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Uncanny in the Making: The Arcane Lure of *Francis Itticora*

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Abstract:

The uncanny aesthetic, disturbing and unsettling, is the natural artistic by-product of a cultural response to postmodern living. It is deeply concerned with all that is unrepresentable but it is through the very same that the unrepresentable finds its most accurate representation. Uncanny becomes the melting point of all the diverse dispensations on the popular Malayalam novel, *Francis Itticora*; a boulevard of opacities and uncertainties, it swings between the realms of reality and fiction. This paper attempts to initiate a conversation between *Francis Itticora* and the tumultuous egos of “uncanny. Unparalleled and without a pioneer in Malayalam literature, *Francis Itticora* is a poignant hybrid of literary and best-seller aesthetics. The work’s narrative structure, plot, theme, and character sketches embrace everything that might definitely be ‘new’ in the Malayalam literary scenario. The novelist’s genius lies in making the familiar turn into something strange.

Keywords: Uncanny, Francis Itticora, T. D. Ramakrishnan, Contemporary Malayalam Fiction, Subversion, Popular Fiction

The various critical elaborations on the topic uncanny make us aware of its making, recognition and acknowledgment. Sigmund Freud’s essay entitled *Das Unheimlich* (The Uncanny) which appeared in the year 1919 can be viewed as foundational in the history of the conceptualization of the term uncanny. Freud’s essay is a direct response to the psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch’s study “On the Psychology of the Uncanny.” Freud begins his essay with a detailed discussion on the lexical meanings of the German word *unheimlich* which is considered untranslatable. The rough English equivalent, “uncanny,” is itself difficult to define. This indescribable quality is essentially an integral part of our understanding of the uncanny experience, which is terrifying precisely because it cannot be adequately explained. The word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general.

Freud in his essay argued that ‘uncanny’ is a subject of aesthetics because it is concerned with a certain kind of feeling or sensation or emotional impulses that can be provoked in the viewer. He relates the ‘uncanny’ to something that has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny (4). Freud further says that the uncanny is “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,” but which has become alienated from the mind through the process of repression (4). In the essay of Freud many psychoanalytical terms ensemble to form a concept of the uncanny. These include castration complex, Oedipus, narcissism, compulsion to repeat, the death drive, repression, anxiety, etc. Though it provided an anchoring point for the history of the conceptualization,

Freud's essay was hardly noticed. However, with the advent of post-structuralism a growing interest in the uncanny in literary studies became explicit and many readings of Freud's 'uncanny' were published. The bulk of the critical and theoretical reception of "Das Unheimliche" is located in the field of aesthetics: literary theory and criticism, art history, philosophy, architecture and cultural studies (Masschelein n.p.).

The uncanny triggers in us uncertainty, disturbance, and doubt as the boundaries between the living and the dead are blurred. They challenge rational modes of knowledge because they confuse the spatial (inner/outer) and temporal (past/present) dimensions of reality. More specifically, they echo the Freudian understanding of the uncanny, according to which "everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, [comes] into the open" (5). In other words, Freud believes that the uncanny manifests itself when the repressed aspects buried in our unconscious suddenly return. There are myriad ways in which the concept is used, theorized, or applied in 20th century art and criticism. With recourse to the founding text, this paper will look into the construction of uncanny in the Malayalam novel *Francis Itticora* with principal focus on the fear of castration, the play of doubles, subversion, the repetitions, the mix of real with unreal and the stylistics of narration.

The Malayalam novel, *Francis Itticora* by T. D. Ramakrishnan elicited many debates regarding the nature and characteristics of contemporary Malayalam fiction writing. The wide ranging critical responses for or against the novel from academics and reading public were unprecedented in Malayalam literature. The novel's narrative structure, plot, theme, and character sketches everything might definitely be 'new' in the Malayalam literary scenario. The novel which was released in 2009, has been reprinted seven times till date. The fictional world of *Francis Itticora* maneuvers the readers into the interstices of imagination and reality. Uncanny becomes the melting point of all the diverse dispensations on *Francis Itticora*. A boulevard of opacities and uncertainties, uncanny swings between the realms of reality and fiction. This paper attempts to initiate a conversation between *Francis Itticora* and the tumultuous egos of "uncanny."

The novel, *Francis Itticora* is unparalleled and without a pioneer in Malayalam literature: it is the hybrid of literary and best-seller aesthetics. The novel deals with the time span of seventeen centuries across different countries and the fictional ambience of the Malayalam literature has never ventured into the areas which the novel sumptuously engages. The novelist deliberately veers away from the existing mode of postmodern writing in Malayalam literature pushing it to a larger canvas where easy crisscrossing of art, science and business is made possible. Spacio-temporal dimension in the novel is ruptured through crisscrossing the notions of time and place with imagination, and the novelist makes the reader ready for other elements of the uncanny. The writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation. *Francis Itticora* is a story of conspiracy which tries to establish connections in the chaotic and coincidental events in the past and the present.

Analyzing Hoffman's story *The Sandman*, Freud remarks that it is the fear of castration that creates the uncanny effect in the story (12). Sigmund Freud never wanted to abandon the sexual character of castration. *Francis Itticora* constantly ensues and returns to the concept of the father, which the castration myth implies. The novel depicts the incidents after the castration of the protagonist, Xavier Itticora. The uncanny in this novel is evoked by the attempt of Junior

Cora to revive his sexual potency. Xavier Itticora's loss of potency and his search for his ancestors, which leads him to Francis Itticora is the broad structure of the novel in which other events are woven in. The violent sexual instincts of Xavier Cora can be traced back to his forefather, the 'God' of the *Pathinettamkootukar*, Francis Itticora.

The uncanny can be connected to the phenomenon of the 'double,' which appears in every shape and in every sphere of development of the novel. Freud explores the theme of the Double in his essay "The Uncanny" (12). The 'double' was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death.' In the novel the doppelganger effect abruptly comes into view, impedes the subject and apparently fades away to return even more intensely. Helen Cixous claims that the double is a "ghostly figure of non fulfillment and repression, [rather than a] counterpart or reflection [and it] also absorbs the unrealized eventualities of our destiny which the imagination refuses to let go" (540). This observation can be very well extended to the relationship between Francis Itticora and Xavier Itticora. Xavier Cora is the double of Francis Cora, the realization would cost his life. The formal distance between Francis Itticora and Xavier Itticora, whether it be of temporal and spatial, is the uncanny area between the living and the dead. The subject is confronted with his double, the very image of himself and this crumbles the self leading to the shattering of the bases of his world, producing a terrible anxiety. The moment one encounters one's double, one is headed for disaster; there seems to be no way out.

P. K. Rajasekharan in his article, "Plot/ 'plot': Itticorayude Upajapalokangal" ("Plot/ 'plot': The conspiring worlds of Itticora") critically explores the significance of *Francis Itticora* in the contemporary milieu. He gives a broad description of the enigmatic nature of Francis Itticora. Gluing together diverse opinions disseminated across the text, one could speak of Itticora as follows: son of a Keralite with a Jewish tradition and an Italian mother, Francis Itticora was born in 1456 and died in 1517 in Florence, Italy. He studied in the secret Hypatian schools in Alexandria (Egypt) and Timbuktu (Mali), Mathematics and Astrology during the period from 1471- 74 and was proficient in seven languages. Itticora became a wealthy merchant by trading black pepper even before the arrival of Vasco de Gama. But with the explorations and the discovery of sea routes to India by Vasco de Gama, he lost his monopoly in trading and so he settled in Florence and gained political influence by procuring ladies for prostitution. Itticora was the harbinger of the developments in the field of Mathematics and Astrology in Kerala to the European Philosophical realms in the 14th and 15th centuries and in turn was the missionary to Kerala of the Hypatian theorems. There exists an unapproved myth that Itticora was killed in a battle with the Portuguese whereupon he was transformed into a winged panther and steadily rose in the sky. Francis Itticora who had 79 children out of 18 maidens each from 18 different lands created an anti-Catholic cult, *Pathinettamkootukar* of utmost secrecy and established a Bible too. After death invaded him, he became their forefather, idol and God; he savoured the maidens offered to him by his people and bit their necks like blood-sucking vampires and drank their blood. Itticora, whose name appears nowhere in the approved histories is either the creator or the perpetrator of many crucial and noble events in history (2018).

Francis Itticora can be seen as a culmination of many paradoxes. "He was a saint, a lover, a murderer, a moral and an immoral person, a procurer, a smuggler, a slave merchant, a revolutionary and above all a conspirator" (2018). The enigmatic nature of the depiction of Francis Itticora evokes the feeling of uncanny. He is a familiar figure as a forefather of Xavier

Itticora but something prevents us from understanding his character completely. The people from whom we get to know about Itticora and their paranoiac mental state add to the uncanniness that looms around Cora. Bindhu, Rekha, Reshmi, *Kadhayezhuthu* and others sum up their quest for Xavier Itticora's filial roots thus, "Our investigation about Itticora doesn't lead us to any history but to a parallel culture which science or rationality cannot answer. An underground culture. Itticora is its icon. A secret Icon. They will never allow it to be exposed" (Ramakrishnan 102). The cult of Itticora is kept secret by many situations which together conjure up a distant yet familiar figure. Those who are part of the Cora myth and those who oppose it vehemently join together not to expose the Itticora myth. As Benny says, "we have to be careful confronting them [*Pathinettamkoottukar*]. They cannot say about Itticora out in the open. The Catholic Church cannot either admit that Itticora did exist. The matter is complicated" (104).

The secret sect *Pathinettamkoottukar* can be viewed as the double of the Francis Itticora who lives among them controlling their lives as *Corapappan* or as their 'God.' The mysterious life of Itticora and the mysteries behind the sect influence each other in evoking a feeling of uncanny. In the course of time, the 'double,' the *Pathinettamkoottukar*, fear Francis Itticora and they themselves become a thing of terror for others. The *Pathinettamkoottukar*'s fear of extinction ensures the firm establishment of the Cora cult who anticipate it as a means to transcend death. In the novel the "double," from having been an assurance of immortality becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. As Morigami in her speech reveals:

Francis Itticora who had 18 wives and 79 children in different parts of the world entrusted with his descendants the duty of popularizing the Hypatian philosophy. They later evolved into the secret sect called *Pathinettamkoottukar*. Unfortunately during the course of time they detached themselves from Hypatian philosophy completely and became superstitious, selfish and cruel. They use any vile means to get profit in business and these days their actions are shrouded in mystery. Morigami says that she suspects *Pathinettamkoottukar* behind the murder of Xavier Itticora. (Ramakrishnan 303)

The writer at the very outset of the novel gives the hint that "the story is not a history, but an attempt to cook up a story from hearsay, tall tales and lies" (19). But as the novel progresses, the novelist incorporates many historical figures and documents along with many pseudo documents thereby leaving the reader in sheer uncertainty. The uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced. It happens when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality. It may be true that the uncanny is something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and now returned.

The primitive fear of the dead is still strong within us and always ready to come to the surface at any opportunity. The feeling of uncanny is evoked when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed. The direct figure of the uncanny is the ghost. The spectacular and baffling ritual of *Coraykkukodukkal* is a case that precisely confirms to the point. Our primitive fear of the dead coming back to life, taking control of our lives is addressed in that ritual. In that ritual every girl on the onset of menstruation is to be offered to their idol, Francis Itticora, the next Christmas night. The family, which has a *Corapennu* (the girl who is offered to Cora) becomes rich in no time. The readers get a slice of the *Corakkukodupp* custom through Susanna's mesmerizing account of her experience as a '*Corapennu*.'

The ritual begins late in the evening, the *Corappennu*, adorned with new clothes and surrounded by women who have already been offered to Cora, sit in the middle. The chief of the house performs certain rituals using an ash coloured cross made of animal bone. The entire atmosphere sinks in the eerie music of some strange instruments. A banquet follows and the girl is given wine till she succumbs to its seductive trance. The girl is then stripped naked and whipped several times before she is sent to the *Nilavara*. It is believed that on that night *Corapappan* will descend from the sky to take the offering. If pleased with the girl, *Corapappan* would leave a love bite anywhere in the body of the girl and she was forbidden from disclosing anything that happened on the night she was offered to Cora. The whole ritual is cloaked in mystery. Apart from all these externalities, the text itself expresses a feeling of fear and awe. Susanna ends her narration of the incident thus:

The morning was just dawning; I woke up to some knocks on the *Nilavara* door. I opened my eyes with a passionate longing to see my Prince Charming who was sleeping within my hands. I was stunned! That gorgeous body has shriveled into something like an Egyptian Mummy. While I was trying to pull myself up, shuddered at this sight, it transformed into a small spider and crawled its way from my navel down to my left leg's thumb where it changed to a butterfly and fluttered away. The *Nilavara* was opened and when they let me out, I ran out like a child in search of that butterfly. (Ramakrishnan 67)

Human body occupies an ambiguous and even paradoxical dimension throughout the novel. It is very well evident from the ritualistic practice *Coraykkukodukkal*. The human body is depicted in its conflicting aspects - the sudden shifts that the human body undergoes from a sheer material reality having feast, drinking and pain, to one of mere abstraction in the *Nilavara* where, it is believed that *Corapappan* savours the chastity of the girl. What happens in the *Nilavara* is kept unknown from the reader. From a world of material existence which is familiar to everyone, the readers enter one of imagination where impossibilities can happen.

The uncanny is deeply concerned with all that is unrepresentable but it is through the very same that the unrepresentable finds its most accurate representation. The novel intriguingly captures the variants of ritualized sex. *Corakkukodupp* is a ritual unknown and unrepresentable. Both the readers and the characters in the novel read into it. This enigma finds different cultural representations exemplified through Susanna, Katrina, and The School (Bindu, Resmi and Rekha). The wine, the gothic tapestry, music, the perforated suit, the spider, the entangled snakes, the whipping and the perversions that accompany it are some of the common grounds between the three cultural trans-representations. What is even more interesting is that while *Corapappan* remains a constant in all the cultural representations, the *Corapennu* emerges as a mysterious variant through Katrina, Morigami, Violatta, Susanna, Leena and finally Bindu as Angelo Pereira. Bindu represents the *Corapennu* of the new episteme. In that sense, the *Corapennu* is a double of the trio (Bindu, Resmi and Rekha).

The trio do not realize that they themselves practice and are part of what they are hunting for. *Kadhayezhuthu's* spontaneous creativity of Vespuchi's experience as a *Corapennu* well fits into the jigsaw of representation. *Kadhayezhuthu* conjures up a story in order to free himself and Bindu from those who torture them, "a girl sees Itticora only once in her life. But it's alright I'm there in every nook and corner of the world. There sleeps within every man an Itticora. Your strength rests in awakening him. I just initiated you into that. Learn the rest by yourself" (235).

Xavier Itticora is on a voyage to reclaim his sexuality; he meets women of extra-ordinary sexual skill in different cultures, the different cultural representations of the *Corapennu*. Bindu, Resmi and Rekha have been performing the myth in their lives. Unfortunately, they do not realize this. Xavier Itticora is confronted with a return of the repressed; the latent consciousness of Corappapan. As soon as Bindu meets her double, Angelo Pereira, within herself, she meets death. The repressed returns, but is buried before it emerges. The concept of the 'double' and the primitive beliefs coming to life conjoin here like the entangled serpents in a *Corapennu's* navel. The uncanny here ascends through a strong feminine repressed sexual consciousness-the *Corapennu*. From Hypatia through Iyyalakotha to Bindu, one can read a legacy of subversion, consequential of a legacy of repression, forbidding sexual perversions and the dominance of women in love-making. These women become cartographies of a repressed feminine writing, a counter performance through their bodies.

The contemporary writers engage themselves in popular fiction genre for the purpose of subversion as a literary technique. Subversion plays an active role in the creation of uncanniness in the novel. T. D. Ramakrishnan in this novel subverts the accepted history of Kerala especially the history of Christianity. The uncanny unsettles history. The novelist quotes from Umberto Eco: "Why write novels? Rewrite history. The history that then comes true" (34). The novelist critically addresses the history of Kerala and creates a parallel history to the mainstream history of Kerala. The characters in the novel express their dissatisfaction with a singular history several times in the novel.

The novelist's suspicions are evident when he writes "it is the problem of thinking within the limits of the accepted history. That is why I keep my investigations out of the history" (Ramakrishnan 61). He further says:

Why not tell our history? It has been written by the Lords, the Nambhoodhiris and the Nairs. Do we have an exact account of the events that occurred 200 or 300 years ago? The Europeans have exact records of the year, the month and even the time of the events which happened about 500 years ago. (62)

The writer subverts the hegemonic history with the aesthetics of a history built on the premises of some assumptions and some imaginary documents and books. The thematic world of *Francis Itticora* travels across two worlds: one of pseudo documents and imaginary texts and the other being established scientific documents and texts or between religion and science (Rajasekharan 20). The novelist presents many pseudo documents in the guise of factual history. The essays on Mathematics appeared on the blog of Hashimoto Morigami, the short story written by the Spanish writer Isabella Swan *The True Story Of Hypatia*, the story of Francis Itticora written by Porinju B. A, titled *Nakshathracora Adhava Itticora Enna Navikan (Nakshathrcora or Itticora, the sailor)* of which only the proof copy is preserved. It is said that the secret sect *Pathinettamkoottkar* burned the copies of the novel on the eve of its publication, *Corayude Suvishesham (The Gospel of Cora)* written by Francis Itticora and translated by Alok Chandra Chattergie from among the documents kept by Xavier Cora, essays written by Claude Andhrew on Hypatia and the relation between Itticora and Raphael, *Aduppootty Padayola* of 16th century are some of them. These pseudo/imaginary documents are presented along with historical persons and facts and thus produce ambiguity in the reader about the reality status of the events presented in the novel. The reader is placed amidst the world of the known and the unknown

The unreliability of the narrator is a stumbling block that deters the reader from unravelling the text completely. The unreliable narrator destabilizes the reader's position. We are made unsure whether an impression reported by the narrator is to be accepted as actually happening within the context of the story or whether it is the product of the narrator's imagination. In both unreliable narrators increase the text's uncaniness by destabilizing the readers' evaluation of the reality status of the events. As readers, we are contaminated by the paranoia of the characters because of the uncertain reality status of the events in the text. The text takes advantage of the structural similarities between our activities of 'reading into' what we perceive as clues in the text and the characters' tendency to selectively read 'into' their experience. It is evident at the end of the novel when the narrator, *kadhayezhuthu*, hears the calling bell alarms ringing the last words of Thupak Amaru, "Ccollanan Pachacamac ricuy auccacunac yahuumly hichas cancufa" (Ramakrishnan 308). (Mother earth, witness how my enemies shed my blood). This can be seen as a paranoid delusion of the narrator.

We perceive some uncertainties about the regularities that we perceive. Are the coincidences accidental or do they indicate a plan? This does not mean that the text forces upon the reader the obsessive conviction of a paranoid individual that his or her interpretations are the correct one. Nevertheless the text represents in its reality, a reality in selective fashion and guides the interpretive activity of the reader. The uncanny aspect of the novel at the level of the reader lies ultimately in their helplessness to trust the narrators or to take sides with any of the characters in the novel. The name given to the narrator of the novel, *kadhayezhuthu* which means the very 'act of writing', itself throws light on the unreliability of the narration. The reader is almost left alone without being able to take sides with any of the characters in the novel. How could the reader possibly like Xavier Itticora, the cannibal, or Francis Itticora, a paradoxical figure or the elite prostitutes in 'the School' or the secret sect *Pathinettamkoottukar* or any of the characters in the novel?

In the final part of the novel Morigami makes a speech at the Gandhi University. She says, "I have often suspected a mathematical order in many things which we habitually call coincidences" (Ramakrishnan 305). True coincidences are uncanny because they mean a deviation from the randomness we come to expect from experience. The author's exploitation of our willing suspension of disbelief alerts onto the epistemological foundations we depend on to evaluate the reality status of an event.

The representation of the 'uncanny' in literature has a more 'fertile province' than the 'uncanny' in real life (Freud 10). The uncanny in literature creates the characters' paranoia on the level of the reader's aesthetic experience. Every piece of literature itself is in some sense uncanny because it is populated by un-dead figures; they exist in the boundary between the animate and the inanimate because they are animated by our imagination (Falkenberg 191). Uncanny presented in the novel *Francis Itticora* lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations. Attempts at analyzing the ambiguity of the text reduce the unfamiliar and thus runs the risk of repressing its uncanny effect. The unfamiliar and mysterious aspect of the texts can never be completely replaced by an explanation which integrates unfamiliar into the familiar context. This logic explains well the incomprehensibility of *Francis Itticora* and other elements that are left unconnected in the novel.

The uncanny aesthetic, disturbing and unsettling, is the natural artistic by-product of a cultural response to postmodern living. Postmodern techniques like self-reflexivity, pastiche,

intertextuality or the blurring of fact and fiction not only can serve the purpose of metafictional play or stylistic radicalization but can also generate profound uncanny effects. *Francis Itticora* weaves the unfamiliar past in the space time of today leaving many ambiguities and uncertainties. The novelist's genius lies in making the familiar turn into something strange.

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