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## Beyond the Aesthetic: Counter-Beauty and the Politics of Corporeal Communication in Pulikali

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### Abstract

Pulikali is the most popular and colourful folk art form of Kerala. When the words ‘Puli’ and ‘Kali’ are combined, the game that imitates the appearance and movements of a leopard is called Pulikali. Pulikali, which is held as part of the Onam celebrations, especially in the Thrissur district of Kerala state, has become one of the cultural symbols of Kerala state today. Pulikali is a popular festival where players take on the appearance of a leopard and take to the streets. After painting their entire bodies in yellow, black, white and red to create the appearance of a leopard, many people take to the streets in groups and attract people by moving their feet to the rhythm of music. Pulikkali has earned a unique place in the history of popular art and culture in Kerala. It is not just entertainment; it is a participatory art form of the people that has risen from the foundations of society. It is a democratic art performance that questions the structures of power and turns the street into a platform for people to celebrate. The counter-beauty of transforming the body itself into an art form maintains Pulikali as a rare creation among the world’s popular art forms. Therefore, Pulikali is not just an art form; it is a celebration of popular solidarity and a powerful reflection of social resistance.

**Keywords:** Belly tigers, Body language, Carnival movements, Pulikali and social resistance

## 1. Pulikali

Pulikali is the most popular and colourful of Kerala's folk art forms. When the words 'Puli' and 'Kali' are combined, the game that imitates the appearance and movements of a leopard is called Pulikali. Pulikali, which is held as part of the Onam celebrations, especially in Thrissur, has become one of the cultural symbols of Kerala today. As cultural history proves, the fine arts grew with emphasis on facial expressions and body language. However, Pulikali does not give life to the face, but to the belly and body. The artist speaks his language through colourful leopard stripes and soulful footsteps. Instead of the divine figures of legends, the lifelike leopards of the street are taking to the streets of the city. Pulikali is a rare performance that transforms the entire body into an art form. Pulikali, which transforms the language of the body into the main medium of communication, continues to be a great symbol of popular aesthetic consciousness, street culture, and popular sentiment. This art is a very rare contribution to the diversity of popular art and the beauty of bodily expression in Kerala.



**Fig. 1. Pulikali**

Pulikali is a popular festival where players take on the appearance of a leopard and take to the streets. After painting their entire bodies in yellow, black, white and red to create the appearance of a leopard, many people take to the streets in groups and attract people by moving their feet to the rhythm of music.

## 2. The Counter-beauty of Body Language

There are many opinions about the origin of Pulikali. According to historians, Pulikali was started as an institution by the Thrissur Shaktyanayaka Sri Shaktan Thampuran about 200 years ago. His idea was to give Onam celebrations a more popular rhythm and gaiety. Pulikali was a reflection of that idea. Pulikkali is a popular art form that thrills the entire city of Thrissur for four days. This art form, which is about two hundred and fifty years old, is a distinct facet of Kerala's

# *The Voice of Creative Research*

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

cultural tradition. But its history and socio-cultural significance have not been sufficiently recognised by the modern world. Pulikalli originated from the streets of 'Edavakunni', which was known around the Vadakkumnathan temple. Unlike the Sanskrit and 'civilised' dances that flourished in royal palaces and upper-caste houses, this art form emerged from the dust of the streets and the soul of the people. Ancient arts placed facial expressions and gestures at the forefront. But Pulikalli transforms the entire body into a work of art instead of the face. The combination of the stripes on the stomach and chest and the rhythmic movements of the steps make this artistic performance a great form of body language. Instead of the characters in legends and myths, the streets of the city are filled with life-like tigers.



**Fig. 2. Body Language**

### **3. Reinterpretation of concepts of power**

The greatest feature of the tiger dance is the complete rejection of concepts of power in the performance. The hierarchies seen in the temple dances controlled by kings and priests are absent here. Tigers enter the stage equally in the public spaces of the country, without any distinction of 'highness or lowness'. The training, playing and celebration of the art all take place on the streets. Tiger dance is becoming a part of people's lives, without any distinction between artists and the people. Tiger groups from different areas of Thrissur city still maintain the spirit of the tiger dance. Many groups from the city outskirts, such as Patturaikkal, Padinjarekotta, Kottappuram, Kokkala, Peringavu, Chembukkavu, Poonkunnam, Kanattukara, Veliyannur, Kuttippuzha Nagar, Naikkanal, Chirayakkal Desam, Kizhakkekotta, Ayyanthol, Kuttankulangara, etc., come together for this. Earlier, there were tiger groups in Paravattani and Kurkancheri.

A team usually consists of about thirty tigers. In this way, about four hundred tigers from various 'folds' fill the streets of the city. Not only have those who enter the stage as tigers, but also other groups working for this have played a big role. The performance of a tiger dance group is the result of the collective work of many hands, including those who paint, draw, prepare the plots

# *The Voice of Creative Research*

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

of the procession, play instruments, make decorations, and make masks. Pulikkali is a popular art form that transforms the city centre into a large-scale folk theatre. Celebrations like the 'Ramleela' (dramatic folk re-enactment of the life of Rama according to the ancient Hindu epic *Ramayana*) of North India, the 'Terukoothu' (performance of ancient Tamil street theater, combining dance, music, and storytelling, often depicting tales from the Mahabharata) of Tamil Nadu, and the 'Vallamkali' (boat race) of Alappuzha, Pulikali is a festival with deep participation of the people. It is not a stage art form that is only seen by those who receive benefits; it is a celebration in which the entire population of the city participates.

#### **4. Carnival Movements**

Carnival is a major part of celebrations in most European countries. Unlike religious or formal celebrations, carnival is a popular expansion that temporarily breaks down the official structures and restrictions of society's daily routine. The entire city becomes a festival stage, and people get the opportunity to express their own imagination and creativity. During the days of carnival, there is an experience as if conventional methods and the strict restrictions of society are collapsing. Carnival is a collective resistance of people against the restrictions and false values provided by the 'official culture'. Carnival celebrations are spread throughout the city with lively costumes, bizarre costumes, imaginative body performances, street art forms, and paint. The popular slogan that "you can express and express anything at carnival" explains the spirit of carnival. Carnival expresses the inherent desires and criticisms of man, overcoming the hollow restrictions and formal rules of daily life.

#### **5. The popular resistance of the carnival**

Carnival is a popular artistic expression against the structural restrictions of society. When thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin studied carnival, they clarified that it demonstrates the polyphony and heteroglossia of culture. The popular voices that rise during carnival days are the soulful performances of different groups. Through this, everyone in society gets the opportunity to present their speeches and body expressions. Even those who are suffocated by social restrictions can freely participate in such celebrations.

#### **6. Artistic faces of carnival**

Carnival is not just a procession. It is a festival of street art forms. As seen in the local markets, herbalists, magicians, street circus artists, and body art performers are active participants. Unlike the 'pop' culture of high-tech supermarkets, the pop culture of carnival is a reflection of popular life experiences and street culture. When artists, adorned with imaginative costumes and full bellies, take to the streets, people can forget the strict rules and restrictions of society and temporarily experience freedom.



**Fig. 3. White tiger**

### **7. Pulikali: Carnival of Body Language and Community Defence**

Among the popular art forms of Kerala, the importance of Pulikali lies in its powerful reflection of the imagination and collective experiences of the common people. This art form, which shakes the city of Thrissur for four days, is a rare popular celebration that transforms the ‘body’ itself into an art medium. Pulikali is a visual experience that turns the stomach and body into a canvas, as a counterpoint to sophisticated art forms that prioritise facial expressions and dialogue.

### **8. The musical language of Pulikali**

The Pulikali drums that sound before Pulikali become the heartbeat of the city. The vibration of the chenda mentally prepares the ‘Puli body’. Just as the vocal melody of “Thannaroo Tannaaro” in Kodungallur Bharani unites the bodies and excites them, in the same way, “Pulikkottum Panantherangam” is also played in Pulikali. The musical language of the instrument gives excitement to the union of bodies; these rhythms are the ‘power dance’ that activates the bodies.

### **9. The artistic beauty of the belly**

The main stage of the tiger dance is not the face, but the belly. Here, a rare body expression takes place that transforms the belly into another face. The limbs become tiger eyes; the navel becomes a tiger mouth. “Belly tigers” are specially selected, and the strength of the team is determined by their number. Tigers trained in clubs bend their bodies to the rhythm and form a ‘tiger body’, which is a sight that amazes the crowd.

# *The Voice of Creative Research*

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)



**Fig. 4. Artistic beauty of the belly**

Here, the belly is transformed not only into a “canvas for painting” but also into a “talking face”. Although this may seem like a kind of “port-belly dance”, it is a popular social expression.



**Fig. 5. Tiger belly**

This artistic concept that shifts the gaze from the face to the belly is a defensive aesthetic that society has found to “avoid being seen”.

## **10. From face to body**

While in traditional art forms the face played the main role, in carnivals the body takes centre stage. The language of the body is a powerful expression that challenges social restrictions. Through paint, body marks, and bizarre costumes, the body becomes a work of art and an important

## *The Voice of Creative Research*

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

platform for social criticism. The importance of Carnival lies not in the external splendour of the celebration, but in the popular dream of overcoming the restrictions imposed by society. Carnival is a grand festival of popular art forms that question the restrictions of official society. Carnival becomes a platform for the soulful performances of different groups and a symbol of the liberation of body language. Carnival movements seen in European cities have a spiritual connection with the popular experiences of freedom in our country's festivals, markets, and street art performances. Therefore, Carnival is not just a celebration; it is a defence of popular culture and a great festival of the people's creativity.

The main feature of Pulikali is that it is an attempt to regain the freedom of the body. Within the usual frameworks and restrictions of civilised society, the human body sometimes seems like a frozen, lifeless branch. It appears as a restricted "dead body" that has lost its mobility, cannot respond, and is reborn in art forms like Pulikali. Movement regains the freedom of the body, and the awakening of life is experienced through community. When groups of Pulikali dance in the streets, the entire crowd becomes part of that experience. It is not a performance for just one person; it is the awakening of the community.



**Fig. 6. Tigers Head**

When studying the social history of folk art forms in Kerala, Pulikali is one of the most remarkable and deeply ingrained art forms in the hearts of the people. On the fourth day after Thiruvonam, the streets of Thrissur city are filled with flocks of tigers, the colourful movements that captivate the entire city, and the artistic beauty expressed only through the medium of the body; all these make Pulikali unique. Historically, this art form, which is about two hundred and fifty years old, is a "folk" art form that was born on the streets of the city as a counterpoint to the "civilised" art forms that were born in the palaces of the royal houses and the great ancestral homes.

## *The Voice of Creative Research*

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

In contrast to the Sanskrit art forms that focus on facial expressions and dialogue, this is a “body art” that turns the stomach and the entire body into a canvas.

Sophisticated stage arts, especially dramas and classical dances, have developed based on the face and dialogue. In them, the body is like a “cutout”, a visual object confined to two dimensions. The audience is also stuck in chairs, unable to move. But in Pulikali, the situation is the opposite. The whole body becomes an instrument for artistic expression. Without facial expressions or dialogue, the main focus of the art is the image of the belly and the footprints. Pulikali stands as a “whole body” art form in contrast to “face-to-face” art forms.

The importance of body language became more apparent in the 20th century. The “culture of hearing” has passed, and the “culture of seeing” (visual culture) controls the present era. All media, newspapers, television, cinema, computers, advertising, and theatre operate depending on the body. The visual beauty of the body is the basis of today's culture. As Foucault says, “Western thought used to separate the body and the mind. But by the 20th century, the body itself had become the centre of culture. Even the functions of the mind had to be explained by the body” (15).



**Fig. 7. Tiger body**

Western dramatists such as Stanislavsky and Grotowski gave great importance to the language of the body. Stanislavsky tried to express “inner feelings” through body language. Grotowski developed the visual potential of the body through intensive training. At the same time, non-Western art forms, crowd dancing, Kathakali, Balinese dance, Japanese Noh, and Kabuki, were also greatly influenced. In them, “non-verbal expression” was more important than speech. Popular art forms, especially Pulikali, emerge as a defensive force in this context. Pulikali is a counter-language to the “politeness” and “control” that governs Sanskrit art forms. Here, the body

# *The Voice of Creative Research*

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

gains a kind of freedom. Colours, steps, and togetherness all act as a response to the physical and psychological pressures of society.

Carnivals should also be remembered in this context. Carnival celebrations in Europe are a popular form of celebration that subverts the “official culture” of the city. The restrictions of civility are lifted for a few days. Carnival is a “celebration of the collective” where the taboos of language and the restrictions of the body are broken, and everything can be expressed. Here is the linguistic beauty of “polyphony” and “heteroglossia” as described by Mikhail Bakhtin. Various collectives express their independent voices.

Festivals like the Vela, Pooram, and Chenakathur Kuthiravel in Kerala also have similarities to carnivals. They provide structures that break free from social restrictions, express the inner speech of the people, and unite different layers of society. Pulikali, carnival, markets, street plays, all of these celebrate the freedom of body language. The body changes from a “dead” state to a “full of life” state. The body itself becomes a defensive weapon against the oppressions of society. The power of popular art is revealed here, questioning the formal structures of culture and reclaiming the freedom of the human body.

## **11. Why a tiger?**

The tiger is a symbol of strength, bravery, and freedom in Indian culture. The vehicle of the god, the protector of forests, the spiritual centre of hunters and wildlife communities, all these roles explain the symbolism of the tiger. When we say, “He is a tiger,” there is strength, fearlessness, and freedom in it. In today’s context, quarry mafias and deforestation are destroying the tiger’s habitat. The “tiger worship” behind the tiger dance, therefore, acquires a socio-ecological relevance. While the popular art that captures the tiger in the city “addresses,” it also contains a message of tiger conservation.

## **12. Carnival culture and the tiger dance**

The tiger dance is a carnival experience. The ‘official culture’ of the city breaks down for a few days; the constraints of civility are removed; the body and voice gain complete freedom. Here, there is the “polyphony” and “heteroglossia” that Mikhail Bakhtin spoke of. Many voices and different social groups express their inner speech. Tiger dance, like carnivals, is a collective resistance against the pressures of society. When ‘tiger bodies’ are paraded on the streets, it is not just entertainment; it is a reflection of society.

## **13. The Politics and Beauty of Body Language**

In a civilised society, the human body is often seen only in a “dead”, controlled, and obedient way. But in the tiger dance, the body is given a new life. Tiger dance celebrates the “collective freedom” of the body. As Foucault has made clear, in Western thought, the body is often subordinated to the mind. But in popular art, the body is the centre of art. While Stanislavsky and Grotowski emphasised body language in Western drama, art forms such as tiger dance have made the body itself the main language of art.

# The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

## 14. Popular Art and Social Resistance

The strength of the working body is the basis of popular art. The performers in Pulikali are ordinary workers and small groups of people. The strength built up in their bodies is reflected in the art form. Pulikali is the ‘language of the people’ against the oppression of society. Colours and rhythms are the body’s defensive weapons. Pulikali is the ‘popular aesthetics’ that emerges on the streets against the “authoritative culture” of the city. Pulikkali is not just a festive art form. It is a political declaration of the freedom and solidarity of the body. The artistic imagination that turns the belly into a face, the vibration of the chenda, the carnival beauty of the streets, all these combine to make Pulikali a meeting point of “visual art and social resistance.” By worshipping the puli, man regains the “puli power” within him. The tiger dance is a message of wildlife conservation, the defensive spirit of society, and the freedom of the body, all rolled into one. Therefore, when the tiger dances, not only the city but also the cultural thoughts of the society tremble.

### Conclusion

Pulikkali is an art form that is naturally and uncontrollably formed. The resistance feature that rejects power structures is evident in Pulikali. Art is created through the natural participation of the people, without giving room to formal methods and codified systems. Pulikkali is perhaps a rare example in Kerala where the entire body has been transformed into an art form. The human body, made into a canvas and completed with colours and lines, is not just a visual beauty; it is a powerful statement of body language. This art, formed through the combination of music and footsteps, makes the body a symbol of socio-cultural communication and popular sentiment. Pulikkali is a living face of Kerala’s artistic and cultural heritage. It is not just a game, but a folk festival that reflects the courage and unity of the community. When the beautiful appearance of the Pulikali, the sound of the Chenda Melam, and the excitement of the crowd filling the streets come together, Pulikali remains in the minds of Malayalis to this day and forever.

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# *The Voice of Creative Research*

Vol. 7 & Issue 3 (July 2025)

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