldian perspective of power/knowledge. In general, the verbal transcript of an orally performed traditional song has been problematized from a variety of angles by questioning its boundaries, apparent fixity, performative representativity, situational and cultural contextuality, co-textual and intertextual environment, discursive function and ideological bias.*

**Keywords:** Cerinannurati, Orature, folklore, Text, Oral text, written text, Subaltern discourse, Folk culture, Fixity, Power/knowledge

## 1. Introduction

Cennannūrāti (The life narrative of Chengannur kunjathi) is a ballad from the periphery, which is profoundly entrenched in oral tradition of the paraya community of Kerala. Kunjathi was a triumphant warrior who fought and defeated the twenty one masters in the eighteen kalaris across Kerala. Paraya tradition of artistic representations of ache and bliss is found unique to others. Even in the dearth of written expressions they have managed to check over and revise the saga of Cennannūrati orally and swap over to generations tongue to tongue. An oral narrative in a written form is strictly come/under the notion of transcreation because it is between a source text (ST) and a target text (TT). The orature can be considered as the ST and the written form will constitute the concept of TT. These transcreation processes eventually influence the capacity of the orature to inherit the spirit of changing times. Once it is fixed, it acts as a rigid documented for the coming generations. That is a kind of limitation but in a bigger canvas the reach of the text can be wider. An oral narrative is actually a transcreation of transcreation because it is based on performance; each performance will be different from the other.

## 2. Vāmoli and Varamoli (Oral and Written)

Oral texts are often regarded within national cultures as texts of the "other" and thus marginalized. An oral literature (orature) not merely as folksy, domestic entertainment but as a domain in which individuals in a variety of social roles articulate a commentary upon power relations in society and indeed create knowledge about society (Furniss and Gunner 1). The decisive components of an oral account have a triangular structure, the 'text', 'texture', 'context'. There is no single 'text' for folklore; instead it has 'versions' and it might be uncountable. This irregularity is the regularity of folklore. Then a 'text' will be one among different versions of a narrative. Alan Dundes demarcates: 'the text of an item of folklore is essentially a version or a single telling of a tale, a recitation of a proverb, a singing of folklore (23).

In that sense the text of chengannurathi is taken as told by Padathara Chennan and as mentioned earlier, it is strictly a version of folklore. So when this oral form is transformed into a written form, what happen is that the version is compromised for the printing purpose. I know that it is never able to reproduce in the traditional form, but the fact is that when one oral account (vamoli) is transformed into a written form (varamoli) it will lose its capability to absorb and the written text will remain as a fixed form for the future generations. The jeopardy is with this 'fixity' of the text, and in course of time the printed version becomes the fundamental text.

In detail the text as told by Chennan was the product of a social order in which the informant lives and it is a mixture of his/her own character, feelings, dreams, and interpretations with the base story of Chengannur Kunjathi. The singer unconsciously renders the oppressors glory by replacing their own from their oral tradition and even continues the practice. It is because at certain level of time the discourse of Kunjathi was usurped by the dominant culture through its suppressive power over the downtrodden mass. At this point, we need to analyze the connections between power and knowledge to find out why a certain 'aspect of knowledge' has become acceptable at a given historical moment.

## 3. The Perception of Power

As mentioned above we can find that the 'text' by the informant is the product of power relations in a society. Similarly, for Michael Foucault the power problem is central to his thinking regarding the relations between society, individuals, groups and institutions. He investigated this problem from a critical and historical perspective. He viewed power as the plain oppression of the powerless by the powerful, aiming to examine how it operates in day to day interactions between people and institutions. Usually, power is understood as the capacity of an agent to impose his will over the will of the powerless, or the ability to force them to do things they do not wish to do. In Foucault's opinion, power is not something that can be owned, but rather something that acts and manifests itself in a certain

way; it is more a strategy power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain... Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application (Foucault 98). He describes:

**3.1. Productivity of power** (power relations are integral to the modern social productive apparatus, and linked to active programs for the fabricated part of the collective substance of society itself)

**3.2. Constitution of subjectivity through power relations** (the individual impact of power relations does not limit itself to pure repression but also comprises the intention to teach to mold conduct, to install form of self-awareness and identities) ([qtd.in paul rabinow, xvii](#))

These two concepts should read along with Knowledge (savoir), which refers to all procedures and all effects of knowledge which are acceptable at a given point in time and in a specific domain. He claims that power and knowledge are not external to each other, but that they operate in a mutually generative fashion, as nothing can exist as an element of knowledge if it does not possess the effects of coercion [and as] nothing can function as a mechanism of power if it is not deployed according to procedures, instruments, means, and objectives which can be validated in more or less coherent systems of knowledge" (Foucault. The Ethics 52). Thus, there is no need to study knowledge and power separately, because it is the "nexus of knowledge/power (53).

The informant version is closely linked with the Foucauldian perspective in its utterance, as we look into the text, it begins with a stuti, the singer is praising lord Saraswathi, and Ganesh. How far is it possible to contain such kinds of dominant Hindu cultural symbols in a subaltern discourse? The knowledge of the informant had at some point of time, accepted by the community itself, which is due to the power relations, so as s/he renders, the outcome will be a mixture of traditional knowledge and the knowledge of the dominant culture. There are plenty of references about this: at one point, Kunjathi is giving money to a thamburan to buy an elephant and he is travelling upon the elephant. One story there is child marriage between Kunjathi and paluvam pennu. In another story, The Paluvam Pennu (paraya women) is selling toddy. Similarly, Kunjathi is invited for a *vastubali*. All these indicate the influence of dominant Hindu culture upon the subaltern mass. Or they are trying to become a part of the dominant culture. By analyzing these, we can assume that there is a silent form of suppression in the discourse. That's simply because the power relations in a society, as mentioned by Foucault.

If those are the veracity about oral literature, similarly the printed transcript has also something to do with its textual origin and linguistic accuracy, its methods of documentation, transcription, translation, editing and publication, the collector role in the making of the text and the editors impact on the final form; each item needs individual explanations but as a whole all those processes affects the originality and traditionality. The relationship

between text and context is also vibrant because the performance itself progresses in time with the inter-influencing exchanges between performer and audience. Unless one takes into account the way it relates with its context, the text, no matter how faithfully transcribed, would not be found different from the written poem or narrative. In performance, no two performances can be exactly the same; there will be newness in every performance. Also, in performance, nuances of tone, vocal inflections, voice-imitations of characters and gestures, all are vital tools to interpreting the performance. In print, or writing, however, these unique features of oral literature are lost.

Printed version makes labelling and numbering of ballads possible. The belief that a song is 'preserved' in print is ironic, since the song is its own performance and that performance is not preserved. All that remains is scholarly invention. In the first place the book is the printed continuation of an existing oral tradition and not a first written record of oral songs; in the second place the book exists only within the context of that tradition. So, 'the written word can give only an idea of the fact, but the word is not the fact itself' (Kaviratna 93).

#### 4. Conclusion

The traditional ballads origins and authorships are uncertain. Documentation is necessary for the oral forms prolonged existence. But, which form is taken for documenting is the question that determines the authenticity and more over the purpose of folklore. It is difficult to find the one original source of oral texts, but one can find a number of versions and by analyzing those versions one can move towards a skeleton of that particular narrative and that will help the endurance of the orature.

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