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SEEING AND READING: THE EARLY MALAYALAM NOVEL AND SOME QUESTIONS OF VISIBILITY

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In Chandu Menon's novel *Indulekha,* there is a moment when Kesavan Namboodiri, fascinated by the modern world, describes a new kind of object:

> Siva, Siva, Narayana, Narayana! What can I say! The cleverness of these white men is truly astounding. Lakshmi, you will be amazed if you see it. What a wonder! The spinning mill which we hear so much about is actually an iron wheel. This wheel makes all the yarn. And what turns this wheel? Smoke, pure smoke! But this smoke does not hurt our eyes like in our kitchens. The factory has a long tail raised upwards, like the flagpole in a temple. They say it is for the smoke to pass, but I have my doubts. There must be some trick inside, which these clever white men will not reveal.[1]

The factory is presented here as a new, illegible object, a locus of obscurity and concealment. This tricky object can be

[1] O. Chandu Menon, *Indulekha* [1889] (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, 1978), pp. 96-7. All translations from Malayalam texts are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

tamed only through an activity of readings, which incorporates it into a world of familiar objects and stable meanings:

> Smoke is a very potent substance. Does the smoke of the rituals (*homam*) not have power? I suspect that this is also a *homam* for some deity. Perhaps some idols or *chakras* are kept inside the flagpole. Who knows? Perhaps the deity likes this *homam* very much and the factory turns because of its blessing. Who knows? Only Lord Narayana knows.[2]

For Kesavan Namboodiri, the spinning mill becomes legible as a familiar sign when it is transformed as a temple in disguise, concealing supernatural powers within its interior. Involved in this is a process of translation which turns objects into signs, and an experience of seeing into one of reading. Variants of this recur as important motifs in many of the early novels written in Malayalam. In *Indulekha*, as in many other early novels, the inaccuracy or inappropriateness of such translations becomes an object of humour. We are invited to laugh not merely at the characters' ignorance of fact but also at the farcical floundering of traditional subjects in front of incongruous objects and incompatible modern spaces.[3]

The satiric representation of Suri Namboodiri in *Indulekha* is pivoted on his misdirected translation of unfamiliar universes, where he reads the polite gestures of a modern, Western sociability as sure signs of an extreme, delectable promiscuity. Suri has two white acquaintances whom he refers to as 'Meghadantan' and 'Makshaman'.[4] This appears as another instance of inadequate translation, but on a closer look reveals a double inadequacy.

2 Ibid., p. 98.

3 Kizhakkeppatt Raman Kutty Menon's *Parangodi Pannayam* (1892), which parodies the emerging formulae of the new genre of the novel, represents this incongruous object in the figure of a white man riding a horse, which is mistaken to be a fiendish, centaur-like figure. See George Irumbayam, ed., *Nalu Novelukal* (Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1985), p. 229.

4 *Indulekha*, op. cit., 112 and 125.

First, a proper name, which by its very nature defies translation, is misread as a sign with translatable meaning. Then it becomes the object of an inadequate translation into the familiar form of proper names in Malayalam, with a possible promise—even if incoherent—of meaning. Translation of names becomes possible only when they cease to be proper names and refer not to unique objects but to classes. There is a confusion between designation and description here, perhaps indicative of a pre-modern conception of the proper name.

When 'Makshaman' introduces his wife to Suri, she extends her arm to shake hands with him:

> Madamma sayippu held my hand—goose pimples rose all over my body.... I held her hand for a very long time. I found her figure very enjoyable. The fool Makshaman stood close by, observing all this with a smile.[5]

The distance between the world where these signs of a modern, Western sociability originate and the world from which Suri performs his reading indicate the distance between two modes of visibility and legibility. They refer to two different ways in which objects may appear to the perceiving subject as occupying a coherent and meaningful world. In order to make the new object (the factory or the white woman's hand-shake) legible, in order for it to appear as possessing value or meaning, it needs to become part of a world of coherent objects, which needs to be imagined or assumed as existing. The principles of this coherence come from the world of the floundering reader of signs (Kesavan or Suri). The reader projects familiar sorts of relations on to the new object and attempts to construct an 'original' world for the object in terms of these relations. The reader is involved in an activity of speculative translation. This, however, does not fully assuage the sense of incoherence which had set the reading process in motion in the first place, and a sense of instability—a sense of the lack of coherence of the translated object—persists,

5 Ibid., p. 113.

manifesting itself in the subject's attempt to regain mastery by adopting postures of wonder or fear or ridicule.

It is not accidental that many of the early novels in Malayalam display a fascination with collections of objects—these can be seen as located at an intersection of the co-ordinates of coherence and value. *Indulekha* presents two kinds of collections. The first is Suri's collection of valuable objects, all gold and silver, which he prepares to carry with him on his visit to Indulekha's house: "On a table was spread out about fifteen golden shawls, about twenty special *mundu*, several rings, a box made of solid silver with a gold handle on the lid, beetle leaf rolls made of gold, a silver jug, silver lamps, silver jars, a gold watch which can be worn as a necklace with a gold chain.... "[6] In contrast to this, there is a collection of 'English sorts of objects, beautifully arranged' in Indulekha's rooms.[7] This second collection of objects, laid out in a certain style in order to constitute a new domestic interior, is central to the discursive elaboration of new space—that of modern cultivation and style—in the early novel. This can be seen especially in the description of the rooms of the educated Nair men in Malabar or in Madras. Round tables, reclining chairs, painted mirrors, embroidered covers, glass lamps, carpets and, sometimes in the centre, glass cupboards of books in English and in Sanskrit, beautifully bound and embossed with golden lettering—these objects conjure up a new world of coherence, the universe of a new civility and new values.[8] The two sorts of collections mentioned here are distinguished from each other not merely in terms of the nature of the objects and of their interrelations, but also in terms of the subject's implication in them. The mode of enjoyment of objects in the new domestic interior involves a new set of acts on the subject's part, different from those which characterise the old notion of the collection of precious objects. The history of self-fashioning in the early novel is in some sense inseparable from the story of the differentiation of these objects and their collections.

6 Ibid., p. 123.

7 Ibid., p. 37.

8 Cheruvalathu Chathu Nair, *Meenakshi* [1890] (Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1990), p. 41. See also, Padu Menon, *Lakshmikesavam* [1892], in George Irumbayam, ed., *Nalu Novelukal*, op. cit., pp. 131-32.

A prominent site where the subject and the world of objects become intimately intertwined is that of clothing. Suri's clothes link value with traditional signs of wealth, according to a schema which sees in gold the original and authentic sign of wealth and value:

> As soon as the palanquin reached the front courtyard, its door was opened. Suddenly, a golden form jumped out. Yes, it was truly an idol in gold, a golden statue. Head covered in a gold cap, body covered in a gold shirt and gold-coloured dhoti, gold-gilded slippers on the feet, gold rings on all ten fingers, on top of all a golden shawl thrown over the shirt and a gold-cased mirror in the hand to look at oneself. Gold, gold, all gold. What can I say about the glow when [Suri] Namboodiri stepped out from the palanquin into the mid-day sun! Around him in a one-metre circle the glare of the sun turned yellow, acquiring a golden glow.[9]

In contrast, Indulekha's clothes indicate a sense of taste which turns away from ornamentation and jewellery to notions of a simple elegance in clothing:

> Indulekha was not very fond of jewellery. Her mother, grandmother, or uncle had to plead with her to make her wear special ornaments on festive days.... However, Indulekha took particular interest in her clothes. *Onnara* and *melmundu* with special weave and gold border had to be kept ready, white and clean, every morning and evening when she bathed. She was always seen with a white *melmundu* with gold border covering her breasts.[10]

9 *Indulekha*, op. cit., p. 130.

10 Ibid., p. 38.

The dominance of gold in Suri's attire is contrasted with the elegant cleanliness of Indulekha's white clothes with a golden border, underlining a difference in taste which involves a new relation between wealth and value. Gold as a sign of wealth is subjected to two different norms of coherence in the styles of Suri and Indulekha. While gold occupies the position of substance in Suri's attire, it becomes a sign in Indulekha's clothing. It is by minimising its substantiality that gold is transformed into a sign, making it indicate rather than embody wealth and value. The contrast between these two systems is presented as one between uncivilised wealth on the one hand, and taste on the other. The discourse on taste is anchored here in a minimal display of the corpus of riches, and in a concealment which nonetheless indicates the presence of riches through a margin or a *parergon*, which makes manifest what the substance or *ergon* has renounced as vulgar.

One may, at first sight, be tempted to characterise the difference between these two modes of object-coherence as that between a world of schematic visibility and one of what can be called 'secular visibility'. In the former mode, objects, the norms of their coherence, and the implication of the subject in them seem to be available in terms of a schematic organisation of value. Gold, like the gold standard in the evolution of money, is the prime example of such schematism. In contrast, in the latter mode, objects seem to occupy an empirical space of uniform visibility. Yet, this may be too simplistic an opposition—the latter mode, on a closer look, reveals itself to be an equally stylized world, involving a semiology of indication and concealment, and a new 'civil' style of behaviour on the part of the subjects. We shall try, in the following pages, to explore how the discourse of the early novels in Malayalam try to negotiate the distance between these two modes of object coherence and how this negotiation assumes the form of a new discursive production.

In his Preface to *Indulekha*, Chandu Menon characterises his new project in terms of two metaphors—he presents his novel as involving a new mode of visibility, and a new and complex engagement with translation. The history of visual representation provides Chandu Menon with analogies for explicating the former:

> Before the European style of oil painting began to be known and appreciated in this country, we had painted, in defiance of all possible, existence, pictures of Vishnu as half man and half lion, pictures of the deity of the chase, pictures of brute-headed monsters, pictures of the god Krishna, with his legs twisted and twined into postures in which no biped could stand and blowing a cowherd's horn, pictures of Ananthan wearing a thousand cobra hoods, pictures of gigantic demons, and all these executed with a touch and colouring so coarse as to banish all idea of chiaroscuro, perspective and proportion.[11]

Against this mode of visual representation, Chandu Menon places a new emergent form of visibility:

> A taste has set in for pictures, whether in oil or water colours, in which shall be delineated men, beasts, and things according to their true appearance, and the closer that a picture is to nature the greater the honour paid to the artist. Just in the same way, if stories composed of incidents true to natural life, and attractively and gracefully written, are once introduced, then by degrees the old order of books, filled with the impossible and the supernatural, will change, yielding place to the new.[12]

It is equally important to remember the second problematic of self-explication in Chandu Menon's Preface—that of translation. Menon characterised the project of *Indulekha* as an outcome of failed attempts at translating English novels into Malayalam. He felt that it was difficult to make a written translation which would

[11] O. Chandu Menon, 'Preface', *Indulekha*, op. cit., pp. 20-1. Dumergue's translation, amended.

[12] Ibid.

adequately communicate the effect of the original since the translator could not have recourse to the explanatory and expressive resources of oral retelling. Furthermore, the results would not be aesthetically pleasing "if one made a straight translation into Malayalam of those scenes from English novels where *srngara* dominates as *rasa*."[13] This led Chandu Menon to write a "novel book in Malayalam somewhat like the novel books in English."[14] These problems of translation relate to appropriateness and economy, to the rules of *auchityam* which allow the objects of representation to cohere in a new discursive space. For this new coherence, a new propriety, a new notion of *auchityam* would need to emerge, which cannot be articulated except in terms of a difficult process of translation which comprises moments of failure and production in an inseparable unity.

Some signs of this difficulty can be found in the narrative discourse of *Indulekha*. The problem of translation here needs to be understood in its extended and etymological sense as bearing meaning across borders, making connections across discontinuous spaces. One such sign is a certain 'bilingual' repetition which Chandu Menon uses in order to present Madhavan's sense of shock at the rumour that Indulekha has married Suri Namboodiri. Menon's narrator describes this not once but twice, using the resources and the tropes of two distinct worlds of discourse:

> As he listened to this, Madhavan immediately understood the matter. Not only in his mind but all over his body, he felt a sense of shock or an intense pain, as if he had touched the electric box called the battery when that machine is turned on.[15]

[13] Ibid, p. 18.

[14] Ibid. See, for a discussion of *Indulekha* in terms of the problematic of translation, Susie Tharu and Anita Devasya, "Englishising *Indulekha*", in *Critical Theory: Indian and Western*, ed. Prafulla C. Kar (New Delhi: Pencraft, 1997).

[15] O. Chandu Menon, *Indulekha*, op. cit., p. 222.

This is soon followed by the following exchange:

> *Madhavan:* Is what I heard just now about Madhavi right?
> *Sankara Sastrikal:* Yes.
> The word 'yes' was like a lightning; it was the very fire of lightning. Madhavan's face and his body turned ashen, burnt-out. Like the transformation of Nala when the serpent Karkodaka bit him, one might say.[16]

The two descriptions engage in a set of relations with each other, which cannot be easily understood in terms of complementarity or contrast. It is not as it one description completes the other and forms a whole; nor is it the case that one annuls the other and proposes a more adequate presentation. Through the two descriptions two discontinuous discursive worlds are juxtaposed with each other. The coherence between these two worlds is not guaranteed prior to their presentation. Coherence becomes available—it is produced—only through the act of presentation, the act of juxtaposition. In other words, the new discursive space which these passages inhabit is produced through their difference and mutual supplementation. This new space marked by a productive incoherence is that of the novel. The procedure of engagement between the two passages can be seen as a productive mechanism for the discourse of the novel. The failure of translation and the difficulty of achieving *auchityam* in translation here generates a new discourse of dual presentations, with their differing notions of appropriateness.

Another sign of the difficulty of translation can be seen in Chandu Menon's description of Indulekha's body. Chandu Menon says in his Preface to *Indulekha* that he "has written this book in the kind of Malayalam, that is ordinarily spoken at home,"[17] distinguishing it from Sanskritised Malayalam, both in pronunciation and syntax. This is by and large followed in the

[16] Ibid., p. 223.

[17] Ibid., p. 21.

narration, until we come across the first figuration of Indulekha's beauty. The language changes all of a sudden, and syntactic and rhetorical structures begin imitating schematic models of description deriving from the Sanskrit poetic tradition:

> I confess that it is impossible to describe the joy and the happiness and the fervour and the excitement and the intense desire and the grief that arises in the minds of men when they see Indulekha's complexion which resembles the colour of gold, her teeth which resemble gems, her lips red like coral, her eyes which make dark flowers feel like slaves, her face which has the glow of red lotuses, her dark hair, her heavy breasts, and her slender waist.[18]

The structure of this sentence imitates the paraphrases of Sanskrit poems, and invites the reader's attention to a change in register. An enhanced sense of solemnity is introduced through the oblique indication of a schematic world even in the midst of a world of secular visibility. The early novels in European languages also make use of such a device at times, although it is often the contrast between the schematic and the naturalistic that occupy the centre of that device.[19] The schematic in such instances is revealed as a case of exaggeration, incommensurable with the naturalistic delineation of the rest of the fictional universe. This may result in the ridiculous, or in the presentation of a sentiment for beauty which demands the reader's indulgence rather than his/her rational assessment according to naturalistic norms. In contrast to this, Chandu Menon's use of the Sanskrit poetic tradition seems to authenticate his description of the heroine in a way which no naturalistic description could match. The perceived object is seen as demanding an iconography for appropriate description or presentation. The unavailability of such a schema would create difficulties of *auchityam*, similar to the problem of

[18] Ibid.

[19] *Don Quixote* and the novels of Fielding and Sterne are well-known examples.

propriety Chandu Menon thematized in his Preface.[20] While describing the female body, a schematic gaze needs to be deployed even within a world of secular visibility. However, such a schema may not provide an unproblematic anchoring point for description as in the world of the Sanskrit *kavya* from which it has been borrowed. We saw in our earlier example that the juxtaposition of passages belonging to different discursive worlds need to be seen as a productive mechanism within the early novel. If this were the case, the Sanskritised description of the body can be seen as part of a larger, productive device where it interacts with other modes of figuring and viewing the body.[21]

The problems of propriety and iconography can be seen as entailing two further issues—those of the norms of felicity and of the meaning of bodily signs. These are indeed interconnected, since felicity—among other things—implies the presence of physical signs which signify felicitous attributes in the person's nature. The bodily descriptions in many early novels are open to a reading based on conventions of interpretation of bodily signs, such as *samudrikashtam*. The presentation of such signs govern not merely the unchanging attributes of the person's inner nature (*swabhavam*), but also the physical signs of transitory (*sanchari*) and permanent (*sthai*) emotions. Here, the iconography and the hermeneutics opened by convention does not seem to stabilise the body's hidden meanings, as these very conventions are open to reproduction, imitation, or mimicry in a secular, non-schematic space. This is particularly so as two distinct traditions of interpreting bodily signs can be seen at play here. One is that of physiognomic signs which allow one to read the inner attributes of a person. The second is that of theatrical representation, where an actor can train himself in the production of signs which

[20] For a discussion of some issues involved in the presentation of the body in the early novels in Malayalam, see my *Styles of the Self: The Subject and the Act of Self-Articulation in Modern Malayalam Writing*, monograph submitted to the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1999. See, especially, chapter 3: "Representation and Desire in the Early Malayalam Novel."

[21] See ibid. for a more detailed discussion.

simulate a certain character with identifiable inner attributes. While the first claims to be an authentic reading based on an originary correspondence between the inner and the outer, the second undercuts such claims of authenticity and makes any correspondence between the inner and the outer a fabrication. The schematic, conventional sign, separated from its original locus and put into circulation in a world of uniform visibilities, does not possess any inviolateness. It opens itself to a groundless repetition in the theatrical enactment of iconographic and conventional signs. In other words, in the world of the novel, even when elements from conventional physical semiologies induce a stabilisation in terms of propriety, they are constantly shadowed by the possibility of doubling and deceptive enactment. In so far as the signs of love or of valour can be learned from convention and be read, they can also be fabricated as in theatrical practice.

Thus, in the early novels, the world of appearances, even when it is subjected to a schematic reading which finds it legible, does not fully guarantee an 'authentic' intelligibility. The problem of mistranslation which we began with is an indication of this lack of guarantee. Several different strands in the early novel in Malayalam seem to engage in different ways with the problem of legibility and of the unmooring of the world of appearances. The constitution of subjectivities in the discursive space of the novel is intimately linked to the problem of illegibility and its fictional articulation or resolution. Many of the early novels display mechanisms for generating, and for controlling the consequences of, an unreliable world of appearances.

In *Indulekha*, for example, this takes the form of a misprision which results from the engineered production of a false discourse and from Madhavan's hasty reading which accepts it without sufficient reflection or interrogation. The subject is at the wrong place or at the wrong time—there is a mismatch between the subject's location in space and time, and the places or moments from which truth may be apprehended. The resolution of this mismatch takes the form of a temporal unravelling at the end of which the elements which went into disarray at the moment of misprision are represented in a new arrangement. The trope of the journey which recurs in many of the early novels in Malayalam is often the site of this unfolding. The journey through unfamiliar spaces leads the hero back home where truth and resolution are discovered.[22] These divergent spaces may not necessarily refer to a single system of topography where translation between different territories is possible. For example, Dilip Menon, in his analysis of Potheri Kunjambu's *Sarawativijayam*, highlights the presence of two different forms of territorial imagination in the novel—the journey of Kuberan Namboodiri follows a sacred geography centred around Kashi, while the progress of the *pulaya*, Marathan, takes places in a secular geography of colonial modernity of which Madras forms the centre.[23] The mutual translatability of these territories is an issue that the novel addresses and produces in a problematic fashion rather than assumes as pre-existing fictional articulation.

In most of the early novels, journeys are about traversing spaces of uncertain visibility and unstable coherence The motif of the journey, in other words, is intimately linked to an encounter with *heterotopoi* (other spaces) where the self-certainties of the subject are put into question. In many of the early novels in Malayalam, especially those written in Malabar, urban spaces and the spaces of the journey constitute the *heterotopoi* par excellence. There are several stories written in Malayalam in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth which speak eloquently about the deceptiveness of these spaces. In *Indulekha*, Madhavan is robbed of his belongings at a railway station in the context of an 'urban' interaction.[24]

22 The recurrence of the motif of the journey is, again, an object of parody in *Parangodi Parinayam*, where the hero returning home to save his beloved from imaginary adversities, gets engrossed in music while on the train forgets to get off at the right junction, and arrives at another town in the morning, thus pointlessly making the journey home into a journey of wandering around.

23 Dilip M. Menon, "Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*", *Studies in History*, 13:2 (July-December 1997), pp. 291-312, especially pp. 307-12.

24 *Indulekha*, op. cit., pp. 246-51.

Kesari Nayanar and Moorkothu Kumaran, among others, have written stories about preposterous acts of deception taking place in towns or on trains.[25] The norms of visibility which prevail in the *tharavadu* may fail the subject in these other spaces, the subject may fail to 'see' certain crucial traces in the urban world, and may fail to 'read' signs—be they human or material—correctly.

In Chandu Menon's second novel, *Sarada* the motif of *heterotopos* assumes a new significance—the heroine's origin is located in an 'other space', as she was born of a marriage which took place away from the protective, visible ambit of the *tharavadu,* in another territory and another kingdom in India.[26] This poses great difficulties for relocating the heroine in her *tharavadu,* as her origin and prior history lie hidden in the obscurity of the *beterotopos.* "What if she is not really the child of the woman from this *tharavadu*?", asks the *karanavan,* "what if she is the offspring of a liaison between her father and a Muslim woman?" If these doubts are well-founded, then all the previously coherent spaces where she now moves are open to the danger of a ritual pollution which would destroy their schematic coherence. The inhabitants of the *tharavadu* in *Sarada* wonder if the temple pond—the epitome of ritual coherence—has been polluted by the girl's bath. As long as the question of miscegenation is not resolved, all spaces remain open to the threat of impurity. And the problem of contaminated origins cannot be settled so long as it is shrouded in the obscure mystery of the *heterotopos,* where familiar norms of vision and verification do not obtain.

Chandu Menon outlined the trajectory of the conflict between these spaces in *Sarada* in terms of a legal battle, where a natural

25 See, for example, Vengayil Kunjiraman Nayanar, "Madirasi Pithalattam", *Kesari Nayanarude Krithikal* (Calicut Mathrubhoomi, 1987), pp. 24-7; and Moorkothu Kumaran, "Ente Theevandiyatra", *Mookothu Kumarante Kathakal: Sampoorna Samaharam* (Calicut: Mathrubhoomi, 1987), pp. 23-7.

26 See O. Chandu Menon, *Sarada* (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 1996).

and authentic visibility may triumph over a fraudulent and artificial one which claims empirical veracity. However, Chandu Menon did not live long enough to complete the novel. Several later novelists tried to complete the novel by writing sequels, and one among them was C. Anthappai. In his *Sarada,* the resolution is made possible through the use of a magical object which can traverse the distance between nature and artifice, and link the dark spaces of the *heterotopos* and the familiar world of the everyday. This special object is the photograph. The photograph produced here is that of Sarada's family:

> [In the photograph] there are the true images of Krishnan, Raman Menon, Sarada, Kalyani Amma and Sankara Menon. Although Kalyani Amma is dead nobody would say that it is not her image that one sees in the picture. Even if somebody says it, it won't stand [in a court of law].... Krishna Menon looked closely at the picture again. Kalyani Amma's resemblance is very much imprinted on the child's face.[27]

The photograph is seen as immune from the logic of the artifice and thus from the unstable logic of *heterotopoi.*

> They are photographic images, aren't they? One cannot make them through forgery, they are dependent only on the inviolable law of nature. Thus there is no need to think in that direction.[28]

The photograph, the modern representational object par excellence, is seen as the thread that would lead the subject out from the labyrinth of unmoored appearances. In Western discourses on art, the photograph may appear as a non-natural and non-artistic object linked to technological reproducibility, but in the early novel in Malayalam, it appears as an incontrovertible legal trace, preserving a mode of visibility of

27 George Irumbayam, ed., *Anthappayiyude Novalukal, Chandu Menonte Sardayum.* Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1994), pp. 149-50.

28 Ibid, p. 207.

the true nature of things and immune from the deceptiveness of artifice. Could this not be the exemplary space of secular visibility dreamt of in Chandu Menon's Preface to *Indulekha*, the visibility of 'things according to their true appearance', even if belied by his novelistic practice?

The photograph, however, was later incorporated into the novel's new imaginary and is subjected to the instabilities that reign there. Firstly, the photograph opened a paradox where technology is seen as the ultimate guarantee against artifice and forgery; a form of technological mediation that is solely 'dependent...on the inviolable law of nature.' Secondly, the family photograph, like the family portraits of Ravi Varma, was part of the production of a new institutional locus of visibility, a new schema organised around the emerging notions of domestic relations and affective spaces.

The paradoxes around the photograph in its function as trace multiply when we turn to the occurrence of this motif in Potheri Kunjambu's *Saraswativijayam* (1892). It is through the evidence of a photograph that the supposedly murdered *pulaya*, Maraththan, *is* conclusively identified as the judge who tries the case of this murder years later This picture was taken before Maraththan's conversion to Christianity. The discursive location of this picture of the 'true appearance of things' is no less interesting than that of the family photograph in Anthappai's *Sarada*. A German missionary in *Saraswativijayam* testifies to the history of this photograph:

> I took that photograph when I was informed that some scholars in England needed to know the physiognomy (*dehaprakrati*) of members of various castes in Kerala. The man you see in this picture had come to join the Christian faith. If his physiognomy were to undergo some change later, it would be important to understand the extent of that Change. These images would be very useful in later years for scholars who inquire into the physiognomy and the state of civilization of people from various countries all over the world. This picture, therefore, was taken before he was admitted into Christianity.[29]

Here the photograph appears as part of the authentic technology of the ethnographic eye, the equipment which would perceive and preserve traces for the production of a truth otherwise unavailable. It is, however, interesting that, after seeking to establish 'natural' relations between caste and physiognomy on the basis of a racialist argument, this passage goes on to project this naturalist logic to an autonomous, non-natural, free act, that of conversion. There is a collapse of the distinction between nature and freedom here. This paradox may perhaps be embedded in the complex relations between arguments against caste and the position of 'conversion' as an anti-caste possibility in the discourse of lower-caste reform movements in nineteenth-century Kerala. The photograph, the quintessential image of a secular visibility, seems to function here as the vehicle of a new schematic gaze which seeks to locate the free subject of conversion in terms of a modern, racialist semiology of the body.

Now we shall turn to a third inscription of the photographic image in the early novel, which would take us to a different configuration of the discursive possibilities we have engaged with so far. In *Premamrtham* (1914), a later novel of C.V. Raman Pillai, one of the main characters, Thampi, is shown the photograph of girl whom he might consider as a possible bride. Thampi's first look reveals to him an idealized image of virtue shining through the self-transcending beauty of bodily features, even making it necessary for him to apply an inner rather than an external physical vision to the picture:

> His fleshly vision clouded over. For the first time, the eyes of love that his inner body possessed became capable of sight.... What these eyes saw was not a form created by the arrangement of light and shade, but the purity of a slender virgin leaning

[29] Potheri Kunjambu, *Saraswativijayam* (1892), 2nd edn. 1937, reprinted in George Irumbayam, ed. *Naalu Novelukal*, op. cit, p. 119.

> on a chair immersed in intense thought.... Thampi felt that the beauty of a divine virgin was standing in front of him draped in innocence and assuming the sublime state of femininity.[30]

Thampi is tempted to meet the woman, the original of which the photograph is a copy. At her house, he encounters yet another photograph, which contradicts the first image:

> ...if the second photograph is accurate, it is a certain elegant seductiveness that is dominant in the woman whom he has come to visit.... As it was a full-length portrait one could see the specious exuberance of her hair. If a girl is ready to comb her hair and hold it up before a photographer displaying the taste of a seductress, she was untouched by the venerable trait of modesty, and Thampi knew that she did not possess the right qualities to become the spouse of the heir of Chambrangottu *tharavdu*... He put the photograph down on the table. Panikker's hopes dimmed. He said: 'Same girl in both pictures. You can see the original herself if you wish.'[31]

Thampi agrees, but the confusion of these images is further compounded by the complexity of the original:

> Amidst the black exuberance of her hair which indicated the profusion of natural riches, her face shone with the glory of the golden image of a goddess...and Thampi felt that this face was not familiar to him from either of the photographs he had seen. Radiant like the full moon, on that face played—a childlike innocence as well as some elements of frivolity....[32]

This image of the girl's face casts a spell on Thampi, a spell further enhanced when she begins to play on the veena and sing.

[30] C. V. Raman Pillai, *Premamrtham*, [1914] (Trivandrum: L. J. Fernandes and Sons, City Press. 1953), p. 100.

[31] Ibid., p. 106.

[32] Ibid, p. 108.

However, this moment of abandon is also the moment of the spell's undoing. She begins to sing a *srngara padam*, 'What have I, done, my love, to displease thee...' with a slight smile at the aptness of the words.

> Thampi's taste identified in the bluish glow of the singer's eyes the flicker of an animal emotion. On her red lips tender like buds, glowed a fire that could rage and burn down the holy abode of matrimony—thus he analysed her natural propensities. A sudden awareness shone inside him that the beautiful fingers which were now playing on the veena as if they were dancing on the hood of Kaliya, those same fingers could turn into serpents with forked tongues for the man who would be embraced by them.[33]

Here, the photograph, instead of putting an end to the unstable movement of appearances, initiates and compounds a series of repetitions where each instance destabilises the earlier ones. The photograph does not function here as a reliable natural sign, but accentuates—through the multiplication of appearances—a problem of reliability inherent in natural appearance itself. The subject here reads the fact as a theatre of fleeting traces; his retina tries to capture momentary variations in the face and examine them as if in a photographic image. Later, the hero of the novel, Kartha, encounters the same series of appearances and subdues them by judging the first picture as an authentic image and the second as the work of a tasteless photographer. However, he experiences a deeper instance of misprision, confusing the appearance of his beloved and that of her mother, which results in the destabilization of his entire world.

Premamrtham is presented as a satire on the limits of empirical vision and the Western idea of civility built on it. Against a uniformally available and verifiable visibility, the discourse of the novel pitches conceptions regarding perception from the Indian tradition, such as *adhyaropam* or the propensity to project

[33] Ibid., p. 110.

subjective images on to things. Parallel to this, the novel also presents the narratological trope of custom. This is epitomized in the taboo against seeing one's mother-in-law, prevalent at the time in southern Travancore. The inadvertent transgression of this taboo occasions Kartha's misprision and the sequence of major complications in the novel. The world of custom and tradition seem to indicate one mode of visibility and one way of moving around in the world, while the notion of an empirically reliable vision produces a different picture of the world and demands a different set of norms of agency from the subject. C.V.'s novels provide a discursive locus for the confrontation and the mutual contamination of these antagonistic worlds. The organisation of visibility in his fictional universe bear the marks of this encounter.

C.V.'s entire fictional work may be seen as constituting the problem of uncertain visibility as the very condition of novelistic discourse. The fatal confusion of the hero in *Premamrtham* is described in terms of a floundering vision and the eruption of an apocalyptic darkness:

> Kartha's anxious lifeless eyes saw the destruction and the confounding of the three worlds. The luxuriant hair that attracted him at their first meeting, from head to foot (*padantam*), from toe to crown (*anguleekesaram*), the beauty that immersed him in the ocean of bliss, in the... of a dark snake... Unbearable, so horribly unbearable!! ... The lamp in the room went out in sparks like the apocalyptic fire at the end of the world. The universe was immersed in darkness.[34]

The rhetoric of the dark which makes its compelling presence felt here is not unique to *Premamrtham*—it pervades all the major novels of C. V., determining their techniques of narration and description. Right from the early pages of his first novel, *Marthanda Varma*, (1891) C. V.'s descriptions work by producing an 'obscure excess', through a procedure which renders perception

[34] Ibid., p. 197.

difficult by the presentation of a multitude of images in superimposed layers.[35] These images do not function as determinate signs but signify by unspecified suggestion, and their accretion produces effects in excess is of the reader's capacity for a totalizing comprehension.

C.V.'s major novels are often discussed under the rubric of historical romance. However, it is seldom acknowledged that the availability of the experience of history, the presencing of history, is itself a problem which these novels engage with. C.V.'s historical novels attempt to conjure up a world which possesses schematic coherence. The story of Marthanda Varma, the eighteenth-century king of Travancore, often regarded as the story of the formation of a state through the destruction and subjugation of a world of older ties and customs becomes, in C.V.'s hand, a story of the protection and restatement of custom in the face of impunities and corruption. The king's body, a fragile object if viewed in terms of an empirical visibility, is elevated in these texts as the most sacred and transcendent object of vision. The king often appears in C.V.'s texts under disguise—be it as an ordinary citizen to observe the state of everyday life in the kingdom, as a spy to investigate conspiracies, or as a brahman in order to escape the pursuit of enemies. The image of the king is rarely available in its full presence to the gaze of the subject or of the reader. The king sometimes appears seated behind a curtain, watching a wrestling contest as in *Rama Raja Bahadur* (1918-19). Even when he appears with all the attributes of regal splendour, the gaze that is directed at him does not appropriate this image directly or fully. Ritualized gestures of reverence prevent the loyal subject from looking straight at the king's body:

> When he guessed that the king was inside the building [watching his performance in the wrestling bout], Azhakan Pillai's soul bathed in an ocean of delight. Immediately he straightened his dhoti, adopted the posture of ritual obeisance

[35] C.V. Raman Pillai, *Marthanda Varma* [1891] (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 1999). See also my 'Frames of the Translator', *Summertill Review*, May 1999.

by folding one arm over his chest and covering his mouth with the other. Standing with his feet folded inwards, he placed his fingers on his shoulders according to the old custom of the southern parts, and bent down to see clearly the king's sacred body and to bow down before that only god visible to the eye, protector to him and to his country.[36]

However, as the shadow of this luminous vision emerge the unstable spaces of deception and intrigue, of disguise and deformation, which form the rhetorical body of C.V.'s novels. These spaces are generated through the productive deployment of schematic and the performative elements. The schematic dimension of appearances functions as an incitement to iconographic interpretation, and corrodes the stability of empirical spaces in C.V.'s work. What initially appears as an ordinary object comes to have an iconographic meaning which needs to be read carefully. However, this initial promise of legibility is attenuated by a method of description which makes all characters appear like figures in a performance space, moving according to rules of stylization. This process is further complicated by the use of a variety of forms of oral utterance in C.V.'s novels. Oral discourses in these texts are sites of a contest between an empirical authenticity an exaggerated performativity. One might miss the point of C.V.'s artifice if his differentiation of oral discourses were to be regarded merely as an index of the individuation of character subjects. Schematic determinations of the individual, such as gender, family, caste and region, inflect the speech of individual characters. Utterances refer primarily not to interior psychological intentions but to the performative enactment of a certain type or a certain combination of typical features. Each character refers to a schematically determined universe of discourse and practices, not accessible in equal measure to all other characters. The differences between the utterances of characters indicate differentiated levels of accessibility. At their

[36] C.V. Raman Pillai, *Rama Raja Bahadur* [1918-19] (Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1999), p. 48.

limit they form secret codes of communication, as in the code language used in *Marthanda Varma* or in the commands delivered in Hindustani in *Dharma Raja*.[37] Idioms are the signs of a schematic differentiation between universes of enunciation.

Utterances of C.V.'s characters often, through an exaggerated performance, transforms even moments of introspection and soliloquizing into instances of exterior discourse. Variations are accentuated excessively, except in the case of the protagonists or characters who are presented as self-conscious subjects. Kings, heroes such as Ananthapadmanabhan, Thrivikraman and Raja Kesava Das, and heroines like Parukutty, Subhadra, Meenakshi and Savithri display a restraint in their utterances which is contrasted with the technique of excess used in the case of other characters. Instances of such restraint indicate the presence of a psychological inner space in C.V.'s novels. In other words, it is the abandonment of performative exaggeration in utterance—the abandonment of a technique of exteriorization—that produces effects of inferiority. The utterances of these relatively self-reflective subjects thus move away from schematic determination in terms of traditional categories. In other words, C.V.'s art of dialogue making shows the use of two models—one that relies on performative exaggeration and schematise, and another one which reveals an inner space through restraint and concealment. Norms of self-consolidation and dignity are generated through the use of the second model. Viewed in terms of these norms, schematically determined characters in C.V. appear as if they belong to another world—they are regarded with indulgence or repugnance, with compassion or fear, but not with a sense of equality of subjectivity. Dialogues between the self-conscious subject and these figures do not rely on a language of inferiority.

This can be seen in the way in which characters interpret the utterances of others. The utterances of un-self conscious characters on the whole demands only a schematic interpretation. The

[37] C.V. Raman Pillai, *Dharma Raja* [1913] (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 1999).

deceptiveness of a Kodantha Asan or an Ummini Pillai—or even that of a Hari Panchananan, who comes very close to self-conscious subjectivity—is writ large in the dialogues, in marks of exaggerated obsequiousness and tactless marks of betrayal. In contrast to this, when Kesava Pillai and the king meet in *Dharma Raja*, they interpret each other's utterances in terms of what is not directly revealed and make their inferences through an assessment of the obliquely said.[38] These inferences do not possess any absolute guarantee of accuracy, and the king may mistakenly place a loyal, self-conscious subject like Kesava Pillai under suspicion.[39] When these doubts are cleared and trust restored, it is affirmed through gestures which invoke the possibility of a world of schematic coherence. The king and the loyal subject partake in a moment of quasi-sacred, emotion-laden communion.[40] Uttarances do not directly express this in C.V.'s historical novels. It is the resources of circumlocution, oblique suggestion or a purely ritualistic enunciation that the novels draw upon in such moments.

If oral utterances in C.V.'s novels are subject to this special set of determination and constraints, how does his fictional world, so thickly populated with instances of conversation between different orders of subjects, cohere? Here, we need to take note of the insertion of dialogue into a larger mechanism which includes gestures and actions and descriptions. Audible utterances in C.V.'s texts are inserted into a mechanism of visibility which does not necessarily obey the same rules of formation and functioning. First, let us take C.V.'s descriptions. Inconographic elements inform them in a prominent way—sometimes correspondences are indicated between certain characters and animals, as in the case of Chantrakkaran and the bull, or Ummini Pillai and the snake, or the awesome aspect of Hari Panchananan and as the name itself indicates—the lion.[41] This animal imagery

38 See, for example, ibid., pp. 204-7.

39 Ibid., p. 207.

40 See, for example, p. 271.

41 See P. Venugopalan's notes to *Dharma Raja*, op. cit., p. 122 n. 77.

can be contrasted with the presentation of a character like Meenakshi, whose first appearance in *Dharma Raja* is described in the language of descriptions of the goddess in sacred literature.[42] We already saw the epitome of such descriptions in the vision of the king's body, which like the idol in the inner sanctum of a temple even when fully visible demands an oblique gaze as a sign of respect and restraint. Between these two kinds of description which make use of elements from two opposed ends of non-human iconography—the animal and the divine—appear the realm of effective human action. Here, gestures and actions undergo a process of stylization. The expression of emotions in utterances or in silence is accompanied by exaggerated and stylized gestures, which locate the character's actions in a performance space rather than in an empirical one.

What is of particular interest to us is the way in which this performance space of exaggerated gestures affects the presentation of heroes and heroines—the relatively self-conscious subjects in C.V. Although free from exaggeration in utterance, these subjects also partake of the stylized language of gestures. As we saw, these subjects often display restraint and emotional containment. However, C.V.'s novels elaborate a language of gestures and postures for these moments of restraint and containment. This may take the form of tears or sweat streaming down the male protagonist's body in exaggerated abundance.[43] Or it may assume the aspect of swooning or physical frailty in female characters.[44] Even as restraint in utterance may conceal the subject's emotions, paving the way for the speculative production of a sense of interiority, his/her gestures may link that inner space to the world of schematic and performative expression. The legibility of the protagonists' gestures rely on the same, exaggerated schematism shared by other, voluble characters in C.V.

42 Ibid., p. 106, p. 148.

43 See, for example, C.V. Raman Pillai, *Rama Raja Bahadur*, op.cit., p. 40.

44 See ibid. and *Marthanda Varma*, op. cit., p. 158.

Gigantism forms an aspect of many of C.V.'s figurations of character or incident. This, along with mechanisms of sudden emergence, transformation and disappearance, confer a dream-like consistency on the fields of visibility in C.V.'s work. The topical chronotopes of the C.V. novel are the night, the jungle, and the cellar. Even in familiar spaces such as the palace or the *tharavadu*, unforeseen crevices and spaces emerge, hiding a dagger or a spy or a corpse. This creates a certain sense of discontinuity of spaces—the norms of intelligibility of one segment of space may not prevail in another. Such a configuration of spaces is different from the opposition between sacred and secular topographies, or the space of the *tharavadu* and of heterotopoi, which we discussed in the context of Chandu Menon's novels. Familiar spaces may inexplicably transform themselves into 'other' spaces in C.V. In his historical novels, conspiracy, spying, and clandestine acts of violence may transform any apparently secure space into its opposite. All familiar spaces are open to the taint of the uncanny. The epitome of such transformations is invoked in *Marthanda Varma* through the legend of Kalliangattu Neeli, which links uncanny transformations to evil and deceit. Before the villainous brahman's eyes, the seductive figure of the courtesan changes into the shape of his former wife murdered by him, and then into that of the *yakshi* of Panchavankadu, "filling the forest and touching the sky, with terrifying teeth and a blood-dripping tongue reaching the ground, with a cavernous mouth and huge, round eyes which scatter sparks of fire, and enormous hair standing up like trees..."[45] Apparently innocuous spaces in C.V. often bear traces of contamination of evil, which makes them open to such sudden transformations. The historical novels of C.V. are about the ability to negotiate the morphology of these changes.

The motif of disguise, which runs through several of C.V.'s major works, can be seen as a nodal point where questions of transformation and visibility meet. Disguise provides the subject with access to different, apparently inaccessible universes within

[45] C.V. Raman Pillai, *Marthanda Varma*, op. cit., p. 78.

the novel. In *Marthanda Varma*, the eponymous king adopts a series of disguises, to protect his sacred body and regime. Ananthapadmanabhan, the hero of the novel, disguises himself even in front of the disguised king in his attempts to serve and protect him. His disguises come with schematically determined descriptions and dialogues, indicating two different character types belonging to two distinct and credible universes. This also means that the technique of disguise extracts a price in terms of the unity and continuity of character. The more elaborately a figure of disguise is developed, the less available it becomes for reappropriation into a true, unified guise. The mad Channan and Shamsuddin are not fully integrated in terms of their character universes in the final unity of Ananthapadmanabhan. Chantrakkaran, Kali Prabhava Bhattan and Manikya Goundan; Pakirsa and Vriddha Siddhan and Velu Thampi; Perinchakkodan and Parapanda; and, conversely, the figure of Haripanchananan—all these convert the notion of character into a series of appearances that functions according to the logic of disguise.[46] It is true that some clues are provided in the novel which make it possible for the reader to retrospectively identify the original which lies concealed within the disguise. However, disguises work within the fictional universe only by claiming narrative credibility, by making other characters believe in the coherence of the disguised persona and by their relating to him/her as an independent character. We have seen that the disguises in C.V.'s texts are fabricated in accordance with schematic and predictable attributes. They are sites of an exaggerated performance; if they do not appear out of step in the fictional worlds they inhabit, this is because fictional representation is designed according to a principle of performative excess in C.V.'s novels. Subhadra in *Marthanda Varma* is an interesting figure in this light. Subhadra is a hermeneuticist of disguises and signs. Without attempting any disguise, she is able to access different spaces which would

[46] These are names of some characters and disguise-figures in C. V. Raman Pillai's *Marthanda Varma*, op. cit., *Dharma Raja*, op.cit., and *Rama Raja Bahadur*, op.cit.

be denied to her if her true intentions are made transparent. Subhadra understands that the principle of disguise works on the basis of the coherence and legibility of the signs emitted by the persona one adopts. She does not try to conceal her identity or to contradict the disreputable rumours about her. Instead, she uses this false public image, her legible appearance, as a disguise.

Thus, the colourful positivities of event and action which light up the pages of C.V. Raman Pillai's writing can be seen as often belonging to a deceptive luminosity. The colours here are the colours of a masquerade, which are instances of enactment and concealment. What they conceal and thereby produce at the margins of their own saying are the contrary instances of a promise of full visibility on the one hand, and a premonition of an apocalyptic eruption of darkness on the other. Full visibility, located in the solitary body of the king, and the world it guarantees are presented as constantly under siege. The performance of the novel is marked by a constant sense of danger—that an unstoppable flow of darkness may erupt from the gaps between spaces, languages, or worlds. To stop such gaps and stem this impending flow, an elaborate machinery is set up which produces unceasingly a world of artifice and exaggeration, of disguises and transformations, of a plenitude of written and oral styles. Each novel in C.V.'s trilogy returns at its end to a moment of full vision, a sacred, non-narrative moment of union.[47] But, what the earlier novels close and conclude are opened again in the later ones, placing the full vision once again under siege, thus generating a panorama of exaggerated and unstable visibility. Darkness functions as the very condition of the possibility of the novel's visible universe, just as the forces of evil function as the narrative locus against which the light of the king's power can be affirmed and articulated. In *Rama Raja Bahadur*, Meenakshi, a descendent of an anti-royalist family, ruminates on the historical meaning of her ancestors and their actions: "Were they evil acts?

[47] See, for example, *Marthanda Varma*, op. cit., p. 339; and *Dharma Raja*, op. cit., p. 464.

Could those valiant antagonists of royalty not be considered as the wetting stone which through friction against the rock of royal power, revealed the magnificent light of the precious diamond within?"[48]

We need to recall that C.V.'s historical novels continue a tradition of folk narratives and ritual performances which commemorate the conflict against royalty in eighteenth century Travancore. These rituals and their accompanying narratives re-enact the conflict and the victory of the king against the Ettuveettil Pillamar with their power based on an older custom.[49] While validating the victory of the king in terms of a historical memory, they ritualistically pay the debt to vanquished ancestors and to the destroyed realm of custom. C.V's work, among other things, can be seen as a transformation of this tradition. It validates the royal triumph in terms of an ethical universe which allies itself with a modern political realm and with a pre-modern realm of custom at the same time. The king and his allies represent an ethic of responsibility and self-reflectiveness surrounded by the an earlier world of blood ties and naked force. The full subjects in these novels draw sustenance from the resources of custom and blood lineage, but transform them into ethical ties articulated in terms of a rhetoric of responsibility. Blood ties appear for them in terms of their remembrance of affection and kindness received in one's childhood or in times of difficulty. In other words, the language of blood is appropriated into a discourse of familial intimacy and affection. Ties of blood or of custom do not have an absolute claim on the subject except when mediated through the terms of this ethic. In such a scheme of things, as we saw above in the words of Meenakshi from *Rama Raja Bahadur*, there is space available even for 'family pride'.[50] However, sentiments about lineage need to establish links with the discourse

[48] C.V. Raman Pillai, *Rama Raja Bahadur*, op.cit., p. 117.

[49] See Mark de Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore: History and State Formation in Travancore* 1671 to 1758 (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1997). p. 51.

[50] See note 48 above.

of responsibility understood in terms of the larger realm of politics which the king symbolizes. C.V.'s kings unite the language of the blood and that of the community. The king is the sacred father figure, and his feeling for his loyal subjects, regardless of their age, is one of *vatsalyam* or tender, protective affection. It is not accidental that C.V.'s historical novels repeatedly return to instances where blood affiliations come into conflict with loyalty for the king. These conflicting pressures are presented as two forms of blood ties. In one of them, blood is appropriated through reflective memory into the discourse of familial ties and then into the discourse of a politics centred on the king's body through a relationship of filiation with him. In the other, ties of blood or ritual bonding are unmediated by the ethic of reflective memory, and they may place the subject in a world of intrigue and deceit. Here, the urge for revenge or the desire for power may make the subject enter into ritually binding ties. The rebellions against the king are often placed at the intersection of naked self-interest and mysterious forces of the blood. The ambivalent figure of Hari Panchanan embodies this dual nature of the antagonist in C.V.'s work. The king's party and his antagonists draw upon the same resource of blood ties, incorporating them into two distinct discourses, one which leads to the king and the State, and the other to the actions of the ancestors and to the family treasure.

We saw that one end of the spectrum of vision in C.V. is occupied by the silent brightness of the king's body. Located at the other end, that master of disguises, Chantrakkaran, volubly articulates this dark principle which constitutes his very possibility:

> His fleshly form rises up, in an unnatural horrendous shape, awesome even to the god of death, were he to be witness. Unaware of the blood trickling from his fingers, he stretches, extends his arms, expands his chest, and roars aloud, as a curse fills his mind. He breaks into a loud laughter, like a demon feasting on corpses in a battlefield. 'You, darkness!', he cries, 'open your mouth, take me, this dim-witted fool, in. What is time, which is the end, if not you! You alone is the god of death, the owner of all time... For me, the darkest of the dark, sown in the dark womb of a mother, grown in the pitch dark night of human pretence, ending in this unrelenting dark pit, for me, you alone the path, you deep, dreary dark.' Exclaiming these special advaitin thoughts, walking backwards, sped the body of Kaliyudayan, into the deep, dark cosmos, without beginning and without end.[51]

This language of the dark in C.V.'s novels is a powerful articulation of the engagement with visibility in the early novels in Malayalam. In his historical novels, we saw that this is presented in terms of the conflicts and complicity between two discourses of belonging and responsibility. Just as the historical figure of Marthanda Varma is associated with the carving out of a state from communal ties of blood, the fictional universe of the historical novel sketches in a form of visibility which is available only against and in conflict with the dark The saga of the victory of royal power and the visible fictional universe of C.V.'s novels appear like luminous writing etched on the dark page of an infinite night. This makes it the task of the self-conscious subject of the novel to read the visible world as constituted by iconographic signs while exercising control and restraint over the emission of one's own signs. In *Premamrtham*, we saw a sketch of the transformation of this problem in the modern world. The problem of ethics becomes a problem of legibility in this novel, and an empirical vision is seen as an inadequate tool for the task of reading. Nonetheless, there is no simple traditional iconography which would arm the subject better for his or her task. Law needs to be supplemented by trust, and the evidence of a photographic memory needs to be allied to an understanding of the world of custom and taboo before stability and coherence can be restored. It is in the unavailability of a single schema of vision, and in the constant task of negotiation that C.V. sets up in

[51] C. V. Raman Pillai, *Dharma Raja*, op. cit., p. 418.

his novels between darkness and light that we need to locate his contribution to the emergence of the novelistic imagination in Kerala.

In our discussion, we saw that for the emerging discourse of early novels in Malayalam, the encounter with an experience of incoherence remains central. A rupture of spatial imagination schematic and secular spaces, and attempts to articulate and negotiate the distance between them form an integral part of the creative procedure of the novel. These spaces are not separated but brought into situations of mutual contamination, tension or complicity in the novels we discussed, giving rise to a new imaginary of unstable spaces, unreliable objects and uncertain visibilities. This impure spectrum of light which ties the subject to the tasks of seeing and reading is central to the positive discursive possibilities that the early novels in Malayalam produce.