

**MASCULINITY AND THE STRUCTURING OF THE PUBLIC DOMAIN
IN KERALA:
A HISTORY OF THE CONTEMPORARY**

Ph. D. Thesis submitted

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RATHEESH RADHAKRISHNAN



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CULTURE AND SOCIETY
(Affiliated to MAHE- Deemed University)
BANGALORE- 560011

JULY 2006

Bangalore

28 July 2006

Declaration

I, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, do hereby declare that this thesis entitled **Masculinity and the Structuring of Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary** contains original research work done by me in fulfilment of the requirements for my Ph.D. Degree in Cultural Studies from the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society and that this report has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma in this or any other institution. This work has not been sent anywhere for publication or presentation purpose.


Ratheesh Radhakrishnan

Bangalore
28 July 2006



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Centre for the Study of Culture and Society
(Affiliated to Manipal Academy of Higher Education – MAHE)
466, 9th Cross, Madhavan Park
Bangalore 560011.

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Tejaswini Niranjana

Dr. Tejaswini Niranjana
(Supervisor)

Srinivas

Dr. SV Srinivas
(Member, PhD Committee)

Tejaswini Niranjana

Dr. Tejaswini Niranjana
(Director)



To my parents

KM Rajalakshmy and M Radhakrishnan

For the spirit of reason and freedom I was introduced to...

This work is dedicated....

The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, so enable it to think differently.

Michel Foucault. 1985/1990. *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Vol. II*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage: 9.

... in order to problematise our inherited categories and perspectives on gender meanings, might not men's *experiences* of gender – in relation to themselves, their bodies, to socially constructed representations, and to others (men and women) – be a potentially subversive way to begin? [...]. Of course the risks are very high, namely, of being misunderstood both by the common sense of the dominant order and by a politically correct feminism. But, then, welcome to the margins!

Mary E. John. 2002. "Responses". *From the Margins* (February 2002): 247.

The peacock has his plumes
The cock his comb
The lion his mane
And the man his moustache.

Tell me O Evolution!
Is masculinity
Only clothes and ornaments
That in time becomes the body?

PN Gopikrishnan. 2003. "Parayu Parinaamame!" (Tell me O Evolution!). Reprinted in *Madiyanmarude Manifesto* (Manifesto of the Lazy, 2006). Thrissur: Current Books: 78.

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	viii
Introduction	1
Part I Mapping the Present	
Chapter 1: Masculinity and Kerala: On Trajectories and Concepts	9
Chapter II: An Incident in Narrative: Discourse of Masculinity and Public Domain in Contemporary Kerala	54
Part II ‘Present’ing the Past: Masculinity and Modernity in Kerala	128
Chapter III: Masculinity in the Public: Politics and Art	133
Section 1: <i>Sakhavu</i> : The Left Revolutionary	134
Section 2: Cult figures and Collectives: John Abraham and <i>Amma Ariyaan</i>	174
Chapter IV: Negotiating Modernity: The Crisis Narratives	212
Section 1: Of Mice and Men: Matriliney and the Crisis of Masculinity	213
Section 2: Powerlessness as Hegemony: ‘Emancipated woman’ and the Crisis of Masculinity	255
In Conclusion: Masculinity, History, Kerala: New Beginnings	298
References	306

List of Illustrations (pages 172, 173)

Images 1 & 2	Stills from the documentary <i>Vijayan Mash</i> (dir: Sophia Bindh 2004).
Image 3, 4 & 5	Photographed pages from <i>Deshabhimani</i> , Annual issue 1953.
Image 6	Still from <i>Anubhavgal Paalichakal</i> (dir: KS Sethumadhavan 1971).
Image 7, 8 & 11	Stills from the documentary <i>Ithrayum Yathabhagam</i> (dir: Sathyan 2004).
Image 9	John Abraham. “In his sister’s house, calmly” (Shaji 1993/1994: 282).
Image 10	John Abraham. Source: <i>Chithrabhumi</i> Film Magazine (21 June 1987): 8-9.
Images 12,13, 14 &15	Stills from <i>Amma Ariyaan</i> (dir: John Abraham 1986).
Image 16	Ravi Varma’s painting titled <i>There Comes Papa</i> (1893)
Image 17	Still from <i>Elippathayam</i> (dir: Adoor Gopalakrishnan 1981).
Images 18, 19, 20	Stills from <i>Manathe Vellitheru</i> (dir: Fazil 1994).

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Introduction

The thesis attempts to work out the link between the structuring of the public domain and the discourse of masculinity in contemporary Kerala, South India. Using the debates around an incident of sexual harassment that happened in 1999, it argues for a conjunctural understanding of the contemporary where various events and moments in history are replayed through narrativisation and popular memory. The thesis goes on to analyse the debates around this incident, which produce a ‘narrative public domain’, to foreground the various notions of masculinity that construct and structure it in relation to notions of female sexuality and changing structures of family. These notions of masculinity are then used as starting points for a historical inquiry into Kerala’s modernity – an inquiry that would throw light on the past and the ways in which the contemporary is produced through its historical legacies.

The thesis is structured in two parts. The first part, consisting of two chapters, is an attempt to map the public domain in the contemporary, focussing on the discourse of masculinity that structures it, as a space from where the history of Kerala’s modernity can be written. The second part takes off from where the analysis of the contemporary ends, and in two chapters – each sub-divided into two sections – tries to look back at four moments in the history of Kerala’s modernity where each of the notions of masculinity that come together to form a contemporary discourse of masculinity are put together.

Part I, titled “Mapping the Present” consists of Chapters I & II. The first chapter, “Masculinity and Kerala: On Trajectories and Concepts”, tries to look at the various contexts that led to the formation of the research question. It will discuss the history of debates on gender in Kerala and the disciplinary locations from where *masculinity* is discussed in India and the Western academia as being the contexts in relation to which this project is conceived. Issues of research related funding and the use of masculinity as a newly found concept in the developmentalist rhetoric will also be taken up for critical engagement. It will be argued that the moment of this project cannot be de-linked from these larger disciplinary and economic contexts. The chapter will discuss the specific disciplinary and methodological questions involved in embarking on a project of this kind.

Chapter II, “An Incident in Narrative: Masculinity and the Public Domain in Contemporary Kerala”, takes up for analysis the debate around the sexual harassment of PE Usha, a non-teaching employee of University of Calicut (Kerala). It will be argued that the various narratives that are produced around the incident constitute a narrative public domain. This public is not necessarily representative of contemporary Kerala, as the discussion of the debates around the incident does not exhaust the possibilities for elaboration of the dynamics of the larger public with its claims to producing the region. It will be further argued that the public engendered by the debates around the incident under discussion

foregrounds the public sphere that constitute the region as one among the many possible publics in contemporary Kerala.

I further argue that these narratives make use of various notions of masculinity as tropes in their discussion of the incident of sexual harassment. These tropes are those that seem to be at the heart of the narratives that are under discussion in the first chapter and those that seem to be picked up and repeated from earlier narratives. In this instance we see these notions of masculinity functioning as metaphors, and not as the primary object that is being fashioned. To put it differently, the public domain in contemporary Kerala deploys notions of masculinity as metaphors that structure its concerns. Thus even when masculinity is not the central – or at times, even the marginal – concern in the debates that constitute the public domain, there seems to exist a gendered language historically produced as the organizer of these concerns. I begin with masculinity as an empty signifier, which during the course of the analysis of the material, is filled with content. The conceptual elaboration of the key terms of my project, ‘masculinity’ and ‘public domain’, will be done using the narratives that will be taken up for analysis in this chapter. Analysing materials like newspaper reports, speeches and articles that I have collected through extensive fieldwork, I excavate four different notions of masculinity that act as tropes in the discussion around the sexual harassment incident.¹ It will be argued that there is an underlying narrative about

¹ The fieldwork was conducted during the many visits to various libraries – private and public – in different cities in Kerala, especially those associated with different women’s groups, between September 2003 and December 2004. A sizable amount of the material was made available by Dilip Raj and Reshma Bharadwaj, two researchers based in Kerala.

female sexuality and about changing familial structures that underpin the elaboration of these notions of masculinity.

Part II of the thesis, “ ‘Present’ing the Past – Masculinity and Modernity in Kerala”, includes Chapters III & IV. Through these chapters each of the notions of masculinity identified in the previous chapter is taken up for separate analysis through texts produced in the second half of the twentieth century in Kerala. It will be argued that these notions of masculinity were under production during different periods in the history of Kerala, and that it is through a constant negotiation with these notions that Kerala’s modernity developed. By the time we come to the sexual harassment of PE Usha, these notions appear to have been concretised in such a way that they have become metaphors for everyday speech.

In Chapter III, “Masculinities in the Public: Politics and Art”, I discuss two moments in the history of Kerala’s modernity where notions of masculinity that are performed in the public sphere – especially in relation to politics and art – are put together. Both these notions of masculinity are predicated upon their larger political and intellectual circulation in the public domain in Kerala. In Section I of this chapter, titled “*Sakhavu* – The Left Revolutionary”, I take up for analysis the construction of the figure of the revolutionary in the discourse of the Left in Kerala. I look at the figure of P Krishna Pillai (1906-1948), the revered revolutionary, as the prototype of the image of the revolutionary that is still deployed in the left rhetoric. Along with the revolutionary, I also look at some of the heroic figures played by Sathyan, the popular star of Malayalam cinema from

the mid 1950s till his death in 1971, in the films written by the progressive writer and activist, Thoppil Bhasi. The various rites of passage of the male revolutionary and the gendering of such actions will be the focus of this section. A prominent figure in the discussion will be the wife/partner of the revolutionary figure who constitutes an important point of reference to negotiate his masculinity. Section II, titled “Cult figures and Collectives: John Abraham and *Amma Ariyaan*”, focuses on a later period in Kerala’s history, the 1980s – when new intellectual subjectivities were formed following a period of extreme left movements and existentialist philosophy. This moment produced a number of cult figures, who are constructed through notions of masculinity that are understood as indigenous and local. The figure of the ‘mother’ – and the notions of normative femininity – that appear in the various writings of the period will be used as a counterpoint to elaborate the ‘constitutive outside’ of the cult figures.²

Chapter IV, in two sections, looks at those distinctive moments in the history of Kerala’s modernity where notions of masculinity were engendered in relation to a narrative of crisis. If the first of the two crisis narratives was related

² Judith Butler describes the notion of the ‘constitutive outside’ thus:

The exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires a simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet “subjects”, but who formed the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. [T]he subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation (Butler 1993: 3).

Throughout the thesis the concept ‘constitutive outside’ is used in the sense that Butler has defined it.

to the collapse of matriliney and the enforcement of land reforms, the second was articulated in relation to the narratives around the ‘emancipated woman’ in the Kerala Model and in response to the discussions about feminism in Kerala. Section I of the chapter, titled “Of Mice and Men: Matriliney and the Crisis in Masculinity”, takes a moment from the history of matriliney in Kerala – a history that has been examined by a number of scholars, focussing on a period at least half a century after the reform movement among the Nairs – during the early decades of the twentieth century.³ Taking up some exemplary texts from Malayalam literature and cinema, I will argue that these presented the futures imaginable for the Nair man after the breaking up of matriliney, the passing of land reforms and the creation of modern economic structures. It will be argued that it is the Muslim man who emerges as the ‘other’ of the Nair man in these texts, which attempt to construct normative models of masculinity for the latter. Emphasis will be given to the notion of ‘mobility’ as constituting an important aspect of modern Nair masculinity. Section II titled “Powerlessness as Hegemony: ‘Emancipated Woman’ and the Crisis of Masculinity”, identifies the trope of ‘masculinity in crisis’ in various kinds of narratives produced in Kerala. I argue that such narratives are constituted in relation to the figure of the ‘emancipated woman’ of the Kerala Model and as part of a popular response to

³ Though the name of the caste is spelt ‘Nayar’ in most academic writings, I have, through out the thesis, retained the spelling ‘Nair’ which is commonly used as the second name by the members of the caste. In case of the word referring to the people of Kerala, I have used the spelling ‘Malayalee’, as opposed to ‘Malayali’, which is also widely used.

feminist debates. I concentrate on two kinds of crisis narratives – one of men suffering from mental illness and the other of men being victimized by the law.

The concluding part titled, “Masculinity, History, Kerala”, pulls together the various strands of argument in the thesis to suggest ways in which my analysis of the masculinity discourse can enrich our understanding of Kerala’s modernity. Here I return to the key terms that I began with, ‘masculinity’ and ‘Kerala’ along with a third term – ‘history’. The conclusion tries to propose ways of thinking through the historical enterprise that are rooted in the contemporary, stressing the need to have a framework of masculinity that includes multiple notions that co-exist at a particular point of time in history. It further argues that a history of the contemporary has to be written in conjunctural terms where different incidents and developments of the past get played out in new forms. Finally, the conclusion also offers new insights into the construction of the historical and cultural entity that we call ‘Kerala’ in relation to the discourse of masculinity.

Part I

Mapping the Present

Chapter I

Masculinity and Kerala: On Trajectories and Concepts

Starting from / Thinking through Contemporary Kerala

It was May of 2001; the place was the entrance to the Administrative Building of the University of Calicut. Some of us had gathered in a group in support of PE Usha, a non-teaching staff member at the University, who was on a hunger strike protesting against the University administration's attempts to protect a colleague of hers who had allegedly started a gossip campaign against her. The incidents that led to such a confrontation had started a year and a half ago when Usha was sexually harassed while travelling in a bus.¹ During the days of the hunger strike the University had literally turned into a political battlefield, with the supporters of both the complainant and the accused gathered in the area. By then, intellectuals, activists and the media in Kerala were clearly polarized. In the charged situation at the University on that particular day there were intellectuals and activists, representing both sides, giving public speeches, each side taking turns to respond to the other. And then a leader of the left-backed employees' organization, which was supporting the accused, got up to speak. In his vicious attack on Usha, which claimed that she was becoming a pawn in the hands of anti-

¹ See Chapter II for a detailed discussion of the debates around the incident of sexual harassment of PE Usha.

left elements at a time when the elections to the state assembly were fast approaching, the speaker, whose name was V Stalin, started to retell the incidents under debate using a story from the Hindu epic of *Mahabharata*, where Arjuna had used Shikhandi, a transsexual warrior, to kill Bhishma, the infallible commander of the enemy. He was referring to the various individuals active in the debate using the story. In his retelling, Bhishma, the wronged one in the story, represented the accused.²

This turned out to be an important moment for me as it was then that I started thinking about the anxieties that governed political debates in Kerala, especially when a woman was the key player or when it was gender politics that was being discussed. This thought set off a number of questions: Why is it that ‘progressive politics’ has to use the language of masculinity to raise a political question? How is this language different from that of the various narratives one encounters in the media, especially in popular cinema, regarding men’s crisis in relation to what they perceive as the possibility of being wrongly accused of, say, sexual violence? What are the other locations where such narratives seem to exist? The larger question the situation prompted in me was about the salience of ‘masculinity’, or rather its perceived crisis, and its connection with the story of the ‘emancipated woman’, as an important vantage point for understanding modern Kerala. It was clear that one had to track the debates on gender in Kerala through hitherto unexplored routes in attempting to think through these issues.

² This part of the speech by Stalin is excerpted in Chapter II, followed by a detailed discussion.

By the late 1990s, feminist debates had gained high visibility in Kerala through various popular magazines and journals coming out in Malayalam. Through the discussion of a number of highly publicized sex scandals, with the voices of women's rights activists heard in the visual and print media, with the State Women's Commission being frequently in the news, there was no doubt that gender as an issue to be addressed had found its place in the commonsense of the average newspaper-reading Malayalee.³ The existence of such a commonsense was evident from the responses, in most cases sceptical, gender issues and especially feminism seemed to elicit in popular media – in films, comedy shows and through articles and letters to the editor in various magazines. In spite of this visibility, Kerala was ranked highest in the country in terms of the number of cases of violence against women. The place presented a paradox which one had to come to terms with for any understanding of the contemporary. There seemed to be an agreement on the fact that Kerala was a difficult place to live for women, but on the other hand the many writings on Kerala and official writing in particular, claimed that it had the best figures in India in terms of statistics concerning the status of women like their rate of literacy, a sex ratio favouring women and their life expectancy. Feminist arguments about the difficult living conditions for women in Kerala were often countered by those who pointed out

³ The concept 'commonsense' is used throughout the thesis as defined by Antonio Gramsci who has suggested that 'commonsense' is "the traditional popular conception of the world" (Gramsci 1996: 199). He would argue that the starting point of the philosophy of praxis should be "...the commonsense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude and which has to be made ideologically coherent" (*ibid*: 421).

the increasing number of women in the public domain and their many successes, especially in comparison with other states in India.

The story of the ‘modern emancipated woman’ as seen in standard textbook versions could be quickly summarized as follows. The status of women has always been central to the development of Kerala as a cultural entity, right from the early years of the twentieth century.⁴ Even in the mid-nineteenth century, one of the first major struggles that have been identified as marking the advent of modernity in Kerala concerned the right for women to cover the upper part of their body in front of men from upper castes.⁵ The period of social reform from the late nineteenth to the early years of the twentieth century had placed heavy emphasis on education of women, widow remarriage, and the demolition of practices like matriliney, arguing for a society that treated its women better. Such a move was preceded by various reforms in the field of education which were initiated by missionaries and benevolent monarchs of the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. In the social reform context, these arguments were housed within

⁴ Kerala was formed as a unit of administration in independent India, in 1956. The region that came to be called Kerala was put together by uniting the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and Malabar which was part of Madras presidency. But the idea of Kerala and the word ‘Keralam’, meaning the ‘land of coconuts’, has been in vogue much before this historical moment, especially in relation to the common language Malayalam, which was spoken, and the natural boundaries that separated the region from the rest of the land around it.

⁵ This historic struggle by women of the Channar caste who had converted to Christianity is known as the *maarumarakkal samaram* or the ‘struggle to cover the upper body’. For a detailed discussion, see Hardgrave 1993; Devika 2004a.

organizational structures that were caste or religion based, which were primarily concerned with their negotiations with modernity.⁶

In the process of negotiating the ‘women’s question’, these movements and the public debates that emerged in those times in the many journals that were in circulation, reorganized notions of gender in such a way that it discursively produced notions of ‘sexual difference’ for years to come. Women’s journals that circulated in early twentieth century Kerala, addressed women who had not, in their vision, integrated themselves into the newly constituted modern forms of life, and attempted to indulge in a pedagogic enterprise vis-à-vis ‘ideal forms of femininity’ (Sukumar and Devika 2005: 66). Within this logic, women were seen as embodying inherent qualities like nurturing, patience and kindness. They were qualified to look after the home and also to take on vocations like teaching and nursing which were seen as an extension of their domestic duties. Men on the other hand were seen as embodying qualities that were related to public life. Binaries such as cultural/material or emotional/rational were mobilized in populating the binary woman/man. The number of women’s journals and

⁶ The important organizations that spearheaded the social reform activities included the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) of the Ezhava community started in 1903 by Sree Narayana Guru, the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham started by Ayyankali in 1907, which worked for the upliftment of the members of the Pulaya caste, the Yogakshema Sabha which worked for reform within the upper caste Nambudiris and the Nair Service Society (NSS) started in 1914 and working for the dominant and landed Nairs among others. There were also organizations working within the Muslim community like the Muslim Mahajana Sabha and Chirayankil Taluk Muslim Samajam. See Devika 1999, 2002, 2003; Kumar 1997; Chandrika 1998, 2000 and Sreedevi 1999 for works that look at gender and social reform in early twentieth century Kerala.

women's organizations (called *mahila samajams*) that existed at this time demonstrates the fact that women, especially of the upper castes, seem to have been agents rather than mute recipients of the fruits of reform.

In later years, the circulation of Marxist ideals and the subsequent formation of a strong Communist Party in the state resulted in putting in place 'class' alongside gender as the other important category of social analysis in Kerala in the twentieth century. A gradual sidelining of gender as the primary concern of political thought in the service of class-based politics was being initiated at this time. Discussing the political concerns of the plays that were performed during the social reform period and the early days of the Left, one of the commentators writes:

During the period of renaissance, women were at the centre of the plays that were performed. The Communist Party, which came into being after this period, focused on the economic and political inequalities faced by the peasantry and the labourers. I argue that the notion of an essential woman that these plays presented were based on a traditional notion of femininity and that it was the internalisation of such a feminine model that helped produce the identity of the 'free woman' in Kerala society (Sajitha 2002: 13).⁷

⁷ All translations from Malayalam, if not mentioned otherwise, are mine.

In this period, ‘community’, ‘caste’ and ‘religion’ were discursively erased through the valorisation of ‘class’ and ‘gender’.⁸ Class went on to become the locus for political struggle under the leadership of the Communist Party, reconstituting itself in disciplinary terms as ‘economics’ to help produce a welfarist developmentalist narrative of the ‘Kerala Model’.⁹ Gender, on the other hand, metamorphosed into the central index of development in this narrative. The high status of women has been the central argument for the existence of a unique developmental project in Kerala.¹⁰ In this narrative, women in Kerala were highly educated, had high life expectancy, an upper hand in the sex ratio and better health conditions. The success of the state family planning programme has also been pointed to as an important index for the success of the model.

The status of ‘women’ as a positive index of development in statistics remained unchallenged till the late 1980s when various women’s groups and feminist scholarship questioned its salience. It is also around the same time that

⁸ See Menon 1994 for a detailed analysis of the changes that happened in the political discourse in Kerala, especially in relation to the language of caste, during the early years of the Communist movement in Kerala.

⁹ Economics has been the central social science discipline in Kerala to the extent that disciplines like Sociology are more or less invisible. The well-known research institute in the state, Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram, until recently specialized in economics. This, I suggest, is primarily due to the role envisaged for the discipline in fine-tuning a class-based politics under the supervision of the Left. As poverty and labour related issues were at the heart of the concerns at the Left, this is not surprising.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the ‘Kerala Model’ and the role of women in it, see Section 2 of Chapter IV.

‘women’ became a category of political organization in Kerala.¹¹ A number of organizations working on women’s issues like *Manushi*, *Bodhana* and *Prachodana* were founded at this point of time and even the more established political and social organizations began to use the language of gender. In this context a clear-cut hierarchy between women and men – both identified as ontologically coherent singular entities – was also being imagined. Such a position created a victim-predator relationship – one that was seen as ahistorical, unchanging and universal. This move could be understood as an attempt to politicise the binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ that had been put in place in the early days of the twentieth century by arguing that there were power relations inherent to the notions of gender difference accepted for about a century.

It is not as if the ordering of the social alongside gender was totally separated out from other vectors that could affect vertical breaks in it. ‘Class’ has had an important role to play in organizing gender hierarchy where at most times the re-establishment of the binary was engendered by ‘class-ing’ men and women as lower class and upper class respectively.¹² Thus both in the established stories about gender difference in Kerala and in the responses to it the binary is kept

¹¹ For a history of gender politics in Kerala, see Chandrika 1998, 2000. A more analytical history is available in Sukumar and Devika 2005.

¹² One of the early feminist ethnographic attempts tried to redress such a situation by studying lower class women, especially women working in the agriculture sector. See Saradamoni 1988/1999: 76-83.

intact.¹³ The various responses to feminism – in particular those of men – helped only to entrench the symbolic opposition that was already in place.¹⁴

This ontological status attributed to the category ‘women’ and ‘men’, engendered the erasure of a whole range of structures of inequality that exist *within* both these categories, and the glossing over of complex structures of power *between* these identity categories. In the words of Sharmila Sreekumar:

[The] prioritisation of gender difference... serves to elide multiple vectors of socio-economic disparity – religion, caste, class, sexualities etc. The resulting homogenisations of man and woman displace other tectonic movements and tensions within the social field of contemporary Kerala along the lines of gender. Such presentations, where all social differences are reduced to tellings of gender, are attempts to abridge and make manageable the numerous other struggles and contests that are being waged in present day Kerala. It also, crucially, overlooks the many real differences within

¹³ The figure of the arrogant upper class woman was a trope used in the works of satirists and other writers to notate modernity gone bad. On the other hand, as Sharmila Sreekumar has noted, the ‘ordinary woman’ who is the protagonist of the success stories of the Kerala Model has always been the unmarked upper-class upper-caste subject (Sreekumar 2001: 134-139). In the early responses from the women’s movement in Kerala, the attempt was merely to deploy this in the reverse to articulate its politics. A similar situation in relation to caste has been discussed by Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana with regard to the upper caste-ing of the woman and the lower caste-ing of the man in political debates in the 1990s (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 237-243).

¹⁴ We will have occasion to come back to the responses of men towards feminism later in the thesis. See Section 2 of Chapter IV.

the category – “woman” (Sreekumar 2001: 207-208).

The status of a unified category called ‘woman’ was challenged by a number of developments in Kerala, by the end of the 1990s. One was the re-articulation of caste in the political parlance following the breakdown of the consensus on the acceptance of ‘class’ as the foundational category.¹⁵ This has made possible the refiguring of the gender question, which can only be posed now in relation to how caste inflects our understanding of gender. Such a critical development meant “sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning the voice that ... feminists had gained in the 1980s” (Rege 1998: WS 45), as the ‘voice’ that she refers to had been premised upon the imagining of a unitary category called ‘women’ which now gets marked ‘upper caste’.¹⁶ Another significant move that has destabilized the notion of ‘women’ and has “created fissures within the feminist discourse in Kerala” (Navaneetha 2003: 121) is the organizing of sex workers in the state and the visibility that this move has gained.¹⁷ This has led to important debates

¹⁵ This followed a number of developments in Kerala’s polity including the loss of hegemony of the middle class in the wake of the crisis faced by the service sector in a liberalized economy. Not much work has been done in the area yet. An early attempt to track this through cinema is to be found in Radhakrishnan 2005, 2006b.

¹⁶ There is a growing literature in Malayalam on the topic. See Girija 2001; Rowena 2005; Raj 2005. Also see the articles collected in Rao 2003 for a comprehensive representation of the debate in the national context.

¹⁷ Two events that directly challenged the frameworks of the women’s movement in Kerala need to be mentioned in relation to the sex worker’s movement. The first was when an organization of sex workers called ‘Jwalamukhi’ organized a gathering to felicitate the director and actress of the film *Susanna* (dir: TV Chandran 2000)- a film that was critiqued as ‘anti-woman’ by well-known feminist film critics. See Muraleedharan 2002 for a collection of the various responses to the film, except significantly the response from the sex workers’ movement. See Navaneetha 2003, for a

around agency, labour and sexuality – issues that were not squarely and publicly addressed hitherto by the women’s movement in Kerala. Nalini Jameela’s discussion of the responses the sex workers’ movement received from the mainstream women’s groups, foregrounds the difficulties that the groups faced in dealing with the issue (Jameela 2005: 75-77). A third important debate that has gained visibility in Kerala in recent times is that of the rights of sexuality minorities, which not only challenged the ‘middle class familial locations of feminist articulations’ (Girija 2004) but also brought to relief gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identities, which complicates the singular and simplistic man-woman power hierarchy that was in place in gender debates in Kerala.¹⁸ These developments have opened up the possibility of understanding various layers of gendered organization of Kerala society in hitherto unseen ways.¹⁹

discussion of the film in relation to the sex worker’s movement and Bharadwaj and Menon 2002 for a discussion of the imaginings of an ‘alternative public’ engendered by the event. The second event was the publication of the autobiography of Nalini Jameela, herself a sex worker and one of the founder leaders of the movement, titled *Oru Laingikathozhilaliyude Aathmakatha* (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker 2005), which has caused considerable discomfort in feminist circles in relation to issues of sexual choice and sex work.

¹⁸ The first organization to work on issues of sexuality minorities, *Sahayathrika*, started in Thiruvananthapuram in the year 2002 while a help line had started functioning as early as in April 2001. See Deepa 2005. This was followed by two volumes about the issue, which came out of the mainstream press. See Sebastian 2003; Bharadwaj 2004.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of the dominant location from where ‘women’ is articulated in Kerala, see Sreekumar 2001. See also Tharu and Niranjana 1996 for a persuasive argument about the crisis that the concept ‘women’ has come to in India in the 1990s.

Studies on masculinity gained visibility in Kerala during this time. Within a time of three to four years (between 2001 and 2005) the response I have seen to a project studying masculinity had changed from incomprehension and amusement to easy acceptance in both academic and quasi-academic contexts.²⁰ Till date, there have been three annual workshops between 2003 and 2005²¹, a special issue of a cultural studies journal in Malayalam²² and even a popular film that discussed masculinity²³, in Kerala. Sakhi Women's Resource Centre (Thiruvananthapuram), an important women's group in Kerala, has published a book titled *Aankuttikalkkoru Kaipusthakam* (A Handbook for Boys) to address

²⁰ It would be an injustice to those who found research on masculinity and Kerala urgent, if I mention only the sceptical remarks. Responses to the project in the initial years were of three kinds: one, the most common, was amusement and incomprehension, the second was immediate recognition of the significance of the question, and the third were from individuals who embarked on lectures or narrated a clearly worked out thesis on the topic. For the third group, for reasons diametrically opposite to that of the first, there seemed not much of a point in this exercise.

²¹ The workshops were organized by a NGO, Centre for Social Education (CenSe) based in Thrissur, working on youth related issues, in collaboration with other NGOs or educational institutions. These workshops were aimed at college students from different parts of the state.

²² *Pachakkuthira* 1 (2) (September 2004).

²³ The film *Chandupottu* (dir: Lal Jose 2005) is a comedy about a young man, Radhakrishnan, who is brought up by his mother and grandmother as a girl and the gender confusions that follow on from this. One of the upcoming stars of Malayalam cinema, Dileep played the role of the 'effeminate' protagonist. Even though earlier films like *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (dir: Sreenivasan 1998) and *Danny* (dir: TV Chandran 2002) among others, depicted anxieties faced by men in very interesting ways, it was only this film that had 'masculinity' and 'femininity' as its central thematic.

issues of male roles and socialization of boys.²⁴ One of the leading publishing houses in Kerala, *Malayala Manorama*, has already published two volumes of an annual publication titled *Sreeman* addressing men as its readers. In more popular articulations, masculinity has come to be recognized as a metaphor to discuss a variety of issues from the aggressive foreign policy of the United States in relation to Iraq, to the jokes around the new political party which calls itself DIC(K).²⁵

The scant academic literature on masculinity in Kerala has by and large been rooted in three disciplinary formations. The first set, based on research into cinematic and literary representations, has focused on understanding the dynamics of male bonding as constituting an important element of masculinity in Kerala using queer theory (Muraleedharan 2001, 2004a, 2005a), the need for foregrounding caste-inflected masculinities, with special reference to the erasure of Dalit women as a constitutive element (Rowena 2002, 2004a) and the analysis of star personae in relation to masculinity (Gopinathan 2004; Venkiteswaran 2004). The second set comprised of historical inquiries that concentrated on issues such as masculinity and conjugality in the context of family planning initiatives

²⁴ *Aankuttikalkkoru Kaippusthakam* (A Handbook for Boys), Thiruvananthapuram: Sakhi Women's Resource Centre. 2005.

²⁵ DIC(K) was a breakaway faction from the Indian National Congress led by the veteran leader K Karunakaran. The party was named 'Democratic Indira Congress – Karunakaran. Apart from these there are also those narratives coming out of the Hindu right discourse that use tropes of masculinity. I do not go into details of these as I have been listing issues that are specific to Kerala and also because the use of these tropes have been noted by many commentators as a national pattern.

(Devika 2004b) and the refiguring of the father figure in the debates on matriliney among Nairs (Kodoth 2003, 2004a). The third set is that of ethnographic studies, including those on the young fans of Malayalam film stars Mammooty and Mohanlal (Osella and Osella 2004) and on the pilgrimage to Sabarimala (Osella and Osella 2003).²⁶ This interest follows a long history of research into masculinities within India and outside.

Masculinity: A History through Disciplines

The academic interest in *masculinity* as a concept for understanding contemporary culture is relatively new in India. In the early years of the twenty first century – which has already seen a series of conferences titled ‘Travelling Seminar on Masculinities’, an important report on supportive practices among men (Chopra 2002), a number of documentaries (from South Asia in general) supported by international donor agencies like the UNIFEM and ‘Save the

²⁶ Curiously, the ethnographic interest in masculinity is shown more by researchers based in the First World doing their fieldwork in Kerala. Let me submit that we should resist simplistic connections between researchers’ locations and their disciplinary choices but rather point to the status enjoyed by anthropology in our academia as a discipline doomed to study ‘tribal’ communities as an explanation – an issue we will have occasion to return to. I wish to stress this point also because many of the recent responses to one of the translated articles of a couple of Western anthropologists were based on the fact that they were outsiders and hence argued for their inability to understand the specificity of Kerala. See Mankuzhi, Salin. *Randu Osellamar Anaye Kanda Katha* (The Story of Two Osellas who saw the Elephant). ‘Letters to the Editor’ (*Ezhuthukuthu*) *Madhyamam* Weekly 18 November 2005: 4. The anthropological interest in masculinity is an issue in itself and will be taken up for more detailed and critical analysis later in the chapter.

Children UK’ and the publication of two volumes dedicated to this topic (Srivastava 2004; Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004) – there is a sudden upsurge of works that concentrate on this aspect of our society.²⁷ The interest in the concept of ‘masculinity’ in Kerala parallels this moment and has had important links with the national picture.²⁸ A critical examination of this historical moment and the various pushes and pulls that engender it could be an effective starting point to quickly map out the field of study that loosely constitutes the contemporary research on masculinity. It is this history that becomes the backdrop to this project – one that engenders it and constrains it at the same time.

One of the earliest works that employed the concept ‘masculinity’ before the upsurge of interest outlined above was that of Ashis Nandy, who argued that British colonialism should be understood as the employment of the power of the masculine over the feminine (Nandy 1983: 4-11). It was his contention that this

²⁷ The first round of workshops were organized in 2002 in five universities across India, including Delhi University on 1-2 February 2002 and North Eastern Hill University on 18-19 April 2002, and the second is to be held in 2005-2006 at ten universities in four South Asian countries. The first workshop of the second set titled ‘South Asian Masculinities’ was held at the University of Colombo and International Centre for Ethnic Studies (Colombo, Sri Lanka) in October 2005.

²⁸ I am not suggesting that the work on masculinity which happens in Kerala is entirely framed by the national picture. But it is important to note that one of the first public discussions of masculinity in Kerala happened in a workshop that was organized at Kerala University (Thiruvananthapuram) as part of the Travelling Seminars. The first writings on the topic of masculinity in India emerged from this conference. For example Praveena Kodoth has noted that it was indeed the invitation to the travelling seminar that made her think of using the materials that she had been working on in her research on property rights in early twentieth century Kerala to discuss the issue of masculinity (Kodoth 2003: 1, fn 1).

dichotomy was used in political terms by Gandhi who valorised the ‘feminine’ in his political philosophy, especially in the context of non-violence, as the response to the violence of colonial power which is understood as ‘masculine’ (*ibid*: 52-55). Nandy argues that the colonial ordering of sexual difference was based on an understanding that *purushatva* (manliness) was superior to *naritva* (womanliness), which in turn is superior to *klibatva* (femininity in men) (*ibid*: 52). Gandhi on the other hand, he argues, understood sexual difference as *naritva* being superior to *purushatva*, which in turn is superior to *kapurusatva* (failure of masculinity) (*ibid*: 53). He further argues that, whereas earlier nationalist movements tried to articulate indigenous masculinities in opposition to colonial machismo, Gandhi tried to elevate femininity as the foundation for his anti-colonial politics.

Nandy’s work has been critiqued by many scholars as being essentialist in that it attributes gender to the colonizer and the colonized in a stable and unchanging way and by positing a binary of masculine/feminine to represent another problematic binary of West/East. Taking issue with Nandy’s position, Mrinalini Sinha argues that it is indeed a fact that colonialism operated by continuously negotiating notions of masculinity and that it would be fallacious to think of these notions as fixed (Sinha 1995). The attempt to theorize masculinity as a site for political negotiations helps Sinha present a topography of ‘masculinity’, which by definition cannot be thought of as singular. For her, “... colonial masculinity points towards the multiple axes along which power was exercised in colonial India; among or within the colonizers or the colonized as well as between colonizers and colonized” (*ibid*: 1). Another important

contribution of her work is the idea that masculinities are not fixed and need to be asserted and performed again and again. She takes up some of the key controversies in colonial India during the last decades of the nineteenth century such as the debates around the Age of Consent Bill to argue that notions of masculinity governed colonial relationships in India. She provides a historical map textured with the history of first wave feminism and the discussion on homosexuality in Britain, colonial power and nationalist aspirations within India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁹

Other well-known early works which have paid attention to notions of masculinity fall into similar culturalist/essentialist traps as seen in the case of Nandy. These works set out to discuss male subjectivities and end up producing grand narratives of Indian masculinity based on sweeping generalizations. Amidst easy slippages from ‘Indian sexuality’ to ‘Hindu sexuality’, Sudhir Kakkar argues that it is in the struggle between lust and celibacy that male subjectivities are formed in India (Kakkar 1989). He argues that the mother becomes at once the desired and the dreaded in this narrative (*ibid*: 129-140). The argument favouring an ‘intrinsic character’ for ‘Indian masculinity’ appears to break down if we

²⁹ Sinha writes:

The figures of the ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate babu’ were thus constituted in relation to colonial Indian society as well as to some of the following aspects of late nineteenth century British society: the emergence of the ‘New Woman’; the ‘remaking of the working class’; the legacy of ‘internal colonialism’; and the anti-feminist backlash of the 1880s and 1890s (Sinha 1995: 2).

attempt an unorthodox juxtaposition of the argument with the work of historians like Tanika Sarkar who have looked at a similar mother-son dynamic as deployed by the nationalist discourse. Here the deployment serves to imagine the ‘mother nation’ in the form of the Mother Goddess rather than present itself as a cultural trait of Indian masculinity (Sarkar 2001: 250-267)³⁰. Kakkar’s argument suffers from his reliance on the truth-value of the narratives (the testimonies of his patients) that he is analysing, and from his lack of attention to the historical locations in relation to the contexts of deployment of such tropes. He also presents the anxiety about the loss of semen as an important constituent element in this narrative (118-122). The latter argument, one that is now commonly referred to as ‘semen anxiety’, has been central to many studies on notions of masculinity in India, especially in an important work on wrestling (Alter 1992)³¹. The explanatory frameworks which are employed in these writings seem to be based on a misplaced belief in the central role played by Hinduism in shaping male subjectivities in India. These works, in attempting to explain a cultural construct with more or less essentialist ideas about Indian culture and psyche, miss out on

³⁰ See also Indira Chowdhury’s work on colonial Bengal for a detailed account of the deployment of notions of masculinity – in the representation of the ‘frail hero’ – in relation to the figure of Hindu Goddess Durga (Chowdhury 1998).

³¹ For other works that take up ‘semen anxiety’ and celibacy as an important cultural feature in India, see Carstairs 1959; Alter 1994; Lal 1999. The blanket nationalist/culturalist shape that this argument has taken is evident in the use of the concept and the related notion of ‘renunciation’ in the analysis of the all-male pilgrimage to Sabarimala in the southern state of Kerala, culturally and historically far away from the contexts that have prompted its use in the first place. See Osella and Osella 2003: 743-746. See Srivastava 2004a: 13-16 for a discussion of the salience of the concept of ‘semen anxiety’ in studying masculinity in India.

the complexity of everyday structures of gendered performances that exist outside of, and at times even untouched by, nationalist or culturalist discourses.

The earliest writings on masculinity in the context of India were within the discipline of history. Works on the modern history of India have effectively suggested ways in which notions of masculinity (and indeed, femininity) were important nodes for the organization of power in the colonial context. Most significant of these is the work of Partha Chatterjee, who has argued that the disappearance of the ‘women’s question’ in the mid nineteenth century was effected by a discursive organizing in the nationalist framework, of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ as masculine and feminine domains respectively (Chatterjee 1989: 237-243). He further argues that the separation of spatial domains was effected by constructing a series of binaries such as material/spiritual (or, cultural), world/home etc. to populate the binary between the masculine and feminine domains. In focussing on how certain notions of womanhood came to be understood as the ideal in the colonial context (*ibid*: 244-245), Chatterjee points to a crucial connection significant to our understanding of the discourse of masculinity – a connection that gets established in the colonial period in the context of Bengal.³² This is the link between notions of masculinity and *publicness*, a connection that we will have occasion to discuss in detail.³³ Sinha’s

³² See also other articles collected in Sangari and Vaid 1989, especially those of Uma Chakravathy (Chakravathy 1989) and Sumanta Banerjee (Banerjee 1989).

³³ See Chapter II of this thesis.

work, which I mentioned above, squarely places masculinity as a trope that gets worked out in the public, in her case the world of colonial administration. A number of historical studies such as one on hunting in colonial South India (Pandian 1996) have taken as given the connection between ‘masculine’ and ‘public’. In this regard Charu Gupta’s work on the history of Hindu militancy in colonial Uttar Pradesh needs special mention. She presents a rich archive of pamphlets, news reports, and popular literature of the time which demonstrates how the Hindu revivalist discourse of the period negotiated their position of power vis-à-vis the Muslim through gendered metaphors (Gupta 2001: 222-320). The unexamined acceptance of the link between ‘public’ and ‘masculinity’, where the public domain is understood as the sphere of the masculine, disallows her to attempt a critical re-examination of these concepts in the specific historical/cultural context that is under discussion. In a similar vein, the studies on present day communal conflicts help us think through the link between masculinity and the public domain.³⁴ Chatterjee’s significant formulation about women and nationalism historicized this link that has been, and is still, unexamined in any detail by other historians. Though his distinction between private and public derives from the history of Bengal, the discourse of gender that he has identified seems to have had resonance in other parts of the country although with some important variations. The reform period in Kerala in the early

³⁴ Here I refer to the works of PK Vijayan on notions of masculinities in relation to the emergent right wing in India in the 1990s (Vijayan 2004), that of Kumkum Sangari on the figure of the Hindu sanyasin Sadhvi Ritambara (Sangari 1999: 397-409) and Deepak Mehta’s work on the Bombay riots (Mehta 2005). Even non-academic attempts like the acclaimed documentary by Anand Patwardhan *Father, Son and Holy War* (1994) clearly demonstrate this link.

years of the twentieth century was a moment of engendering, when a certain set of qualities were represented as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ (Devika 2002: 11-17). The discourses of social reform which concentrated on community formation through caste and community organizations and on uplifting themselves through modern education, engagement with new economic systems and raising the status of women, inadvertently established the normative roles for men and women in Kerala. Devika’s work brings out an element of performance in the notion of the ‘masculine’ public and the ‘feminine’ private by complicating the spatial metaphors.³⁵ She argues that it was possible for a woman to be in the public but necessarily as a private being by adhering to certain norms and through participating in certain activities that were deemed ‘feminine’ (Devika 2003: 204).

Recent works on masculinity demonstrate an important point of difference from these earlier works in that they are rooted mostly in the discipline of anthropology. My suggestion is not that there are no studies that employ other disciplinary frameworks. There are a few historical and sociological studies on masculinity, but that the emphasis seems to be on tools like ethnography.³⁶ The

³⁵ The story of the first ever stage actress in Kerala bears out this interesting observation. Ikkavamma, who was the first woman to act in a play, took on a male role at a time when men used to play female parts (Sajitha 2005: 14). It is significant that she had to play a male role as both the women who performed on stage were considered to be lacking in respectability. It also seems that Ikkavamma was trying to deal with such a situation by performing the male on stage. The gender of the performer gets attached to the gender of the character s/he is performing on stage.

³⁶ For recent historical works, see Sen 2004; Chaudhary 2004; Hansen 2004. Another important strand in the study of masculinity is that of examining representations like calendar art (Jain 2004),

introduction to one of the first volumes dedicated to the study of masculinity takes to task “the dominance of history as *the* language of social analysis in South Asian studies” (Srivastava 2004a: 17, emphasis in the original) and suggests that the “too-easy dismissals of ‘ethnography’ has led to simplistic representations of the postcolonised present” (*ibid*: 17). The emphasis on a historically informed ethnography, suggests Srivastava, “will go some way towards exploring the complexities of the present” (*ibid*: 17). The anthropological turn presents us with some points of departure for understanding the current interest in studies on masculinity.

In contrast to Indian scholarship, the earliest work on masculinity in the West came out from the discipline of anthropology (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994).³⁷ With their focus on initiation rituals and rights of passage towards manhood in ‘primitive societies’, that is, in the colonies, Western anthropologists have been interested in the gender of ‘men’. These works, though always about the ‘other’, did complicate the equation between ‘human’ and ‘man’ that seems to have been taken for granted in most of modern political thought. But

cinema (Vasudevan 2004; Gabriel 2004; Pandey 2004) literature (Monti 2004), and Urdu poetry (Petievich 2004).

³⁷ To date, anthropology continues to be an important discipline carrying out masculinity related research. A recent collection devoted to research on masculinity in the Middle East focuses for the most part on “the formal sites where exemplary masculinities are ‘made’” such as initiation rituals like circumcision, institutions like the military etc. (Sinclair-Webb 2000: 10) demonstrates the continuing interest in initiation rituals for men. See Conway-Long 1994 for a discussion of theoretical issues involved in the anthropological studies on masculinity.

anthropological studies, as have been noted by many, remained oblivious to the processes of gendering, among other things, of the dominant. Although Srivastava warns us against a disdain for anthropology, some of the structures of power that produce the anthropological gaze seem to be in place in the recent work on masculinity in India. A glance through the literature will show us that most of these studies concentrate on urban lower class men (Indukuri 2002; Srivastava 2004b, 2004c), men from rural India (Chopra 2004, 2005), Dalit men (Anandhi, Jayaranjan and Krishnan 2002) or Muslim men (Walle 2004; Mookherjee 2004; Hameed 2002).³⁸ Apart from this apparent pattern of studying the ‘other’, thus abdicating the investigation of dominant male subjectivities, there is a restaging of some of the classical anthropological crises in the theoretical elaborations of the anthropological interest in masculinities. Radhika Chopra’s discussion of the ‘ethnographer’s dilemma’ presents the problem of access to the space of the ‘other’ as though it were specific to the female ethnographer studying masculinity (Chopra 2004: 36-37). She laments: “whole arenas of life (of men in rural Punjab) were invisible to me. My gender had *everything* to do with what I could know” (*ibid*: 37, emphasis added). Her way of getting around this problem is to suggest that she is indeed presenting a partial picture and that she has no claims to speaking about “Punjabi masculinity” (*ibid*: 39). The specificity that she attaches

³⁸ Srivastava, in defence of the research on ‘other’ men, argues that his work

... on non-middle class contexts is [...] an attempt to insert a somewhat different post colonized context into the rapidly expanding canon of ‘postcolonial studies’ with its substantial focus on English language sources, upon ‘colonial discourse’, and the cultural strategies of transnational diaspora (Srivastava 2004b: 343).

to this problem (as a problem of the female anthropologist researching on men) and her resolution are not convincing, as she does not address the problem of representation which is central to any ethnographic enterprise. Rather than recognizing that “[E]thnographic truths are ... inherently *partial* – committed and incomplete” (Clifford 1986: 7, emphasis in the original) and that “a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tract” (*ibid*: 7), she presents her ethnographic work as a limited version of a possible full picture.³⁹ Chopra also constructs an opposition between the genders (between the subject and the researcher) in concrete terms – an opposition that should be the object of inquiry rather than its foundation. It is not my intention at this point to embark upon a critique of anthropological method but only to point out symptomatically that one cannot wish away the critiques of classical anthropology such as the issue of power relations between the researcher and the subject, the question of location, especially in terms of its foundational character, and the need to take on board strategies of representation in our reading of ethnography.

There is another route through which we could historicize the emergence of anthropology as the central discipline in the study of masculinity in the last years of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first. This is connected with the historical location the discipline has enjoyed in India in the

³⁹ Clifford, discussing the ethnographic work of Richard Price, argues that the work demonstrates that “the fact that acute political and epistemological self consciousness need not lead to ethnographic self absorption, *or to the conclusion that it is impossible to know anything certain about other people*” (Clifford 1986: 7, emphasis added).

post independence period and its position in the last years of the twentieth century. Anthropology in India has existed in conjuncture with sociology, apart from its endeavour to study tribal communities. In the words of Mary E John, “If anthropology departments were made to house the study of our tribal peoples, the *Adivasis*, [...] sociology came to inherit British social anthropology and that unique “gatekeeper” of Indian society, “homo hierarchicus”” (John 1996a: 123).⁴⁰ In this form of social anthropology, the discipline of anthropology has been tied to other disciplines like economics in order to become part of the nationalist developmentalist project in the decades following national independence.⁴¹ In recent times, with the increasing NGOisation of the development sector, these disciplines have become important tools of interventionist research. Many of the researchers and activists working in the field of masculinity point to the fact of an important shift in the developmentalist vocabulary of international donor agencies, including the United Nations, OXFAM and more recently the Ford Foundation, which has had an impact on the burgeoning interest in masculinity.⁴² The

⁴⁰ See also John 2001 for a discussion of the lineages of Indian sociology.

⁴¹ The ‘village studies’ model, starting from the influential works of social anthropologists like MN Srinivas, is a good example of this kind of endeavour. See Srinivas 1976. A representative collection of articles on ‘the village’ in India can be seen in Madan 2002. Mary John argues that it is indeed the interest in “the critical spheres of family and marriage”(2001: 251) that made sociology in India aligned with the post independence nationalist project. For a discussion of the role of social anthropology in post independence India, see also Deshpande 2003: 9-18.

⁴² ‘Save the Children (UK)’ along with UNICEF had commissioned a set of documentaries on masculinities in South Asia including Rahul Roy’s ‘When Four Friends Meet’ from India. UNIFEM’s violence against women campaign is also involved in raising questions about masculinity. See the concept note for the first series of travelling seminars by the noted

significant conceptual move in all this has been the one from ‘Women in Development (WID)’ to ‘Gender and Development (GAD)’ in the developmental discourse, in recent times (Sweetman 1997: 2).⁴³ This shift, suggests Andrea Cornwall, helps us to recognize that “[M]en who have already begun to embrace change are allies, rather than part of ‘the enemy’”, and that “opportunities should be made to involve them more in Gender and Development work” (Cornwall 1997: 12). Attempting to historicize the consequences of the shift to GAD in India, Mary E John cautions us to be “wary of the kind of confident proclamations about gender that are increasingly in evidence in development circles” (John 1999: 118), and argues that the shift is made possible by a series of changes in the language of international donor agencies, where narratives of the ‘exploitation’ of rural women have given way to those of their ‘efficiency’ (*ibid*: 113), and “development increasingly being referred to as a *social* issue rather than an economic or political one” (*ibid*: 114, emphasis in the original).⁴⁴ She argues that the discussions on gender tend to “collapse back onto women” (*ibid*: 120) and by

documentary filmmaker Rahul Roy for an overview of early initiatives in masculinity research funding (Roy 2002).

⁴³ The GAD approach signals three departures from WID. First, the focus shifts from women to gender and the unequal power relations between women and men. Second, all social, political and economic structures and development are re examined from the perspective of gender differentials. Third, it is recognized that gender equality requires transformative change. (United Nations statement quoted in Roy 2002)

⁴⁴ For a discussion of the directions taken by the development discourse in post independence India, with specific reference to women as subjects of development, see John 2002.

extension reinforce the man/woman binary in newer terms, by demonising men from the exploited sections of the society. I argue that it is in this context that men, especially those from marginalized sections, get foregrounded as objects of research as gendered beings and therefore as ideal sites for research into masculinity.

I argue further that the structures of institutionalisation of critical categories need to be understood as part of a larger picture. The anthropological project, alongside the developmentalist agendas of interventionist NGOs, has created a situation where the equation of 'men' and 'masculinity' emerges as a methodological issue, especially in the context of the slippage between gender and women as mentioned above. It needs to be noted that this equation, that is, between 'men' and 'masculinity' – is not theorized in most of the research that is being carried out. Here, the sites of research are always already understood as masculine only because men populate these sites. Thus in the work on 'sex clinics', consumption practices of men become the site for the study of masculinity (Srivastava 2004c) and the all-male pilgrimage to the South Indian shrine of Sabarimala is understood as a site for studying masculinity (Osella and Osella 2003), without elaborating the ways in which these practices constitute the subject's masculinity. The 'men and masculinity' paradigm is deployed in such a way that it begins by positing a false equation between the two terms – 'men' and 'masculinity' – as a premise. The project is then to demolish this premise with 'discoveries' such as, "rather than falling into 'hegemonic' or 'dominant' or 'the rest', men live along a continuum in which certain material goals are appropriate

for all and pursued by the majority” (Chopra et al 2004: 16). In other words: men do not fit neatly into clearly defined notions of masculinity. What is missed here is the crucial fact that it is the premise itself that has presented this flawed possibility in the first place.

Recent scholarship on gender has demonstrated that this link is tenuous. It has been argued that even when the pressures of heteronormative patriarchal structures attempt to congeal masculinity and male bodies, the discursive regime of masculinity could be tracked best by dissociating it from specific bodies (Sedgwick 1995; Butler 1993, 1995; Halberstam 1998). Notions of masculinity exist as attributes not only of men but also of women or even inanimate objects, characteristics and feelings. The implied relationship between male bodies and masculinity presents us with an understanding of the sex/gender divide where ‘sex’ is seen as existing *a priori* and gender as a set of attributes that are added on.⁴⁵ This aspect of the argument will be taken up for a detailed discussion later in this chapter.

The works I have mentioned above – the ones on sex clinics and male pilgrimage – could be considered ethnographies of men rather than studies of masculinity. To be fair to anthropology, the unexamined slippage between ‘men’

⁴⁵ An important intervention from the discipline of film studies had suggested an argument similar to the performativity theories as early as the mid 1970s. Laura Mulvey’s suggestion that the spectator is gendered male, irrespective of the viewer being male or female, actually points to this argument. See Mulvey 1975/1999, 1989.

and ‘masculinity’ as the object of analysis is common even to studies on representations. Here ‘men’ amounts to the idea of the ‘masculine’, as is seen in the case of analyses of films like *Hey Ram* (dir: Kamal Hassan, 2000) in the context of Hindu nationalism (Gabriel 2004) and the changes to the images of the Hindu deity Ram in post independence India. The attempt in such writings is to analyse the formation of male subjectivities in order to understand notions of masculinity. The assumption here is that the category ‘men’ is saturated by ‘gender’. A problem arises when “an inquiry begins with the presupposition that everything pertaining to men can be classified as masculinity, and everything that can be said about masculinity pertains in the first place to men” (Sedgwick 1995: 12). Taking a cue from the debates within feminist anthropology on the use of categories ‘women’ and ‘gender’, one could agree with Mary John (discussing research on women as opposed to gender) that research on men “runs the danger of presuming a set of common meanings and connections when such meanings are precisely what need to be explored” (John 1996a: 75).

As one of the claims of the developmentalist discourse is in the nature of interventions in the name of emancipation of women, the political space that is imagined by these studies and their interventions needs closer analysis. At one level we find efforts made by activists and filmmakers to involve men in projects that attempt to rectify gender hierarchies, but on the other we see writings claiming legitimacy for men’s collectives of various kinds. It is important to note at this juncture that, the period that has seen the emergence of ‘masculinity’ as a social science concept in India is also the same period when a number of men’s

organizations have emerged in the country. There have been attempts at imagining political collectives of men claiming to support feminist initiatives as is the case with organizations like The Mumbai-based group Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA), the Pune-based *Purush Uvach* and other scattered attempts in cities like Thiruvananthapuram.⁴⁶ Other groups like the *Purush Hakka Samrakshan Samiti* based in Nasik and Mumbai, and *Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi* based in Kottayam, are collectives that organize men as victims of legal reform. The same period has also seen the emergence of popular lifestyle magazines for men in various languages in India, some of which are *Gentleman* and *Men's World* in English and *Sreeman* in Malayalam. Here I concentrate on the first kind of organization, with its claim to progressive politics.⁴⁷ These organizations critique feminism for not taking into account the gendering of men in its political enterprise, and 'women's studies' for usurping the space of 'gender studies', thus disallowing the possibility of studying men as gendered beings, especially with reference to the pressures placed on them (Kulkarni 2005: 57).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ MAVA along with *Purush Uvach* brings out an annual Marathi publication on men and masculinity, called *Purush Spandan*.

⁴⁷ See Section 2 of Chapter IV for a detailed discussion of one of the organizations of the latter kind, the *Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi*.

⁴⁸ Kulkarni writes:

The feminist provenance of gender studies led to its implicit equation with women's studies. Consequently, even as research on various aspects of women's lives proliferated, the domain of masculinity remained a rather dark subcontinent. The emerging discipline of men's studies seeks to redress this imbalance (Kulkarni 2005: 57-58).

The premise of this argument is that men, like women, are victims of patriarchy and this in turn disallows them to be expressive about their feelings and emotions (Seidler 1989: 143-176). Jeff Hearn writes:

While Betty Friedan... wrote of the problem that has no name when speaking of women's confinement to the private world of domesticity, men may need to address both our private subjectivity as well as the problem of public men that has no name. ... I am not suggesting that men in public is a problem comparable to women in private; rather, I am thinking that the problem of public men is the problem that comes from power and domination, and from its non-recognition- the problems of separation from the private domains, of the public domains being 'normal', 'neutral', and 'objective', of there being no language to make this *objectifying* sphere the object not the subject of knowledge (Hearn 1992: 18, emphasis in the original).

This misplaced idea that the pressures placed on men and women in relation to their socializations are of a comparable order, and the blindness to the

Even the one essay that tries to argue that feminism's focus on women is legitimate, argues for a "feminist theory for *men*" (Das 1998: 38, emphasis in the original) on the premise of the unease men feel about being left out of feminism's concerns. Here is how the discomfort is expressed:

The silence is also on the part of the seething discourse of feminism and gender, that quite legitimately focuses on the 'women' – her agency, identity and resistance – and yet to him it seems, a bit too forgetful of him, the *man* not comfortable, not complicit with his gendered identity, an experience he has to live through (*ibid*: 38, emphasis in the original).

equations of power that socialization bring about, results in the equating of men and women as victims of patriarchy. The deployment of notions of masculinities and femininities at different moments in history has placed different pressures on men and women. This has been demonstrated by works as diverse as those on the 'nationalist resolution of the women's question' (Chatterjee 1989), Sati (Mani 1989), the devadasi system (Nair 1996; Tharu and Lalitha 1993), the representation of women in the films of Mani Ratnam (Niranjana 1994, 1999) or the recent anthropological work on youth in Kerala which argues that the effects of commodification of masculinity and femininity has been different in that the latter has to take on the burdens of 'locality' unlike the former (Lukose 2000: 34). The arguments about men's subjugation within patriarchy are usually followed by a call for emancipation with the assumption that men have a lot to gain from such an endeavour.⁴⁹ These arguments ignore the fact that it is not necessarily in the interest of men to be emancipated from their masculinity, as it would be a refusal of a position of power. Writers putting forth this argument suggest that there is an urgent need to put together a 'Men's Studies' discipline along the lines of the 'Men's Studies' programmes of various Western universities (Kulkarni 2005: 57-59). It can be observed that there is a circular mode of thinking that is employed here. We noted earlier that this argument proceeds from the suggestion that 'Women's Studies' has usurped 'Gender Studies'. Then, it hardly follows that 'Men's Studies' can resolve the crisis, as it would be replicating what 'Women's Studies' has apparently done. In its attempt to emulate the 'Women's Studies'

⁴⁹ Here is a call to action addressing men: "... men may lose more than their chains, but they surely have a whole world to gain" (Kulkarni 2001).

model, the 'Men's Studies' initiative ignores the political history of the constitution of the former, where it came out of a vibrant women's movement and a critique of the social sciences for being oblivious to the gendered nature of their frameworks.⁵⁰ The call for 'Men's Studies' in India follows the work of a stream of academics in the United States who call themselves 'pro-feminist' (Whitehead 2002).⁵¹ It is historically incorrect to suggest that Women's Studies usurped the space of Gender Studies, since the subject of study was always meant to be women and since the category 'women' emerged out of a political critique which tried to understand the patriarchal structures which order our everyday lives.

It is also important to note that there is a benevolent othering of both feminism and queer theory in the slogan that Indian academics have borrowed from the men's movements in the United States. This slogan is that of the National Organization of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS), a country wide network of academics and activists interested in issues of masculinity active in the United States for about three decades: "profeminist, gay affirmative, male affirmative"

⁵⁰ The papers presented at a round table at the seminar 'Engendering Disciplines/ Disciplining Gender' organized by Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi in February 2001 provide us with historical and political contexts that made the emergence of 'Women's Studies' possible. The papers, with an introduction by Mary E John, have been collected in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 9: 2 (2002).

⁵¹ Stephen Whitehead defines profeminists as those men "... who seek to develop 'a critique of men's practice' informed by feminism, while recognizing that their position as men is founded on continuing inequalities between women and men"(Whitehead 2002: 66). See also Whitehead and Barrett 2001 for a detailed discussion of this position.

(Brod 1998: 197-198).⁵² The heterosexual location from where this slogan is being raised is clear from its first two segments- 'profeminist' and 'gay affirmative' and also from suggestions like “[A]s many women’s studies programs move towards gender studies, masculinity may take its place *alongside* courses on gay/ lesbian/ queer topics” (Adams and Sarvan 2002: 7, emphasis added). The description ‘male affirmative’, on the other hand, assumes a pre-discursive maleness, as in the work of Harry Brod who talks about the “the actual or potential humanity or humaneness of persons of the male sex” (Brod 1998: 198).⁵³ This understanding of masculinity, one that argues that the male body – always already invested with certain neutral values of humanism – exists *a priori* to the performance of masculinity, is common in any number of studies, especially in those that look at subaltern men as their subjects of inquiry (for example, see Anandhi et al 2002). Here again an understanding of gender that is based on the notion of a sex/gender division is at play. The need to resist this binary and the idea that ‘sex’ or the biological determinant is pre-discursive, is asserted by Judith Butler who argues,

⁵² Apart from the profeminist positioning of masculinity studies, there exist two other streams of interest in masculinities that exist in the United States. One argument is explicitly anti-feminist, arguing that feminism has emasculated men. The other stream talks about emasculation and the possibility of retrieval of masculinity using mythic figures.

⁵³ Kauffman argues that

... the acquisition of hegemonic (and most subordinate) masculinities is a process through which men come to suppress a range of emotions, needs, and possibilities such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy and compassion, which are experienced as inconsistent with the power of manhood (Kauffman 1994: 148).

In this formulation, ‘men’ as sexed beings seem to exist prior to their ‘acquisition of hegemonic or subordinate masculinities’.

‘[S]ex’ is, ..., not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility (Butler 1993: 2).

Discussing the relationship between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, she writes:

If gender consists of social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not *accrue* social meanings as additive properties but, rather, *is replaced by* the social meanings it takes on; sex is relinquished in the course of that assumption, and gender emerges, not as a term in a continued relationship of opposition to sex, but as a term which absorbs and displaces “sex”, the mark of its full substantiation into gender or what, from a materialistic point of view, might constitute a full *desubordination* (*ibid*: 5, emphasis in the original).

Butler's notion of ‘performativity’ (*ibid*: 12-16) might help us avoid the constructivist model that we have just encountered – one that inadvertently relies on biological determinism by suggesting that the ‘male body’ precedes ‘masculinity’.⁵⁴ It is by positing such a binary that men’s studies could claim a

⁵⁴ Performativity is [...] not a singular “act”, for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition. Moreover, this act is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity). Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names (Butler 1993: 12).

‘male affirmative’ position *a priori* to performances of masculinity. The notion of ‘sexual difference’, which is employed in this argument, similar to the one noted earlier in relation to the work of Radhika Chopra, understands it as fixed and as a foundational difference. In contrast, following Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell in an interview with Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, I would suggest that it is important that we understand sexual difference as something that is deployed in different ways in different historical-cultural contexts towards re-inscribing heteronormative notions in contemporary culture (as quoted in Cheah and Grosz 1998: 29-30).⁵⁵ I argue that it is important to retain this idea in the study of masculinity and that there is an urgent need to venture into an analysis of the discourse of masculinity precisely to understand the contexts in which it is deployed and the political nature of such deployments.

The Current Project: Pulls and Pressures

In 2001, when I hit upon the idea of researching masculinity in Kerala, I had decided that my emphasis would be on understanding the link between masculinity and sexual violence. The immediate cause of this concern was the public debate around the incident of sexual harassment of PE Usha. It was evident from that debate that a notion of patriarchy was insufficient to explain its contours, as there was more than a simple structure of hierarchy between men and

⁵⁵ Butler writes, “The so called deconstruction of the real, ..., is not a simple negation or thorough dismissal of any ontological claim, but constitutes an interrogation of the construction and circulation of what counts as an ontological claim” (Butler 2000: 487).

women that was at issue here. The progressive or even feminist positions seemed inadequate in pointing out the specific historical and cultural repositories which informed the language that structured our understanding of the incident. In the discussion of the incident which employed the concept of patriarchy for analysis, it was the case that women who took Usha's side were progressive and those who supported the other side were understood to have false consciousness. The analysis of gender by the progressives was full of rhetoric about gender inequality without any attempt to engage with the incident and the ensuing debate in concrete ways so as to further our understanding of gender dynamics in Kerala society. Also, at a time when the foundations of ontologically coherent categories of 'women', and by inference 'men', were being challenged (as I have demonstrated above), the universalist deployment of 'patriarchy' as a structure which governs man-woman relationships seems to be inadequate to explain the complex performative structures of gender in the everyday.

I argue that new light could be thrown not only on the issue at hand, but also on the dynamics of gender in Kerala, by recasting the debate around the sexual harassment of PE Usha in relation to a discourse of masculinity and the established orders of sexual difference. The proposed research project tries to engage with the epistemological strides made by feminism, especially in the Indian context. I would like to sidestep the debates around the role of men in feminism, as I suggest that the political/epistemological location occupied by this project vis-à-vis feminism, is to be evaluated in the context of the large corpus of work informed by the latter, and not through a self-validating theoretical exercise

where a feminist (progressive) location is claimed by the project itself.⁵⁶ The impulse to freeze the two categories of ‘men’ and ‘feminism’, the former as a fully formed identity category and the latter as a fully imaginable and bounded field, needs to be resisted. I would still like to note that research by men on issues of gender including the present one seems to be responding, however belatedly, to one of the challenges feminist theorists have posed to men interested in feminism about their hesitancy to deal with masculinity and “their own implication and accountability within the gendering process” (John 1996a: 19).⁵⁷ Mary John

⁵⁶ Sandra Harding argues that there is a significant difference between men referring to their own or other men’s work as feminist, and women referring to men’s work as feminist. She writes:

[M]en would be the least likely group to be able to detect whether their own or anyone else’s (men’s or women’s) beliefs and actions do actually meet some set or other of feminist standards. Because the prevailing social institutions and discourses have been designed largely to match the understandings of men in the social groups that design and maintain such institutions, professional and administrative, men would be least likely to be able to detect how those institutions and discourses do not serve women, or do not serve them as well as they do men (Harding 1998: 173).

Though the distinctions between men and women in recognizing the experience of gender are too clearly marked in this argument, the political impulses behind it are well founded. Her essay, discussing the role that is envisaged for men as subjects of feminist thought in various strands of feminism, provides a strong case for men doing feminism. On the other hand, the anxieties of the male theorist in relation to his position vis-à-vis feminism are demonstrated in Stephen Heath’s highly confused/confusing essay on ‘male feminism’ (Heath 1986/1987). The desire to theoretically posit the possibility of men doing feminism (whatever that might mean) is undercut by an ethical question as to whether it is the right position that *should* be taken (*ibid*: 9). See also Jardine and Smith 1987 and Digby 1998 for articles discussing on the role of men in feminism.

⁵⁷ Mary John analyses Stephen Heath’s discussion of the role of men in feminism and argues that even when he engages with the possibility that men take up masculinity for analysis he shies away from it as though “the shift from the “universal” to the “masculine”, though easy to name, is still being resisted” (John 1996a: 149, en 35).

suggests that the connection between women and knowledge about them is “far from being *a priori*, [...], is a *result*, struggled for, constantly renegotiated and learned anew” (*ibid*: 19, emphasis in the original). In the light of this suggestion, I present my work as the elaboration of a struggle to understand my own experience as a man encountering my gendered self in an attempt “to come to terms with ... [my own] complicities and sanctioned ignorances” (*ibid*: 20) in relation to discourses of masculinity and by extension gendered orderings of our contemporary lives.⁵⁸ The notion of ‘struggle’ as used here stresses the fact that the incompleteness of the project of linking up experiences and the knowledge about it is not a failure, and that such an incompleteness is foundational to it.

One of the first problems I encountered was that of defining the concept of ‘masculinity’. The literature on masculinity available to me then, as well as my own commonsense, equated masculinity with power, aggression and violence. The universalism inherent in the link seemed *prima facie* suspicious, as it is impossible to imagine that notions of masculinity could remain the same across time and space. Then I encountered my second problem – the presumed connection between ‘men’ and ‘masculinity’. There is a definitive link between the two problems: at one level, the suggestion that masculinity is a set of traits (keeping the specific ones mentioned above in abeyance for the moment) complicates the supposed fit between men and masculinity. Such confusions do emerge as a

⁵⁸ Here I am using the discussion in Mary John’s work about the need for locating one’s own work vis-à-vis the point of enunciation as an internal debate that has developed within feminism, to talk about this work and to discuss the issue of men doing feminist work. See John 1996a: 18-22.

methodological problem in any number of instances in the body of writing available on the topic. For example, in their essay on the all-male pilgrimage to the South Indian temple of Sabarimala, Filippo and Caroline Osella tend to misread this as a performance of masculinity to the extent of mistaking the deity of the temple, Lord Ayyappa, a boy-God, as hyper-masculine (Osella and Osella 2003: 730).⁵⁹ Here the only explanation one can offer for such a mistake is the attempt to presuppose the masculine anxieties that underlie the pilgrimage as emanating from the need to conserve masculine energy through renunciation and further to assume that there is a universally identifiable pattern in relation to masculinity, a pattern in which the God of a masculine space cannot be anything but hyper-masculine. It could, I concede, be safely argued that such ideas about the link between masculinity and power are constantly used for purposes of universalising the contours of sexual difference. On the other hand, more significant and more subtle ways of understanding the constitution of masculine identity are passed over in the over emphasis on such ideas.⁶⁰ My decision was

⁵⁹ I am not suggesting here that there is anything fundamentally wrong with looking at the pilgrimage to Sabarimala as constituting certain notions of masculinity among the devotees but that the haste with which it is done produces commonsensical conclusions. This prompts the authors to get into psychological reasoning that renunciation as opposed to repression is the foundation for male subject formation in India (Osella and Osella 2003: 744-748).

⁶⁰ A simple exercise will clarify the point. If you ask a bunch of students in a class to classify characteristics of men and women, in most cases they will come up with simple binaries of man/woman = strength/weakness, intelligence/emotion, rational/irrational, culture/nature etc. It would be unproductive or even naïve to imagine these as the specific narratives of sexual difference that structure their own subjectivities in relation to notions of masculinity. It would indeed be the reasons for their lack of belief in these universalist notions of masculinity that might give us clues about the historical/cultural specificity of the discourse of masculinity.

thus to resist defining the term ‘masculinity’ prior to my analyses of the material that I examine. I decided to allow the available material to provide its own definition(s) of masculinity. The assumption has been that the debate under examination – the debate around the sexual harassment of PE Usha – is organised using specific notions of masculinity and that these will emerge from my analysis of the material itself. I will get into a detailed discussion of my use of the term ‘masculinity’ in Chapter II.

Once I had decided on the two key concepts around which my work is organized- ‘masculinity’ and the historical/cultural entity ‘Kerala’ – I needed to decide on the scope of the project and the nature of the link that I was to propose. Here I encountered the most complex question I had to deal with – the disciplinary space occupied by this project. The question of disciplinary location is also linked to the methodological lineages which it has to confront, and to the scope of the project.

Situated in a relatively new field in India, Cultural Studies, this project had to historicize and rationalize not only its own disciplinary baggage, that is, the researcher's training in English Studies, but also Cultural Studies itself, as seen from the vantage point of English Studies. These anxieties could be rephrased as questions thus, ‘what does it mean to do Cultural Studies in India today?’ and ‘how does one negotiate training in classical disciplines, in this case literary studies, within this new disciplinary space?’

What follows is an attempt to think through the biography of the development of the project in terms of my own negotiations with disciplinary and methodological issues. A student of literature at the end of the 1990s already enters a field that has experienced a lively debate around its historical and political validity (Joshi 1991; Sundar Rajan 1991; Viswanathan 1990; Tharu 1997). The ‘crisis in English studies’ arguments had at the very least opened up the canon to include a wide variety of literary traditions like Indian Writing in English and Commonwealth Literature. My own literature classroom had separated out the classical canons, which were taught using more or less traditional methods of universalist aesthetic appraisals, from other newly constituted courses where one did encounter a few historical and contextual questions. An issue seldom addressed was that of re-evaluating the notion of literature itself by asking questions about print history, readership and the contexts of circulation. It was their own independent venturing out into the social science disciplines, especially sociology and political theory, and the attempts to think through the role of literary products in our society through the intersections with the knowledges produced within these disciplines, that opened up a space like Cultural Studies for students of literature in the 1990s. This helped us to use literature in new ways to ask questions which would be seen to be outside the disciplinary space of literary studies by its practitioners. In the specific instance of this research project, the issue at hand was: if I were to theorize masculinity and sexual violence and to think through the causal links between the two, how was my training in literary studies going to help me?

The foray into the institutional/disciplinary domain of ‘Cultural Studies’, accidental though it may have been in my own autobiography, opened up the space for rethinking the disciplinary histories that I carried. Believing that the answer lay in history, I began to write a social history of Kerala from the mid-nineteenth century to the contemporary, using ‘masculinity’ as the central problematic. I envisaged the study as including archival research and textual analysis spanning this whole period. The unviable nature of the project in relation to one’s own disciplinary limitations, the causal links one was trying to build between a discourse of masculinity as produced by the archives and its supposed ontological referent, the anxieties about entering an archive with an already worked out research question, and especially the move away from the contemporary issues of sexual violence in Kerala soon compelled me to reformulate the project. It became apparent that I had to rethink my relationship with my parent discipline, in this case literature. My entry into Cultural Studies as an interdisciplinary field had introduced me not only to social science research in India but also to the study of diverse materials like cinema and other ‘non-literary’ forms, with emphasis on disciplinary/political self reflexivity. The challenge at this point was to re-inscribe my own disciplinary background onto the newly constituted field of study. Textual analysis made a come back into the scheme at this moment along with reflections on the circulation of the written word and visual image in Kerala. In this context, the description of my project as a Cultural Studies project is premised on two aspects – first, a negative definition coming out of the recognition of a space that is outside yet trespassing the space of traditional humanities/social science disciplines and the second, a positive description about

the interface between textual analysis and the knowledge produced by the social sciences.⁶¹

It was also decided that the research would follow my own thought processes, starting exactly where I had begun my investigation – at the University of Calicut in 2000-2001, where PE Usha was taking on the University officials, and in the general structures of patriarchy that organized day to day life in Kerala. My investigation into the link between notions of masculinity and the public domain in contemporary Kerala would begin by analysing the debates around Usha's struggle. Such a move facilitated the re-inscription of my own self as an important subject of my research. By translating the thought processes that went on to become a research agenda into questions of methodology, I was investigating the discourse of masculinity that produces and structures my own

⁶¹ The self-description of Cultural Studies is still that it is a field that is hesitant to confine itself to boundaries traditionally maintained by established disciplines and that it is impossible to think of a specific methodology for it. This seemed to be an accepted logic around which the discussions at the conference 'Cultural Studies: Taking Stock' organized by the Centre for Cultural Studies, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad in August 2005 took place. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha usefully pointed out in response to the keynote address delivered by Susie Tharu at the conference, the issue at hand – one which is crying out for attention – seems to be that of curriculum formation, which he argued was by definition a conservative enterprise, rather than the question of the political history of the discipline or the pedagogic innovations in the classroom. For early attempts to think through the space occupied by Cultural Studies in India, see the special issue of *Seminar* on the topic, edited by Anjan Ghosh. *Seminar*, No. 446, October 1996. Especially useful are the introduction by the editor and articles by Mary John (John 1996b) and Madhava Prasad (Prasad 1996). In response to the hesitancy of self-definition, I believe that it is high time that the discipline describes itself in positive terms, as its rapid institutionalisation demands such a move.

identity as an upper caste, middle class heterosexual Malayalee man, in constant negotiation with the politics of gender in contemporary Kerala. Rather than being an ingenious way of listing out the various markers of my identity in an attempt to escape criticisms about my complicity with my own location of enunciation, the above statement is intended to suggest ways in which the following work is framed, especially in relation to the vantage point that is assumed.

The next chapter presents a detailed analysis of the writings produced around the incident of sexual harassment of PE Usha. The various notions of masculinity that get narrativised in the debate will be teased out in the chapter. In doing so it will also discuss in detail the key terms, *masculinity* and *public domain*, which form the axes along which the discussion of Kerala's modernity, with emphasis on the structuring of the public domain in contemporary Kerala, is plotted.

Chapter II

An Incident in Narrative: Discourse of Masculinity and Public Domain in Contemporary Kerala

Introduction

This chapter attempts to work out the relationship between the structuring of the *public domain* and the *discourse of masculinity* in contemporary Kerala. In doing so, it will try to argue that, 1) The gendering of the public needs to be understood in its cultural and historical specificities, and 2) Such an attempt will have to take on board not only the specific historic and cultural contexts of the moment under study but also the historical trajectories that make such a linkage possible. Taking up the debates around the sexual harassment of PE Usha, a non-teaching employee at the University of Calicut (Kerala) for analysis, the chapter will argue for the need for a conjunctural understanding of history in our attempts to theorize the contemporary.

The need to foreground history for a better understanding of the contemporary has become part of commonsense in the social sciences. As more and more commentators on the contemporary go back to history to seek explanations, it is important that we ask the question, what is the power of history to throw light on the present? Or, to put it differently, what is the relationship

between history and the present? This chapter will argue that more than historical continuities, we should pay attention to the complex nature of historical memory that constructs contemporary culture. Thus my attempt here is to reverse the recent interest in historical memory and narratives as a way of reconstructing the past, by using memories and narratives of different historical events and moments to understand a single incident in the present.¹ In the reversal that I am attempting, I try to trace back the historical lineages of an incident that happened in 1999 to some of the well-remembered annals of the history of Kerala's modernity. By doing so, I attempt to foreground the historical significance of the event under consideration and also to read the history of Kerala's modernity differently through the lens of the present-day discourse of gender in Kerala.

I argue that the public domain in Kerala is constructed and structured by various notions of masculinity. It is imperative that genealogies of these notions of masculinity are produced to understand the contemporary through its historical lineages.² Such an endeavour, I submit, would help us not only to understand our

¹ An important example of the former kind of historical work is Shahid Amin's writing on the notorious burning down of a police station at Chauri Chaura during the nationalist struggle in 1922, where he tries to reconstruct the incident through narratives that followed it and by interviewing the villagers after almost seventy years (Amin 1995). See also Chatterjee 2002.

² Michel Foucault has elaborated the idea of 'genealogy' as opposed to 'history' in his seminal essay 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' (1971/1984) where he suggests that a genealogist unlike a historian tries to understand the history of interpretations rather than to interpret. S/he, he would suggest, does not look for origins or continuities. For a detailed overview of the idea of genealogy, see Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982: 104-117). The much-abused Foucauldian phrase 'history of the present' (Foucault 1979: 31) is significant, as it is in the present that the genealogist anchors his/her inquiry into the past.

history in contemporary terms but also to do a ‘history of the present’. The attempt here is not to search for the origins of these notions of masculinity but to find in Kerala’s history the development of interpretative frames that allow and structure our understanding of the present. The context of an event and the discursive regime that produces it is, I submit, located as much in the past as in the present.

The Incidents – A Reconstruction

PE Usha was sexually harassed while travelling on a bus on 29 December 1999, by Rameshan, a temporary employee of the Regional Engineering College (Kozhikode). She immediately made the driver take the bus to the nearby police station, lodged a complaint and handed over her semen-stained clothes to the police. The police allegedly tried to tamper with the First Information Report (FIR) but timely intervention on Usha’s part, in spite of intimidation by the police, prevented this. Rameshan was eventually charge-sheeted. A couple of days later, Prakashan, another employee of the University of Calicut where Usha worked, allegedly tried to spread stories that she had cooperated with Rameshan in the bus and that it was only when the other passengers in the bus noticed the incident that she felt it necessary to complain in order to protect her reputation. Usha registered a complaint against Prakashan with both the Registrar of the University and the Kerala Women’s Commission (KWC)³ as per the Supreme Court Guidelines on

³ The central government and the state governments in India have constituted the National Commission for Women and the State Commissions for Women respectively to address grievances

Sexual Harassment in the Workplace⁴. As Usha and Prakashan were members of rival unions in the university (he was a member of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) led Employees Union whereas she was part of an 'independent' union unaffiliated to any party), both parties alleged that this rivalry motivated the allegations and the various complaints that were raised in relation to the case.⁵

A series of developments, including the constitution of an 'Anti Harassment Committee' by the University⁶, and Usha's complaint that the committee was partisan and that it was not set up according to the Supreme Court

of women. The Commission is supposed to wield powers equivalent to a Civil Court and can conduct judicial inquiries on its own account.

⁴ The Supreme Court of India had issued a set of guidelines on sexual harassment in the workplace following a case lodged by some social activists and NGOs in Rajasthan following the gang rape of a social activist. The court defined sexual harassment as including such unwelcome sexually determined behaviour (whether directly or by implication) as: (a) physical contact and advances; (b) a demand or request for sexual favours; (c) sexually-coloured remarks; (d) showing pornography; (e) any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature. All public and private sector institutions, according to the guidelines, should constitute their own guidelines and should have a committee headed by a woman to look into sexual harassment cases. See *Visakha vs. State of Rajasthan* 1997.

⁵ It is true that the various service organizations in the university took sides in the issue according to their political affiliation. So the members of the Left organizations came together as the *Campus Manushyavakasha Samrakshana Samithi* (Campus Forum for the Protection of Human Rights) in support of Prakashan and the other organizations including the political rivals of the Left joined hands with Usha. Led by many women's groups, Usha's cause was supported by *PE Usha Eikyadhardya Samithi* (PE Usha Solidarity Forum).

⁶ It is important to note that such an incident and subsequent pressure was needed for the constitution of such a committee, even though the guidelines were in place as early as 1997.

rulings, followed.⁷ By this time, prominent women's groups like Anweshi (Calicut) had come out in support of Usha's claim. Usha filed a case in the High Court questioning the formation of the committee and requesting that Prakashan be punished. The University subsequently constituted a number of committees, but allegedly went on conducting the trial on unfair terms. As Usha had apparently started receiving threats of violence against herself and her ten-year-old daughter from the members of the Employees Union, she took long leave from office and moved to Thiruvananthapuram. She then approached Kerala Sthree Vedi (Kerala Women's Forum), a statewide network of women's groups. On 20 August 2000, she narrated her story as a feature in the Sunday supplement of *Malayala Manorama*, one of the leading Malayalam dailies, and it appeared as a full-page story on its front page (Usha 2000). This resulted in considerable public interest in the matter and made it one of the most discussed incidents in the state. Discussions in all kinds of media followed and various political groups, community organizations and NGOs in the state were forced to take positions on the issue.

⁷ Usha argued that the committee that was formed was not the Sexual Harassment Committee as per the Supreme Court rulings. She argued that such a committee should have women as half its members and that it should consist of one woman from a non-governmental organization who is equipped to handle such issues. She also claimed that most of the members of the committee were of the staff organization favouring Prakashan. See Report submitted by Usha to the Syndicate Sub Committee constituted by the University, conducting hearing on her complaint filed on 4 January 2001. Later, there were also complaints that only members of Prakashan's union were given a chance to speak at the various hearings of the committee.

Meanwhile, the Kerala Women's Commission, which had been very slow in responding to the case, started an inquiry into the matter in September 2000 (following the appearance of the newspaper feature in August), almost nine months after the complaint was filed. After long deliberations, the Commission found Prakashan guilty of offensive behaviour towards Usha and recommended his suspension. The delay in their actions was attributed to one of the members of the KWC, a CPI-M leader, who argued against Usha's interests at the hearings of the Commission and in the media. The University, headed by the Vice Chancellor – noted historian Prof. KKN Kurup, known for his left sympathies – delayed action on the ruling of the KWC and the directives of the Higher Education Principal Secretary of the State Government, who had asked for Prakashan's suspension. More legal battles ensued with Prakashan getting a stay on his suspension on 13 December 2000. The stay was vacated by the High Court later. By then it was February 2001. Instead of complying with the court orders, the University, after much persuasion, convened a Complaints Committee to look into the case, on 28 March 2001.⁸

Usha decided to go on a sit-in strike on April 18 and Prakashan along with his wife Reshmi and child went on a parallel sit-in the following day – both in front of the university administrative office. Usha converted her sit-in to an

⁸ The developments in the case are paraphrased from the 'Calendar of Events' prepared by *PE Usha Eikyadhardya Samithi* (PE Usha Solidarity Forum), which was distributed at a press conference at Calicut Press Club on 6 April 2001, along with the announcement of PE Usha's decision to go on hunger strike.

indefinite fast on April 30. She was arrested on the fourth day and moved to the Calicut Medical College Hospital. After long negotiations by various human rights activists who promised to negotiate with the government for immediate action, and after nine days of fasting, Usha ended her protest. Meanwhile elections to the Kerala State Assembly had taken place and the Congress Party had come to power. Prakashan was later suspended only to be taken back into service after some months. Usha has since moved on deputation to a tribal development project in Attappady in Palakkad district. The court case against Rameshan, the accused in the first incident of sexual harassment went on till 30 December 2005, when the court gave its verdict in favour of Usha.⁹

The incident, the related developments and the discussions that went on for more than a year present us with an interesting archive that could help us gain insight into gender relations in Kerala. Since they are *prima facie* about an issue of *public* significance, as is evident from the overwhelming involvement of individuals and organizations in the debate, the materials also help us to examine the attribution of *publicness* to an event and also the discursive gendering of this public.

⁹ Rameshan was awarded a punishment of rigorous imprisonment for a period of two years by the court. In a recent article, Usha has narrated her experiences starting from the day she was harassed in the bus. This narrative presents the difficulties she had to face from the police and from the law court. See Usha 2006.

Narrative public domain

In the literature on Kerala, ‘public sphere’ always appears as a derivative of the Habermasian notion of the ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1989), with the early decades of the mobilization of members of the working class and the peasantry by the Communist Party seen as the time of the emergence of the ideal public sphere in Kerala. The oft-mentioned difference between the public sphere in the Habermasian model and the public sphere that is supposed to have existed in Kerala, is that, “[U]nlike the ‘bourgeois public sphere’, in Western countries, here it had developed largely under the aegis of the toiling masses contributing to the hegemony of the left in subsequent years” (Ramachandran 1995: 119). Here the desire to invoke the political role assigned to the Habermasian public sphere in eighteenth century Europe but with a proletarian base is part of the left political discourse. This is usually followed by the story of the decline of the politically dynamic public sphere because of a reversal engendered by the infamous *Vimochana Samaram* (The Liberation Struggle)¹⁰, which resulted in the dismissal of the first Communist ministry in 1959, and by the regressive nature of the “culture industry based in Kottayam and Kodambakkam” (Ramachandran 2001:

¹⁰ The *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle) was initiated by the Congress Party, the Church and some of the upper caste organizations, especially the Nair Service Society (NSS). This resulted in the dismissal of the EMS Nambudiripad Ministry in 1959, the first ever dismissal of a state government by the Centre in independent India.

18-19).¹¹ This model, flawed in obvious ways – in that it doesn't take into account the historical specificities of Kerala and deploys the concept of the public sphere only to produce a narrative of a lost golden 'political' past – is mentioned here only to point to the uses to which the notion of public sphere is put in the dominant academic discourse in Kerala. This pushes us to re-imagine the notion of the public and by extension the private for our specific project.

It is evident that there are two incidents represented in the narratives around the sexual harassment of PE Usha – the first is the incident of harassment in the bus and the second is the issue of gossiping. I argue that these ask for separate analyses and different approaches. Invoking the notion of a public sphere which recognizes the spatial ordering of the public and the private and where the public could be defined as spaces and institutions “theoretically open to all” (Habermas 1989: 37), the first – the incident in the bus – is a public one. As far as the second incident, the accusation related to gossiping, is concerned, there seems to be two different kinds of publics at work. The first is a public constituted by spaces and institutions such as the university, the streets, the law court, police

¹¹ Kottayam is a district in Kerala where a number of periodicals are published. Many of these, like *Manorama Weekly*, *Mangalam Weekly* and *Manorajyam* carried popular romances and were cheaply available. Kodambakkam in Tamil Nadu is the place where the South Indian film industry as a whole was based until recently when all the industries apart from the Tamil industry moved to their respective regions.

station and the hospital and a second, which is more conceptual rather than spatial.¹² In a recent article on student politics, Ritty Lukose writes about Kerala:

[T]he idea of the public [...] is both literal and conceptual. Literally it is about the functioning of roads, shops, schools, and workplaces. These public places are linked to the conception of a space of the public, conceptually, through the language of rights, democracy, the people, property, and politics. Literal places are linked to contested conceptual notions of the public (Lukose 2005: 512-513).

This incident of gossiping is the more interesting and challenging aspect of the case.¹³ What I am referring to here is not the narrative that constituted the gossip (the story that was told) but the act of gossiping itself which is a private act. It is in re-figuring gossiping as a public act that Usha seeks legal intervention. This move by Usha engendered a public domain around where the incidents are debated and contested, and significantly a domain where state intervention could be sought.

The refigured status of gossiping as a public act throws up interesting issues in relation to what this thesis would understand as the 'public domain'. In this understanding of the public domain, the spatial organization of the public and the private is not central. Instead, it is the narrativisability of an incident which is

¹² In Usha's own retelling of the story, it is her experiences vis-à-vis the spaces that constitute the first notion of public that get foregrounded. See Usha 2006.

¹³ 'The case' is used throughout this chapter as a shorthand term to denote at once the legal aspect of the incidents and the debates around it.

at stake.¹⁴ *What makes something public then is the potential of narrativisability. I argue that the distinction between the public and the private rests on the potential of an event or an act to become a narrative that is theoretically available to everyone, and that it is the political-historical condition for the production of such narratives that separates the two.* Such a conception of the public assumes it to be “... a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic.... It exists *by virtue of being addressed*” (Warner 2002: 50, emphasis in the original). Warner goes on to suggest that the existence of such a public is contingent upon “... this reflexivity by which an addressable object is conjured into being in order to enable the very discourse that gives it existence” (*ibid*: 51).¹⁵ The narratives thus produced constitute the private as an opaque zone or as a domain which is the constitutive outside of this public. The public domain constituted through narratives would cut across the spatially organized public sphere.

There have been a number of negotiations which the feminist movement in India has entered into, especially on the terrain of law, which foreground the significance of a narrative public. It could be argued that much of the feminist

¹⁴ My attempt is not to reduce the importance of the spatial public nor is it to marginalize the struggles to occupy the public sphere by women and other marginalized groups. The suggestion here is that such a struggle has already been recognized as an ongoing political struggle whereas the narrative public has not received the attention it ought to have.

¹⁵ Warner argues that the chicken and egg circularity of the conception of the public “is essential to the phenomenon” (Warner 2002: 51).

debate in India has functioned by reorganizing the private as the public following the ‘personal is the political’ dictum.¹⁶ Nivedita Menon observes that mobilizations by women’s groups in India have largely taken place in relation to issues of the private domain rather than those of the public (Menon 2004: 12). One of the cases in point here could be the discussion around customary laws, which has had a significant presence in the feminist debates in the country. Mary E. John suggests that it is precisely the issue of the public-private divide that marks an impasse for feminism engaging with the law. Discussing the writings on customary rights, she observes:

... [F]eminists have every reason to be suspicious of the notion of community that is so completely identified with the domain of personal law. For this would mean granting yet another lease of life to the patriarchal equation of the private familial sphere as the privileged site for the reproduction of culture, not, as in the past, against a colonial power, but now in the name of preserving our cultural diversity (John 1998: 202).

One of the ways by which the women’s movement in India has attempted to get around this impasse is by narrativising the private, thus refiguring it as public.¹⁷

¹⁶ Here I have in mind issues such as domestic violence, reproductive rights or sexual harassment, which have been important issues for the women’s movement in India. The argument that these should be brought under the purview of law, for example, makes a case for refiguring these as public issues.

¹⁷ The limit to which feminist intervention has pushed the law needs to be noted here. It is precisely by making the private public that most of the private domain issues are made judiciable in this logic. Another issue which gets foregrounded here is that these erstwhile private domain issues are put under the jurisdiction of various committees and commissions that exist on the

The arguments for legal interventions into the private are not moves which erase the public/private dichotomy, but instead reorganize it. The publicizing of the private for legal intervention or otherwise invariably produces new notions of the private, which in turn produces new private domains.

Within this logic of publicness, that is, the narratively produced public, public knowledge and accessibility are important criteria. The Malayalam words, which are used to describe the public/private distinction, will help us understand the narrative logic around which it is organized. The words used in Malayalam, as a translation of the binary public and private, are *pothu* and *swakaryam* respectively. *Swakaryam*, the word for the private is also the word which is used to mean ‘private talk’ (or for a secret), underscoring the significance of ‘talking’ or, translating it to the terminology we have been using, producing narratives. ‘Private’ then is that which is not made available to the public but something which is produced within the public as an unrepresentable zone. The popular Malayalam phrase *naalal ariye* (with the knowledge of four people) also refers to this understanding of the public as also to the fact that it is various forms of narratives that make this ‘knowledge’ possible.¹⁸ My attempt here is not to produce two distinctive and independent domains in the spatial and narrative

fringes of the legal system. This is an issue in need of further research, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹⁸ This phrase is not particular to Malayalam, since most of the Indian languages have this or a similar phrase to denote publicness. I am merely drawing attention to the importance of this phrase for the day-to-day understanding of “public”.

publics. It is clear that one overlaps with the other and the practices or acts that constitute the public in the former sense and the domain of narratives that we called ‘public domain’ do influence each other. It could be argued that it is the narratively produced domain that ensures the discursive ordering of the former, including its gendering. Before moving on to discuss the narrative public domain engendered by the intervention by Usha, I intend to look at the role of print in producing publics.

The centrality of print as a site for the production of a public is acknowledged by most writers. This is evident in most of the theorising on the topic such as in the Habermasian notion of ‘public sphere’ (Habermas 1989) and in Anderson’s idea of print-capitalism (Anderson 1983: 37-46). Anderson, for example, singles out newspaper and novels as the forms that help produce the nation as an imagined community that functions in “homogenous empty time” (*ibid*: 31).

The available written history of modern Kerala – from the early decades of the twentieth century – points to the centrality of print in producing the public sphere of the region. This is how a recent anthology of writings on Kerala demonstrated its anxiety about Kerala’s interest in print:

Is the self-image of Kerala and Malayalee produced with the printing press? Are we producing ourselves – as the neighbour that produces jealousy among the Tamils, as a model that can be mimicked by the people in Latin America, as the recurring

nightmare for the CIA – through print? In short are we a ‘paper region’? (Sreekumar and Sanjeev 2003: 10-11).

Print in Kerala at once made possible a spatially organized public and a narratively constituted one.¹⁹ The most important development, which has consequences for the way we understand the public domain in Kerala, has been the visible emphasis on literacy and the boom in the number of newspapers and journals published in the region in the twentieth century.²⁰ EV Ramakrishnan

¹⁹ Alongside print, theatre and then cinema that have played important roles in producing both the spatially organized and the narratively constituted publics. The history of the early days of modernity in Kerala, especially in the context of social reform and the beginnings of the communist movement, is full of stories of how theatre engendered the production of publics. The history of the success of plays like VT Bhattathiripad’s *Adukkalayil Ninnum Arangathekkku* (From the Kitchen to the Stage), Thoppil Bhasi’s *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You made me a Communist) and KJ Baby’s *Naadugaddika* is yet to be written. Later, cinema as a medium has taken up this role. K Sivathamby’s argument that cinema was the first medium which made possible the coming together of various castes in Tamil Nadu is worth mentioning here (Sivathamby 1981). In a recent article on young fans of Mohanlal and Mammootty, the two superstars of Malayalam cinema, Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella present us with an interesting ethnography that could be used to think through the connection between cinema and public domain (and masculinities) in Kerala (Osella and Osella 2004: 224-261). Reshma Bharadwaj and Bindu Menon have argued that the film *Susanna* (dir: TV Chandran 2000) has engendered a public – a specifically political public – with the sex workers in Thrissur organizing a screening and discussion of the film (Bharadwaj and Menon 2002).

²⁰ Print history in Malayalam begins with 1772 when Fr. Clemant Piyaniyus published *Samskshepavedhartham* (The Meaning of the Holy Book – Summarised) in Rome. The first book to be printed in India in the Malayalam language was the 'New Testament' in 1811 at the Courier Press in Bombay. The first book to be printed in Kerala was a collection of short stories for children titled *Cherupaithangalkku Upakaartham Englishilninnum Paribhashappeduthiya Kathakal* (Stories Translated from English for Young Children) printed at the CMS press in Kottayam in 1824. See Ramakrishnan 2000: 480-484 for a brief history of the press in nineteenth century Kerala.

points to the fact that the temporal distance within which a shift occurred from the hegemony of oral traditions to that of the written traditions in Kerala, was as small as that between two generations, in the first half of the twentieth century (Ramakrishnan 1992: 6).²¹ DC Kizhakkemuri, pioneer of the publishing industry in Kerala, notes that there has been a significant increase in the number of books published in Malayalam in the 1950s – from 3167 books in 1941-1950 to 7462 books in 1951-1960 (Kizhakkemuri 2004: 20). From the mid-nineteenth century, especially with interventions made by missionaries and local rulers, education was seen as an important marker of modernity and as a tool to fight poverty, to the extent that one of the most famous slogans of the Kerala Shasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP), a popular science movement associated with the Communist Party in the 1980s, went “*Pattiniyulla manushyaa nee pusthakam kaiyyiledutholu*” (Hey hungry man, take up books)!

Robin Jeffrey suggests that there were as many as 21 dailies with a combined circulation of 1,96,000 in 1951 in the state.

... Malayalam newspaper penetration was roughly thirty-five newspapers for every 1000 people; India’s overall newspaper penetration was about twelve to 1000. [...] By 1996, newspaper penetration of Malayalam was more than eighty-five dailies to 1000 people, twice the all-India ratio... (Jeffrey 2000: 32)

²¹ He points to Punnasseri Neelakanta Sharma (1858-1935) as the last name associated with a vibrant oral tradition and Kesari Balakrishna Pillai (1889-1960) as one of the first writers who was instrumental in popularising literary criticism in the written form.

The establishment of a language that came to be popularly called *achadi bhasha* (print language) through the newspapers, magazines and even syllabi, argues EV Ramakrishnan, “enabled a public sphere that was secular and modern” (Ramakrishnan 2000: 486) and “allowed for the possibility of addressing an hitherto invisible mass of people” (*ibid*: 487).²² He goes on to argue that unlike elite literature which thrived on the silence of its consumers, “[N]ewsreports and international news which opened a window to the entire world broke this silence” (*ibid*: 494) and that the entry of novels and social dramas of a later period, which narrativised the lives of the downtrodden using a language that was considered inferior, was facilitated by the prior history of newspapers (*ibid*: 494). The democratisation of reading, which took place at this time, was carried forward by the reading rooms and libraries which were established by the middle of the twentieth century.²³

²² EV Ramakrishnan’s fascinating analysis of print culture in early twentieth century Kerala demonstrates how print constituted a public who were interested in issues like widow remarriage and other reform activities. He argues that an “equation seems to be built between public and private lives” (Ramakrishnan 2000: 490) and was produced as “... the result of a notion of citizenship that was made possible by political pamphlets, articles in newspapers and journals, letters to the editor and translations” (*ibid*: 490). See also Arunima’s discussion of the debates around the standardization of the Malayalam language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. She writes: “By the late nineteenth century, ‘print culture’ had enabled the possibility of co-existing and intersecting communities: based on language, kinship, faith or caste origin” (Arunima 2006: 74).

²³ For a detailed account of the use of print made by Communists in Kerala, see Shoenfeld 1959: 239.

The establishment of reading rooms and libraries in every nook and corner of the state had happened well before Kerala became a political unit in 1956.²⁴ Dilip Menon records that, “There were twenty-eight registered reading rooms with 2,802 members in 1924; the number had risen by 1932 to fifty with 6,635 members (Menon 1994: 145). In industries like Dinesh Beedi, which is in the co-operative sector, one of the employees was designated by his colleagues to read newspapers aloud the whole day, with the latter pooling in money from their income to pay his/her wages (see images 1 and 2).²⁵ This was supposed to have been done in rotation and is in practice until today. This form of community reading was a practice in teashops from the 1930s itself (Menon 1994: 146).²⁶ Robin Jeffrey’s discussion of teashops in Kerala sheds light on the centrality of reading in the creation of the public domain. He writes: “[In the teashops] people read newspapers aloud and discussed the contents” (Jeffrey 1992: 210) and also cites DR Mankekar who, in 1965, observed that every teashop, “... however humble in appearance, subscribes to half a dozen newspapers” (quoted in Jeffrey 1992: 210). Another commentator notes, “Malayalees are not just literate. More

²⁴ For a listing of the important events in the history of libraries in Kerala, see Ranjth 2004: 7-12.

²⁵ The industries in the co-operative sector are those that are run by co-operative societies, which are formed mostly by the employees. Establishment of such industries was high on the agenda of the early left movement.

²⁶ Menon provides an interesting picture of the teashops and the reading rooms in Kerala of the 1930s. He suggests that the circulation figures of newspapers of that time could be misleading as these community reading practices resulted in one copy of newspaper being consumed by many (Menon 1994: 145-150). These activities were seen as part of the newfound political climate and the left had made good use of this mode of expanding its fronts.

people in Kerala read the newspapers and discuss them. They also write letters to complain about problems and demand solutions” (Franke 1995).²⁷ A romantic ballad called *Ramanan* written by a young poet Changampuzha Krishna Pillai in 1936 was such a success that it is believed that there was no one at that time in Kerala who did not know it by heart.²⁸ Even after allowing for some exaggeration here, it can be safely assumed that the written word has played an important role in the formation of the public domain in Kerala. At least till the mid-1970s, literary works were popular in Kerala in a manner that could have been unique to the state.²⁹

²⁷ The protagonists in the recent (2005) advertisements of *Malayala Manorama* newspaper, Intelligent Ibrahim and Genius Janaki, represent the newspaper reading Malayalee. The advertisements show them correcting wrong information given by a politician and an ex-service man respectively.

²⁸ By 1945, *Ramanan* had had 14 editions with 17,500 copies being sold. By 1998, it reached 1,58,016 copies in 49 editions (Pillai 1998: 12). Such stories of publishing successes are heard even to this day. OV Vijayan’s path-breaking novel *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (The Legend of Khasak 1969) has seen 25 editions in 35 years.

²⁹ It is not as if new kinds of media replaced reading suddenly in the 1970s signalling the demise of the public sphere paralleling the Habermasian narrative of the demise of the public sphere or as suggested by the Marxist commentators that we examined at the beginning of the section. A whole new set of publications and writers, generally sidelined as ‘trash’ occupied reading spaces during this period. These, alongside other forms of media and other kinds of literature do sustain new forms of public in Kerala. It is only the anxieties of a mainstream history of reading in Kerala that would bemoan the death of reading at the time. Even the otherwise perceptive essay by EV Ramakrishnan that I discussed earlier in this chapter ends its critical engagement with some of the developments of the early 1970s, referring to the ‘regressive’ reading cultures of the time, and moves on to a prescriptive tone about the need to have alternative media to counter the popular media (Ramakrishnan 2000: 498-503). Though there is some resurgence of interest in looking at the reading cultures after the 1970s, it is a history that is yet to be written.

The above discussion of print appears to bear out the idea of a public domain as the means by which the region called Kerala imagines itself, neatly following the schema presented by Benedict Anderson for the nation. The ending of this history in the 1970s also points to the fact that the role print culture has played is indeed one that has helped produce an ‘imagined community’ of citizens, of a region that is ‘progressive’, ‘developed’ and ‘literate’, where every Malayalee imagines himself/herself to be part of a seamless well formed culture and history.

Arguing against Anderson, Partha Chatterjee has recently suggested that, to discuss the time-space of modernity only in terms of ‘homogenous empty time’, where the novel and the newspaper functions as the agents for the production of a imagined community called the nation, is to “discard the real for the utopian” (Chatterjee 2004: 7). He writes:

Empty homogenous time is the utopian time of capital. It linearly connects past, present and future, creating the possibility for all of those historicist imaginings of identity, nationhood, progress, and so on that Anderson, ..., has made familiar to us. But empty homogeneous time is not located in real space- it is utopian. The real life space of modern life consists of heterotopia (*ibid*: 6-7).³⁰

³⁰ Chatterjee discusses the intellectual and political career of BR Ambedkar in the exposition of the heterogeneous time of modernity (Chatterjee 2004: 8-25).

Chatterjee argues that the politics of heterogeneity often takes clues from the universalist assumptions of the homogeneous, even though it “can never claim to yield a general formula for all peoples at all times: its solutions are always strategic, contextual, historically specific and, inevitably provisional” (*ibid*: 22). The incident under discussion here, the sexual harassment faced by PE Usha, I argue, presents us with an instance of a narratively produced public domain – one that strategically uses the modalities of the public that constitutes the homogeneity of the region, actually engaging in the politics of the heterogeneous. A significant difference between the examples provided by Chatterjee while discussing the politics of the heterogeneous and the political mobilization around Usha is that the latter is not one that could be read as being either irrational or from a different, ‘pre-modern’ time.³¹ But, I suggest, there are enough similarities between the two such that this difference could be overlooked.³² The narrative public under

³¹ Chatterjee’s examples are of industrialists who refuse to close a business deal without getting the permission of their astrologers, industrial workers who would like to have religious rituals done before working on a new machine and voters who set fire to themselves because of the defeat of their leaders (Chatterjee 2004: 7).

³² Even when I note the similarities between the politics of the heterogeneous and the mobilization around the sexual harassment of Usha, I resist calling the latter an instance of ‘political society’. Political society, for Chatterjee, is a domain between the civil society and the state, one that is the domain of governmentality. It is characterized by a claim for democracy which can often position itself against the claims to modernity made by the civil society (Chatterjee 2004, Chapters 2 and 3). I refrain from equating this framework with the instance under study primarily because the similarities between the two are limited and because one of the conditions of political society, which is its opposition to normative notions of modernity, does not obtain in this case. Explicitly claiming to follow the distinction between political and civil societies made by Chatterjee, Devika argues that issues of gender have been addressed by the state in Kerala in terms of democracy, or what she calls “collective welfare” (Devika 2005b: 7), as opposed to modernity – in her words, “the very possibility of posing and resolving the question of women’s freedom in terms of the

discussion in this chapter is not one that attempts to produce citizens out of subjects. On the contrary, it depends on the deployment of gender as the differentiating identity marker. The deployment of gender, unlike that of class but similar to that of caste, will be identified by the universalising impulse of the normative public domain in Kerala, as a divisive move.³³ This moment shows up ‘the public’, the regional political public, as just one of the many publics that constitute the contemporary.³⁴ The public domain that is being discussed here is one that is produced through narratives and facilitated through print. It was by narrating her experience in a newspaper that Usha could make her more or less private struggle into a public one.³⁵ This is a public, “lacking any institutional being, commence with the moment of attention, must continually predicate renewed attention, and cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated”

concern for equality and autonomy of individuals” (*ibid*: 8). Here the attempt to imagine the position of the women’s movement in Kerala as one that occupies the space of both democracy and modernity is problematic, as she does not attend to the specific theoretical elaborations of these concepts made by Chatterjee vis-à-vis political and civil societies (*ibid*: 7-19).

³³ The historical differences in the deployment of ‘class’, ‘caste and ‘gender’ as political categories in Kerala have been discussed in Chapter I of this thesis.

³⁴ Warner argues that it is by appearing to be ‘the public’ that the national/regional public erases the possibility of existence of other publics (Warner 2002: 51).

³⁵ It needs to be noted that Usha’s identity as an upper caste middle class working woman and her status as an activist have helped her in being an agent rather than a victim in the struggle. Sharmila Rege has argued that caste is an important identity marker which works to make Dalit women easy victims for public offences like rape and sexual harassment (Rege 1998: WS 42). Following this it is not difficult to argue that the issue of agency is also tied up with issues of caste and class identity. The ways in which the issue of caste get figured in the discussions will be taken up in detail at a later stage in this chapter.

(Warner 2002: 61). It is constituted at the moment of Usha's intervention, as one that is presented outside/beyond the regional public. It does not function at the service of imagining those unbound serialities that produce nation/region, but is one that attempts to build a community that comes together in the face of immediate political concerns. Thus, Usha's intervention uses the forms made visible in the constitution of *the* regional public, only to constitute *a* narrative public domain by deploying them in political terms in ways that are different from the former.

Discussion around the various developments in the case took place for over a year (2000-2001) in magazines like *Madhyamam* and newspapers like the *Malayala Manorama* and *Deshabhimani*.³⁶ It needs to be noted that the print material regarding the case represents only a small portion of the narratives that produced the public domain around it. These narratives, in the form of discussions and debates in public fora, gossips, jokes, television reports and other forms of communication are, sadly, lost to us.³⁷ Usha's disruptive intervention needs to be

³⁶ *Madhyamam* is a magazine which started publication in the early 1990s. It is owned by the Jama-at-e-Islami, an Islamic organisation, and is known for its progressive and critical positions. *Malayala Manorama*, a privately owned newspaper is one of the oldest newspapers in Malayalam and claims to be the regional newspaper in India with the highest circulation. *Deshabhimani* is the mouthpiece of the CPI-M and is very popular especially with its cadres.

³⁷ Other than print, it was television, with the many news based shows and comedy programmes, that produced narratives related to the incident. The discussion of the narrative public domain in this thesis is restricted to print, as television circulates differently and has a form of address that is unique to it. One will have to bring another set of conceptual tools to analyse how television produces the public and the private.

understood in the context of the larger dynamics of Kerala society where print and visual media constantly reproduce the narrative public domain.

I argue that the narrative public follows the logic of gendering of the public sphere as has been pointed out by various scholars, especially in the context of nationalism (Chatterjee 1989; Sinha 1995; Gupta 2001).³⁸ Here it is the continuous reproduction of the newly constituted private domain as feminine (and, in the dominant discourse, ideal feminine) that creates the conditions for the gendering of the public. The notions of private and public that were put in place in the early years of the twentieth century in Kerala were based on a set of qualities termed ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ which allowed for women to occupy public spaces while continuing to be ‘private’ beings as was mentioned before.³⁹ The idealization of Prakashan’s wife Reshmi, who followed him to the sit-in strike and sat there silently, in the many writings that appeared around the sexual harassment of Usha, points precisely to this distinction. The representation of Usha as a public woman because of the fact that she ‘represents’ herself, and the

³⁸ The historians of nationalism who have drawn attention to the gendering of the public domain have not necessarily made an argument for a narrative public. I submit that the possibilities of a narrative public are implicit in most of their works. The attempt to refer back to popular print in their discussions, for example, is just one indication of this.

³⁹ Devika suggests that it was by delegitimising caste and community identities as ‘external’ and by putting place gender as constituting the ‘internal’ quality of an individual that engendering happened in the period of social reform in Kerala. This allowed for women to be teachers and nurses as these occupations were thought of as needing ‘feminine’ qualities like tolerance, patience, love, kindness etc. On the centrality of the notion of interiority for early modern Kerala, see also Kumar 1997.

representation of Reshmi as one 'without a voice' points to the fact that the public has the ability to reproduce itself through narratives and also to represent the private with it as a zone of silence. The link between narratives and the public domain is thus complicated by the gendering of the domain as masculine. Following the arguments about the public/private distinction made by scholars like Chatterjee, I would like to stress that the gendering as masculine is foundational to the public domain.⁴⁰ I further argue that the challenge that was posited by the Usha case and the course taken by the narratives around it were in dialogue with the discourse of masculinity in contemporary Kerala. The most fascinating aspect of the various writings on the case is their embedded-ness in a discourse of masculinity, which appears to determine its contours. This is not confined to any particular set of narratives but form an important logic around which they are constituted.

Participating in the discussion around the sexual harassment of Usha, one of the writers to the *Letters to the Editor* column of *Madhyamam Weekly* provided his theory about men in Kerala:

⁴⁰ Recent interest in urban cultures and other hitherto under-researched areas of academic research has thrown up fascinating ethnographies that point to the gendering of the public domain. Two examples that come to mind from very different locations are Srinivas 1997, 2003 on fan cultures in Andhra Pradesh and Srivastava 2004 on sex clinics and the consumption of roadside pornography in cities like Mumbai. A recent article on flirting in Kerala presents us with some insights into the public in contemporary Kerala in relation to its gendering, though its overemphasis on resistance and ambiguity remains more or less speculative (Osella and Osella 1998).

Immediately after Usha's experience became public knowledge, many men⁴¹ came up with papers on the 'possibilities of female co-operation'. *It is such beliefs and expectations about women that construct and sustain an average Malayalee man* (irrespective of whether he is on the Left or the Right) (emphasis added).⁴²

This observation needs further nuancing. It needs to be seen whether it is a straightforward psychological explanation that would suffice as an explanation and whether the category 'Malayalee men' is sustainable at all. Such an explanation fixes gendered bodies as tied to a discourse united by geography, thereby missing the historical/cultural specificities of the construction of both 'Malayalee-ness' and 'maleness'. It is important to expose the various axes of articulation and performance of masculinity that produce what could be called 'masculinities in Kerala' as opposed to 'Malayalee men' or even 'Malayalee masculinity'.⁴³ In the idea of 'masculinities in Kerala', 'Kerala' appears not as a fixed geographical entity but as a historically and culturally deployed frame within which these notions of masculinity function.

⁴¹ The Malayalam word used is '*Purushakerasarikal*' meaning male lions.

⁴² Sundararajan, P 2001. *Panditharude Maraviyum Prashnamanu* (Intellectuals' Forgetfulness is also a Problem). 'Letters to the Editor' (*Ezhuthukuthu*). *Madhyamam Weekly* (6 July 2001): 4.

⁴³ Attempts at researching notions of masculinity under the umbrella of a culture or a region invariably end up in gross generalizations which cannot account for the varied ways in which gender gets structured, as can be seen with Sudhir Kakkar's attempt to analyse notions related to Hindu masculinity through mythologies (Kakkar 1989). See Chapter I for a detailed discussion.

The one other reference to masculinity during the debate around the case (again in the *Letters to the Editor* column) reminds one of the Gandhian sexual experiments, since it posits ‘self-control’ as the quality of ideal men. The writer asked, “Isn’t practising self-control, rather than an attempt at blaming nature for uncontrollable sexual urge, the ideal form of masculinity?”⁴⁴ While presented as a prescriptive suggestion, it does not attempt to address the discourse of masculinity as it exists in Kerala. Such a suggestion, much like the culturalist explanation of colonialism – as the control of the masculine over the feminine – and the valorisation of the Gandhian model offered by Ashis Nandy, is susceptible to the critique that it essentialises masculinity and makes it available for a singular explanation.⁴⁵ Such explanations are limited in that they do not help us explain gender relations which are organized through power in day-to-day interactions.

The category ‘masculinity’ is used in a range of ways in contemporary social science. From its association with power and violence (as in cases where war is by definition seen as masculine) to it being equated with ‘men’ (Chopra

⁴⁴ Rehman, Sahira 2000. ‘*Purushalaingikathayude Purushabhashyam*’ (The Male Take on Male Sexuality) ‘Letters to the Editor’ (*Ezhuthukuthu*). *Madhyamam Weekly* (5 Decemeber 2000): 5.

⁴⁵ As noted in the previous chapter, Nandy produces a binary of masculinity and femininity in his understanding of the West and the East and presents Gandhi’s struggle as one that posits the feminine principle against the masculine (Nandy 1983: 52-55). See Chapter I for a discussion of the positions held by Nandy and his critics.

2004), there are a number of suggestions available.⁴⁶ *‘Masculinity’, for this study, is a normative domain within which, in a specific historic and social context, bodies are gendered male.* Thus narratives of masculinity take recourse to a normative notion of masculinity as a standpoint to evaluate gendered performances. To put it differently, any performance or enunciatory moment of masculinity implies a norm. Any attempt at studying the discourse of masculinity will have to undertake the primary objective of teasing out the norm that underpins it.

The term 'hegemonic masculinity' is used by most of the scholars working in this area to notate the normative. 'Hegemonic masculinity' was first defined by Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee as a "particular variety of masculinity to which others – among them young and effeminate and homosexual men – are subordinated" (Carrigan et al 1985/2002: 110). This map of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities has been complicated by many including Jenny Rowena who argues that the assertion of backward caste masculinities in Malayalam comedy cinema of the 1980s and 90s is made possible in a context of contestations with upper caste men, upper caste women, backward caste women, Dalit men and Dalit women (Rowena 2002: 125- 126).⁴⁷ In the wake of such

⁴⁶ Chopra's anthropological encounter with men in rural Punjab foregrounds the problem of what constitutes the object of masculinities research. The issues that arise from a slippage between 'masculinity studies' and 'studies on men' have been discussed in Chapter I.

⁴⁷ Harry Brod makes a similar point when he suggests, "... nonhegemonic masculinities must always be simultaneously theorized along two axes, the male-female axis of men's power over

attempts to complicate the idea of hegemonic and subordinate forms of masculinity, it will be useful to steer clear of the hegemonic-subordinate structure that fixes the hegemonic as singular within which other forms exist.⁴⁸ Such a structure does not allow for an understanding of gendered identities which materialize through reiterated performances, as it fixes predetermined vectors like class, caste and sexuality, and characteristics like aggression and violence in identifying hegemonic and subordinate forms of masculinity. This effectively makes invisible the specificities of the normative notions of masculinity by foregrounding men from marginalized groups as objects of their research. I argue that such an understanding reduces the complexity of the discourse of masculinity which exists as the discursive regime in which bodies are gendered male. I propose that we abandon the framework which presents masculinity as hegemonic and subordinate, and use *discourse of masculinity* to refer to this regime. This discursive regime functions by presenting masculinity within binaries such as correct/incorrect, acceptable/unacceptable and normal/deviant, which function as rules that govern the attribution of gender to actions and feelings.

I need to add two points of caution here. Attempts at producing large patterns (national, religious, regional or even global) of normative notions of masculinity often tend to essentialise these categories and offer culturalist

women within the marginalized grouping, and the male-male axis of nonhegemonic men's relative lack of power vis-à-vis hegemonic men" (Brod 1994: 89).

⁴⁸ For a critical discussion of the use of the concept 'hegemonic masculinity', see Demetriou 2001. See also Donaldson 1993.

explanations for them. Secondly, the production of a pre-existing structure of caste, class, community and gender as if they would make narratives of masculinity transparent often takes away historical and cultural specificities. The task then is to work a way between these two positions. This chapter discusses the public domain in contemporary Kerala in detail and suggests that it is constituted through a discourse of masculinity. This discourse of masculinity, produced by means of a complex interweaving of various notions of masculinity that have been put together in different moments in the history of Kerala's modernity, engender performances that are designated as normatively masculine or denigrated as non-masculine.

Public Domain in Kerala and the Language of Masculinity

Let me begin by reiterating my contention that the narrative public domain in contemporary Kerala is constituted by notions of masculinities. In the section that follows, where I look at the narratives produced around the sexual harassment faced by Usha, more evidence of the link between the narrative public and discourse of masculinity will come to light.

Even when I argue for a unique status for the debates around the sexual harassment of PE Usha in foregrounding these issues, I would like to hold on to the fact that they do resonate with the 'commonsense' on gender in Kerala.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁹ For a discussion on the various debates on gender and sexuality in Kerala in the last years of the twentieth century, see Navaneetha 2003.

uniqueness of the debate around Usha need not be over-emphasized.⁵⁰ The story or the incident is used here as a take-off point for understanding larger structures and as a method of arresting the contemporary for research. The use of anecdotes for research on the contemporary has been succinctly defended by Meaghan Morris:

[Anecdotes] are oriented futuristically towards the construction of a precise, local, and social discursive context, of which the anecdote then functions as a *mise en abyme*. That is to say, anecdotes...are not expressions of personal experience but allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working. (Morris 1990: 15)

The existence/availability of such a debate and my own attempt at foregrounding it as a starting point for an inquiry into the history of modern Kerala is symptomatic of the dominant ways in which the region is represented. It has been suggested that representations of gender and Kerala exist as a dialectic between utopian and dystopian narratives that simultaneously present the emancipated woman and her complex relationship to notions of emancipation

⁵⁰ This is not to suggest that the debate under consideration is like any other gender issue that was discussed in Kerala. It has been noted that there has been a considerable increase in the complaints of sexual harassment being reported to the police after this issue. Also this was the only issue in the history of gender politics in Kerala that was significantly foregrounded in campaigns for elections to the State assembly (Subha and Krishnakumar 2001). The debate was also different from other cases in that it was the 'victim' herself who was at the centre of the movement (Bharadwaj and Raj 2002: 63, note 2).

(Sreekumar 2006: 150-151). Sharmila Sreekumar argues that both these narratives, i.e. of utopia and dystopia, are mobilised in aid of producing a notion of Kerala that erases the existence of marginalized communities, especially the women in these communities (*ibid*: 151-152).⁵¹ The stories, both positive and negative, about Kerala that are available to us then, are always already exclusionary. Thus it needs to be noted that the narrativisation of the sexual harassment of PE Usha as a much talked about incident and my picking it up for analysis as an event among many is not an accident, and that it is the constraints vis-à-vis what is available as a debate for analysis as visible within the discourse of gender politics in Kerala that are revealed by this. The choice is useful and productive inasmuch as the attempt is not to uncritically generalise the analysis of the material for the whole of Kerala, and if one is sensitive to the contexts within which certain issues lend themselves for analysis.

My attempt thus is not to present the debate around Usha's case as a representative cross-section of Kerala's public domain, as it would be erroneous to imagine the possibility of there being one such. Hence, I am also not suggesting that the various notions of masculinity to be identified in the course of the chapter present a comprehensive picture of the discourse of masculinity as it exists in contemporary Kerala. It is also important to note that my project is not about

⁵¹ She argues that the narratives of both utopia and dystopia are available only for the dominant women in Kerala. She takes the example of the leader of the adivasi land struggle CK Janu and asks whether these narratives about Kerala in anyway represent or talk to the dystopia she lives in and tries to negotiate with (Sreekumar 2001: 276-277).

‘men’. Hence the various notions of masculinities do not in any way conform to ‘types of men’. For the sake of clarity, I will be organizing the various articulations of masculinity in relation to the patterns that I observe in the analysis of the material. The gendered performances in relation to the debate are, I submit, a complex mixture of these patterns.

I

Speaking at the venue of the *prathi-samaram* or the anti-struggle in support of Prakashan and countering Usha’s claims was V Stalin, convener of the *Campus Manushyavakasha Samrakshana Samithi* (Campus Forum for the Protection of Human Rights):⁵²

KP Ramanunni, the well-known writer had spoken here while inaugurating the satyagraha. As a response to him MM Sajeendran spoke. He has not provided answers to any of the issues that we had raised. We had asked some questions very clearly and had explained the reasons for the struggle on our part. Without responding to that.... There is a character in the Mahabharata; it is special kind of character. If you ask whether it is man, it is. If you ask whether it is woman, it is. It is a special character. When the war was going on in

⁵² This speech was made in front of the Administrative Building of Calicut University where Usha was on a satyagraha, and Prakashan had come with his family for an ‘anti-struggle’. The Malayalam word used for anti-struggle, ‘*prathi-samaram*’, had a lot of currency on both sides of the debate as the word also meant ‘the struggle by the culprit’. The most entertaining aspect of the situation was the speeches by the leaders of the two groups, often responding to each other.

the Mahabharatha, it was with the advice of Sri Krishna that Bhishma was asked how he could be killed. So he said, there is someone who carries enmity towards me. The character was Shikhandi. I will fight only men. I will not fight women. You should place the character Shikhandi in front of Arjuna's chariot. Then I will not fight him. I will keep my bows and arrows down. Then you can kill me. There is a similar character in the university. You all know the person without my taking his name. It was that character who responded to us yesterday. His character can be understood only if we look at his past history. He had taken the form of a CPI member and CPI spokesperson when he came to the campus, but changed fast and became General Secretary or President of the Staff Organization – the Congress backed organization. When some other group assumed leadership, he went for a *vanvas*. Then he appeared as the spokesperson of another organization called Employees Council. We didn't see him after that. Then we saw him in the garb of a Senate Member. When they couldn't find anyone else, the Congress Union and others decided to make this man who is a characterless Shikhandi a candidate for that [Senate member]. How else can we see this man, but as a Shikhandi?⁵³

⁵³ Stalin, V, speech addressing Prakashan's supporters on 21 April 2001.

By positing three characters from the *Mahabharatha* as stand-ins for the various players in the debate, Stalin is definitely mapping notions of masculinity onto the political issue at hand. Bhishma, who decides not to fight the transsexual Shikhandi, and Arjuna, who hides behind the latter, are pitted against one another.⁵⁴ Here Stalin's logic for calling Sajeendran a 'non-man' ('Shikhandi' is also popularly used in Kerala as a generic term for an 'eunuch') is linked to his belief that loyalty and stability are positive political characteristics. The problem with Sajeendran as far as Stalin is concerned is that he had shifted his sympathies from one party to another, from the Left to the Congress. Sajeendran was actually a member of the Communist Party of India (CPI), which is equated here with the 'bourgeois' Congress, for the Communist Party of India- Marxist (CPI-M) often presents the rival CPI as the less revolutionary party. Thus the revolutionary status of Sajeendran, linked by Stalin to loyalty and stability, is at the heart of the introduction of the language of masculinity in the latter's speech. Stalin also observes that Sajeendran disappears (or goes on a *vanvas*) between taking on powerful roles in the union and at the university. The absence of a sustained political career or 'experience' is suggested by him as a 'lack' as far as the latter is concerned. Thus, along with loyalty and stability, experience in politics is also identified here as an important characteristic for the revolutionary subject. The

⁵⁴ The other well-known character from Kerala's mythology that was used in the context of the movement was Unniarcha, the famed female warrior and her husband Kunhiraman who is supposed to be a coward – both characters that appear in the popular mythological songs called the Northern Ballads. The invocation of these characters was made in the slogans that were being chanted by the Left backed Union on the Calicut University Campus, as recorded by Dilip Raj and Reshma Bharadwaj on 21 April 2001.

construction of the 'other' in the form of an effeminate masculinity, as the 'constitutive outside' of the self, is very clear in the speech. The 'other' cannot be a woman; neither can it be a man who is like a woman.

The dominant notions of gendering in relation to the public and the private domains are clearly in place in the speeches of the left leaders. On a different occasion, Stalin tried to distance 'our women' from Usha. He was responding, among other things, to Usha's suggestion that it was she herself and not her family who should be fighting for her rights. His argument was that 'their women' (women in the left employees' organization) were not like Usha. Commenting on this exchange, Reshma Bharadwaj and Dilip Raj write,

It is the assumed authority aiming to keep female subjectivities inside the domain of the family that allows him (Stalin) to proclaim unchallenged power over 'their women'. The parallel between those women who challenge the domination of the union and those who challenge the patriarchal structures of the family is not a coincidence. One of the accepted schemes in the union is to try and get a newly employed unmarried woman in the university to marry an agreeable union member. Who doesn't know that the wife's politics will be the same as the husband's! (Bharadwaj and Raj 2002: 55)

The observation that the familial gets reproduced in the structure of the party was true not only in the instance of the cadres of the Left in Kerala but also in that of

women leaders as was seen in the case of KR Gowri Amma, who was asked in the 1950s by the party to marry fellow party member, TV Thomas.⁵⁵

Speaking after Stalin at the venue of the anti-struggle was Viswanathan, Secretary of Calicut University Employees Union:

Sajeendran has said that Prakashan should be beaten up for spreading these rumours. Let him try to touch a single hair on Prakashan's body. Then he will know. He will not be allowed to walk on his two legs on the campus. There need not be any doubt about it.⁵⁶

The aggressive nature of the exchange needs to be noted. It is evident that the apparatus of the Party sees Prakashan's victim status as a 'lack' in the identity of the left activist. The aggression and the overtly gendered language that is used is then an attempt to fill in this 'lack'. I argue that the aggressively gendered language is foundational to the identity of the left activist and that what the party can offer Prakashan to fill in the 'lack' is precisely this.⁵⁷ Though the Left claims to have historically attempted to erase 'gender' in the production of revolutionary subjectivities, it seems that it is a set of 'masculine' traits' that sustained the

⁵⁵ See the account of KR Gowri Amma's career in politics in Jeffrey 1992: 214-216.

⁵⁶ Viswanathan, speech addressing Prakashan's supporters on 21 April 2001.

⁵⁷ The 'Left' in the thesis refers to the political parties and organisations that follow Communist ideals. When it is used as an adjective, as in the case of 'left ministry', 'left discourse' etc., I will be using the lower case.

‘ungendered’ revolutionary subject.⁵⁸ One of the many reasons for Usha being unpopular among her peers in the university, says VK Padmaja, leader of the AIMSS (the women’s organization of the extreme left SUCI) and the convener of *PE Usha Eikyadardya Samithi* (PE Usha Solidarity Forum), is that “she did not show any of the *weaknesses or other attributes that are natural to women*” (quoted in Riyalu 2000: 20 emphasis added). The word that I have translated into English as ‘natural to’ is ‘*sahajam*’, literally ‘born with’. It is clear that regardless of the position these writers take in relation to the case, the gendered assumptions on which politics is mobilized remain more or less the same. The congratulatory tone in Padmaja’s writing falls into the same trap as Stalin by presenting Usha as a non-typical woman. The downgrading or elevation of the revolutionary status of the activist is done through the prism of gender. The historical construction of the revolutionary subject on the Left is a matter that has been commented upon in various contexts.⁵⁹ Referring to the history of the Left in Kerala, J Devika and

⁵⁸ As has been previously mentioned, the early days of modernity in Kerala saw the establishment of a set of traits that were understood in gendered terms. The later history of Kerala, including that of the Left, presents us with a picture where these traits form the basis for the further reworking of gender.

⁵⁹ U Vindhya’s paper on issues related to sexuality and the extreme left groups in Andhra Pradesh is telling in this context. She writes:

In a recent document that reflects on marriages in the party, one of the district committees speak of the spill over of ‘bourgeois and false notions about romantic love, sexual desire and the need for marriage into the party and decries the corrupting influence of such notions on its members. The document holds that while earlier members considered marriage as ‘distracting and harmful’ to the interests of the movement, marriages have become more common in the 1990s. The entry of more women as full time members supposedly produces a ‘desire for marriage’ among the male cadres... (Vindhya 1998: 171).

Praveena Kodoth write: "... the cultural Left represented by works such as those of [the novelist and playwright] Cherukad have upheld a version of liberal feminism that equates gender equality with the masculine" (Devika and Kodoth 2001: 3175).

C Sadanandan has noted that it was by going into a bookshop and browsing through the books that a noted Marxist theorist in Kerala tried to overcome his grief over the death of Marxist leader and theoretician EMS Nambudiripad. The tough Marxist shouldn't be seen crying in public! He goes on to argue that historically the notion of a revolutionary or intellectual that the Left has constructed disallows any form of display of emotion on their part (Sadanandan 2001: 21). In recent times a number of films that narrativised the production of such figures were released in Kerala.⁶⁰ Some of these films try to look at the earlier history of the Left in Kerala but others discuss more contemporary issues relating to this political formation.

II

KP Ramanunni, well-known novelist and short story writer, presented a set of arguments, different in accent from the above-discussed ones, and became one

The implied construction of the cadre as male cannot be missed in this formulation.

⁶⁰ I am referring here to films like *Rakthasakshikal Zindabad* (Long Live the Martyrs, dir: Venu Nagavalli 1998) and *Stalin Sivadas* (dir: TS Sureshbabu 1999).

of the voices most heard in the discussions around the case. He became the self-proclaimed expert on sexuality and gender relations in Kerala and had a strong impact on the directions taken by the debate. Let me list some of his arguments. The tone of the statements is of importance as we can see that his concern is about the issues that discourses of sexual harassment raise for what he perceives as the moral well-being of society.

The incident in the bus must have resulted in grave mental stress for PE Usha, but because of the maturity of her age she would be able to get over it. But the stories of male activities in the public that are being published regularly in connection with the incident has made travelling in the bus a frightful experience for my daughter who is studying in the eighth class. (Ramanunni 2000: 44)

A complete outsider as far as the actual incidents were concerned, Ramanunni went on to become one of the most important advocates against Usha, arguing that what happened was a minor issue (her suffering is much less than the possible psychological impact the narratives will have on his daughter!). His anxieties could be read as emanating from a concern over the rapid shifts in gender relations although he claims that his involvement is, in his own words, "... because of my excessive love for women obviously related to mother fixation".⁶¹ His arguments place the 'mother' as the central figure of his anxieties about

⁶¹ Ramanunni, KP 2001. *Adhunikotheera Vettakkaranthe Muyal Vettakal* (Hare Hunting by the Postmodern Hunters). 'Letters to the Editor' (*Ezhuthukuthu*). *Madhyamam* Weekly (22 June 2001): 5.

gender relations in Kerala. The implicit suggestion of a break in history that has disturbed the gender equitable situation he imagines, when read alongside the imputing of mother fixation points to the fact that there is a pre-history to the narratives of sexual harassment and feminism that he is referring to. I move on to some other similar suggestions made by him and other commentators on the issue, to access and investigate the concern that is being raised.

Another voice in the debate that constantly functioned with unabashed romanticism as a reminder of a glorious past has been that of the well-known poet and Chairperson of Kerala Women's Commission during the incidents, Sugathakumari: "There were a number of 'elder brothers' here earlier", she wrote, "Now there does not exist a group called 'elder brothers'. They have all become Congressmen, Marxists or BJP members" (quoted in Luose and Ushass 2000). The Malayalam word used here for elder brother, '*angala*', is a value-laden term in Kerala's history. This word has a strong resonance with the symbolic position held by the elder brother in the matrilineal system, especially among the Nairs.⁶² The brother then was the one who had to protect the property 'owned' by the sister. He was more or less the head of the family and held the position of the '*karanavar*'.⁶³ Interestingly, this language was used by a number of writers commenting on the case. Here is one more example, from an article that supported

⁶² I am not suggesting that it is only among Nairs that the word *angala* is used to refer to brothers. But the connotations of power, I suggest, come from the particular history of this upper caste.

⁶³ '*Karanavar*' is the name given to the symbolic head of the family, always the eldest male member, especially in the matrilineal systems in Kerala.

Usha's claims. This one addresses *angala(s)*: "There were only a handful of people who were with Usha at the struggle saying, 'This is my *pengal* (sister). I am the one who should protect her honour'. The rest were on the other side. Or they were inactive" (Harish 2001: 39). Here again the kinship term used, *pengal*, is part of the same register that gave Ramanunni the word *angala*. It is very easy to dismiss these statements as reflecting the general paternalistic attitude towards women. But a careful look at the caste(ing) of the language and the usage of terms that come from particular histories might help us go beyond this obvious answer. The upper caste-Nair imagery of the writings goes one step further in Ramanunni when he writes,

Sex shouldn't be seen as an instant mix that could be prepared at marriage after making sure that men and women are brought up in the forests of single sex as Rishyashringas and Rishyashringis.⁶⁴ The sexual growth of children happens and should happen at a very early age. That is why girls are more inclined towards their father and elder brothers and boys are more inclined towards their mother and elder sisters. It develops as hero worship towards their brothers and father in girls and in the desire for touch that is sought through lying on their laps or chest. *In men on the other hand, it develops as*

⁶⁴ Rishyashringa was a young hermit who was brought up in a forest away from women by his father who believed that women existed to seduce them into losing their powers. The story, originally part of the *Mahabharata*, is well known to Malayalees through a hugely popular film *Vaishali* (dir: Bharathan 1988), about a courtesan who attempted to seduce him. Rishyashringi, on the other hand, is a coinage by Ramanunni to denote women who are brought up away from the sight of men.

the demands that the oppol or elder sister should feed him and in the attraction towards the smell of the herb neelibringadi from her hair. (Ramanunni 2000: 45, emphasis added)

What is to be noted here is that suddenly the language and the imagery are inflected by caste when he moves on to discuss the experience of the boys. The use of terms like *oppol* and the olfactory imagery of the smell from the hair are easily identifiable as upper caste Nair. Here a paternalistic attitude is coupled with the projection of a particular kind of masculinity that has specific caste histories. To clarify this point further, we could examine Ramanunni's short story *Purushavilaapam* (The Male Lament 1998, hereafter *PV*).

The story is about two friends, Krishnadas and Sukumaran, who meet in the former's house, probably after not being in touch for a long time. The story unravels through their memories of their childhood, interspersed with Krishnadas' wife Rani's intermittent entry into the narrative. A closer look will show us that the memories that are shared between the two are presented in the context of Rani being an independent woman, who at one point in the story goes out of the house to attend "the executive committee meeting of a certain women's organization." (*PV*: 60). Their memory is full of young women who used to love them 'even when they were cruel to them'; it is about grandmothers (*muthassi*) who 'always took their side in disputes even when they were evidently wrong', and of an uncle who could 'ward off the *yakshis*'.⁶⁵ What did the friends claim they were offering

⁶⁵ *Yakshis*, in Kerala's mythology, were women who come back from the dead mostly to take revenge on men who had wronged them. They were extremely beautiful and were supposed to live

these women who were in love with them even when they were cruel to them?

Krishnadas tells Sukumaran,

The love of a man who is strong with his *paurusham* (aggressive masculinity)- the love of a man that a woman could experience with the bliss of forgetting herself- and not the damp sticky love that is being given to these working women who sleep with us. (PV: 60)

About the *yakshis* and his uncle:

In those times, *yakshis* were the only female selves who could dominate men and make them into mere skin and bones. If my uncle, with a magic thread around his wrist and the magic wand in his hands, were with us then no *yakshi* would dare to come near us. Even if one of them strayed and landed in front of us, he would kill her with his *simhapaurusha manthram* and make her into a woman. (PV: 63)

The story ends with the friends getting drunk and Krishnadas, who imagines himself to be his uncle killing a *yakshi*, kills his wife with a soda bottle. The taming of the *yakshi*/wife as the project of reclaiming a lost patriarchal masculinity is very apparent in this story.

What is more striking is the kinship pattern that emerges in the story which is centred on two men (whose caste identity is not obvious in their names) and the space of the woman in it. The uncle, with his magic wand to kill and make

on top of palm trees. They were seen as the ultimate seductresses who, in the mythologies, targeted mostly upper caste (Nair and Nambudiri) men.

‘women’ out of *yakshis* using *simhapaurusha manthram* (a chant called ‘the masculinity of a lion’) is the head of the institution, although senior women, like the grandmothers, have the right to arbitrate on certain issues. Krishnadas’ cousin sister (*machuni*) who was his traditionally attributed bride (*murappennu*) died at around the same time as his family house (*taravad*) was broken down. Alongside the dominating uncle, the meek cousin also stands in for a lost system of kinship. The fact that the men are left unmarked in the story as far as their caste identity is concerned is significant. This could be read as an attempt to present the story as if it was narrating the past of any Malayalee man. The juxtaposition of the contemporary woman and her emancipation, with a lost past – a clearly Nair past – is obvious from the story.⁶⁶ I argue that the language and the metaphors used by the writers under discussion share the assumptions of masculinity seen earlier as played out in the PE Usha case.

Though recent historical works have maintained that matriliney has never been exclusively a Nair system, I argue that popular historical memory still associates the caste with the system, and that the circulation of caste-inflected terminologies should be understood as working with these popular memories.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ In a reading of the story that is in some ways similar to mine, TT Sreekumar argues that the protagonists are sharing the nostalgia for a lost patriarchy, see Sreekumar 2000: 50-52. Though this is true, my reading suggests it is much more than this. Sreekumar, in some ways falls into the same logic as that of Ramanunni’s, of erasing the caste markers in the story, when he suggests that it is about lost (again unmarked) patriarchy. What he completely misses is the caste histories that allow for such a longing as well as the paraphernalia attached to the longing.

⁶⁷ Matriliney, one of the most researched aspects of Kerala history, was practised by many communities like the Tiyys and the Muslims in addition to the Nairs. In popular imagination it

III

Another set of writings attempted to universalise Usha's experience by trying to explain it using an existentialist language coupled with political correctness. Venu, columnist in *Madhyamam* weekly, compared Usha's plight to that of a celebrated character in modernist-existentialist fiction in Malayalam – Kundan from Anand's 1996 novel *Marubhoomikal Undakunnathu* (As Deserts are Formed) (Venu 2000a: 8). He argued that Usha's problem per se was a small problem and that what was interesting here was the way in which modern institutions, in Kundan's case a state-sponsored defence programme and in Usha's, the university, deal with individuals. Trying to emulate Anand's Kafkaesque narrative and language, Venu draws the picture of PE Usha's movements through the labyrinths of power like the police station, the university and the trade union. Gender is effaced from the case in the name of the 'human condition', using a genre of literature that has produced a particular of kind of existentialist masculinity and has not produced any interesting female characters or even writers. The gradual elevation of the female character to the status of a 'human being' (like the intellectual himself, to be precise) is one of the projects of this form of intellectualism. In this specific instance, Usha's own experience as a woman gets erased in Venu's attempt to produce her as a victim. What is evident

still remains one of the most important features of the Nair community. For the complex nature of what is termed matriliney today, see Arunima 2000, 2003a, 2003b, Kodoth 2001a, 2004a, Jeffrey 1975.

in this narrative is that she is qualified to be called a victim, only if the problems faced by her resonate with a universal existential crisis.

At one level it is the positing of the 'human' above the 'gendered' that is at play here while on the other the 'human condition' is equated with the 'male condition'. It is apparent that there is a particular notion of masculinity that is in use here. This is also one of the most 'visible' forms that are represented in the public domain, one that could be identified through a number of visual attributes like particular clothing, beard and body language.⁶⁸ As the focus here is on the written text, a discussion of the visual attributes of the intellectual is beyond the scope of this chapter. This 'radical left-existential masculinity' is a particular form of public intellectualism that can take a variety of political positions.

This discourse of masculinity also functions through positing an emancipated 'femininity' that rises above the human and becomes the ideal. The production of mother figures and women of power beyond the human has been a part of this sort of project. It is in this context that the statement made by the well known intellectual TN Joy, quoted in full admiration by Dilip Raj, makes sense: "I

⁶⁸ The visual attributes in the case of men in Kerala could be subject for an entire thesis. The moustache, for example is seen as an important feature of Malayalee men. For a lighter take on such attributes of Malayalee men, see Doctor 2002. Judith Halberstam, in her discussion of 'female masculinity', has discussed the significance of the visual aspect in the study of masculinity (Halberstam 1998). The visual representation of particular kinds of masculinity in relation to body and appearance is a fascinating area for research, but is beyond the scope of this thesis. For a discussion on the significance of the infamous sandalwood smuggler Veerappan's moustache to the discourse of masculinity in relation to Kannada nationalism, see Niranjana 2000.

felt the pleasure of a crucifixion [...]. I must have been redeemed of all my sins of being a man when I sat with Usha and listened to these abuses” (quoted in Raj 2001a: 46). The language of redemption in the statement is noteworthy. A non-theological notion of redemption goes hand in hand with existentialist philosophy and in this case the redemption is sought through a ‘politically correct’ existence.

Before moving on, let me quote in full a letter written by M Gangadharan, a renowned historian. After being an effective interlocutor to KP Ramanunni for a long time, this supporter of Usha wrote this last piece on the issue in the ‘Letters to the Editor’ column of *Madhyamam* weekly.

One of my friends, who is conscious of the contemporary world and the developments in it, asked me when I met him recently in Kottayam:

“Is KP Ramanunni gay?”

“I don’t know. Here no one seems to have started coming out. Why did you think so?”

“*Some people think that hatred towards the women’s movement is part of being gay*”.

“I remember another sign. After his recent visit to America what he thought of writing was about a gay family there.”

“That too is a sign. To say that what exists in Kozhikode exists in America also should give a positive look to the issue.”

“There are some gay narratives in some of his stories also.”

“But isn’t it a feature of post modern literature?”

“In Malayalam literature, postmodernism is mostly a show off. This needn’t be so at all” (emphasis added).⁶⁹

Gangadharan’s speculation on Ramanunni’s sexual orientation as an explanation for his politics needs to be examined. Here homosexuality is seen as the cause of misogyny. It is important to note as an aside that the speaker dissociates himself from the authorship of that claim by starting the sentence with “some people say...”. If one is to look at this narrative through the frame of the ‘radical left existentialist masculinity’ it is clear that complete silence around homosexuality has been a feature of that tradition like many before. The existentialist discourse that revelled in narratives of heterosexual sexual relationships (without the burden of romantic love or couple formation) and in male bonding as is visible in the various novels of the time, the movements that sustained them like the Odessa Film Society or the most well-known text produced at the time, John Abraham’s film *Amma Ariyaan* (Report to the Mother 1986), never acknowledged the possibility of homosexuality. If we are to look at this in the light of the understanding of femininity which we discussed above, it will be clear that this silence is constitutive of the sexual politics of that stream. Here, with Gangadharan, we see the production of a non-normative masculinity in Ramanunni, interestingly akin to the earlier argument made by Stalin about the transsexual identity of MM Sajeendran. Heterosexuality is being reaffirmed here as the site for a non-misogynist pro-woman position.

⁶⁹ Gangadharan, M 2001. ‘Jada!’ (Intellectual Show Off). ‘Letters to the Editor’ (*Ezhuthukuthu*) *Madhyamam* Weekly (16 February 2001): 5.

IV

The notion of the modern man as victim was featured in another set of writings on the case. Notions of male victimhood have been prevalent in various cultural contexts all over the world. From macro processes like globalisation to micro politics at home, different reasons have been ‘identified’ as having caused men to be victims.⁷⁰ The visibility accorded to the Malayalee woman and her apparently high position in relation to literacy and health has been mobilized to produce this narrative in the specific case of Kerala.⁷¹

In the case of PE Usha, more than one vocabulary is used in producing the male victim. One of the most dominant strands was the attempt at pathologising the aggressor. Here Rameshan, who harassed Usha in the bus, is the villain (hero?). Ramanunni introduces Rameshan’s ‘disease’ in the most dramatic way:

Rameshan, a young man who is a stranger to Usha, gets into the same bus at one of the bus stops. This man, *who suffers from a psychological disorder named Frotteurism*, moves towards the seats

⁷⁰ There exist a number of writings that look at the narratives of men being victims in contemporary times. For example, see Beynon 2003, especially the chapter titled ‘Masculinities and the notion of ‘Crisis’’ (75- 97). Also see Kimmel and Kaufman 1994 for a discussion of one of the varieties of men’s movement in the US which believes that men should reclaim the lost essence of masculinity.

⁷¹ ‘Woman’ has always been an important marker of the once celebrated Kerala Model of Development. See Ramachandran 1997. For recent critiques of the narrative of female emancipation in Kerala see Saradamoni 1993/1999; Eapen and Kodoth 2003; Sreekumar 2001.

reserved for women to fulfil his bad intentions (Frotteurism is the disease that makes one derive pleasure out of *touching and feeling women* secretly. This disease is mostly seen in individuals with sexual weaknesses.) (Ramanunni 2000: 43, emphasis added)

There were immediate responses related to Ramanunni's 'knowledge' (as evident in the tone of his narrative) of Rameshan's disease and how this is suggested as an explanation for what happened (Raj 2001b: 49-50; Gangadharan 2001: 47).⁷² This argument, one that produces all such activities as pathological, erases the possible violence that the incident represents⁷³. This hugely problematic explanation for

⁷² Responding to Ramanunni's diagnosis, KR Indira writes,

This disease which seems to be widespread among men in Kerala can be treated by a good beating. [...] We should note that these men who are 'mentally ill' in Kerala are well mannered when they go outside the state. Even in gulf countries where avenues of sexual gratification are not easily available no one seems to become mentally ill. (Indira 2001: 48)

It should be noted that she challenges both the psychological and the cultural explanations simultaneously in the above argument, and implicitly suggests that there are social and historical reasons behind the phenomenon.

⁷³ The mobilization of a pathological condition as an explanation presents us with a set of issues that needs attention. It starts with the definition of the disease itself. The website hosted by the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences of the McMaster University, Ontario, Canada, defines Frotteurism as "... the intentional rubbing up against on another, unsuspecting person for the purpose of sexual arousal" and goes on to say that most individuals with this disorder are males and the victims usually female. See www.psychdirect.com/forensic/Crminology/para/frotteurism.htm. The disease, as is evident, is gendered in its very definition. Interestingly the female equivalent of this disease, called 'tribardism' involves a scenario where a woman gains sexual gratification using the body of another woman, and not a man! (<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Frotteurism>). A number of questions arise in relation to the definition of the disease. How do we understand a situation where a mentally challenged person is deemed the perpetrator of a criminal offence? Also, the other issue that is relevant is the issue of perversion itself. What constitutes mental illness

the incident continued to be used in their observations on the case by many commentators. Here is columnist Venu's suggestion:

“In reality the harassment meted to PE Usha is comparatively small, perpetuated because of the *sexual perversion of a mentally disturbed person*, which in turn could be corrected by a small punishment and through medical treatment. [...] What the circumstances surrounding the act were could be deduced only if one has witnessed it. *There is no point in knowing where it was that a small mental disorientation turned into male domination against women*”

(Venu; 2000a: 8, emphasis added).

It is not clear what Venu means by the last part of his statement. Is he suggesting that the line between the mental condition and male domination is thin in this case or is he saying that one cannot determine the issue of ‘male domination’ at all? Well-known criminologist Dr. James Vadakkumcherry, using crime statistics, argues that there is no special case to be made for women who are being harassed in Kerala and argues that some men need psychological help: “In a society where man and woman are part of each other's complete selves, the solution for the

and perversion, and what are the conditions under which it is mobilized and to what ends? Apart from the larger question, it could also be asked of Ramanunni whether all men who harass women in public places could be called frotteurs and if so, what percentage of men in Kerala have this disease? These questions demand separate attention which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

problem of harassment of women should be *socio-psychological* help and cannot be legal action” (Vadakkumcherry 2001: 52, emphasis added).⁷⁴

Mental illness is again mentioned in a newspaper report in which Usha’s husband is supposed to have “... become like a madman as he has been refused the custody of the daughter”.⁷⁵ In this instance, there is a suggestion that Usha’s husband is mentally unstable because of the powerlessness he experiences in the face of the law – a legal system that does not recognize the father’s right over his child. Here unlike in the narratives about Rameshan, the cause of mental agony is spelt out. For Rameshan, it is a mental condition that makes him harass women, while in the case of Usha’s husband it is domination of (or harassment from) the woman who is given the custody of the child by the law that is the cause of his distress.

A second way in which the male is deemed a victim is linked to a construction of women in Kerala as emancipated and to feminist interventions in the public domain.⁷⁶ Interestingly, in these narratives, Rameshan is absent and

⁷⁴ Most of the ‘scientific’ explanations at one level corroborated Ramanunni’s diagnosis and then went on to moral preaching about how it is actually the ‘wrong’ signals given by the woman that causes harassment in public places. For instance see David 2000, Thomas 2001.

⁷⁵ ‘Aaraani ‘Usha’ Sambhavathinu Pinnil...?’ (Who is behind this Usha incident?). *Aaraamam* Magazine, October 2000.

⁷⁶ In the wake of the absence of an articulate ‘women’s movement’ in Kerala as compared to some other states in India, what ‘feminism’ denotes and how feminism is narrativised in these debates needs to be looked at in detail separately.

Prakashan, Usha's colleague at the University, makes his appearance. This separation helps present the two men as part of different and unconnected narratives. As far as the various writings in the case suggest, their actions need to be understood independent of each other, as the reasons behind them have nothing in common. This is done by attempting to shift the focus from Usha's experience to the experience of the two men. Rather than the effects of their actions, it is the causes that are foregrounded here. Rameshan's is a pathological condition that can be cured by proper medical care, whereas Prakashan's is a condition determined by sociological changes which are unfavourable to men. While Rameshan is seen as an 'individual' afflicted by a disease, Prakashan is always presented as a 'larger than individual' social being in these narratives. He is either the 'family man' or a 'party man'.⁷⁷ And while Prakashan becomes central to the argument, the social and political mobility of women is foregrounded:

... various women's groups and *female heroines* [sic.] have been abusing men for their obscene behaviour. Literature is being written on a daily basis on the obscenities perpetuated by men during travel and on the telephone. Seminars are being organized on the difficulties faced by women in public places. Exhortations are made to stop the cruelties of male demons. Thus, what is being generated is a tendency to reduce the matter to a 'law and order' problem. (Ramanunni 2000: 44, emphasis added)

⁷⁷ The case filed against Prakashan and the posters against him that were pasted on the university campus were always referred to as an attempt to tarnish the image of the Employees Union. Alternatively, he represented a family which is suffering.

Ramanunni advises the feminists: “[T]he feminist movement will have to move away from the *reserved spaces* like the stage and the print media and try to get into the unglamorous avenues of studying the psychology of social life” (Ramanunni, 2000: 45, emphasis added). Here the spaces of women’s emancipation, referred to by Ramanunni as the ‘stage and the print media’ are seen as spaces that women have occupied through dubious means, by means of reservation as opposed to merit. He goes on to point out the real space that feminists should occupy: “In a newly configured logic of women’s emancipation, we will see [feminist activists like] Sarah Joseph, Ajitha and Geetha enrolling the frotteurs in mental asylums and sensitising their families with sympathy and kindness” (*ibid*: 46). The call to feminists is clearly to get back to the private domain (away from the stage and the media) with the gender roles that were assigned to them a century before – one with attributes such as kindness and nurturing.

Pavithran, a member of the Campus Forum for the Protection of Human Rights and leader of the Left-backed Employees’ Union, adds a new twist to the argument about female empowerment:

What does Prakashan have to say? Truth has two sides. He is dark skinned, doesn’t know to write. Doesn’t have the language. Doesn’t have the glamour. Will copies of newspaper sell if they publish Prakashan’s photograph? If copies are to sell, you should have a bit of glamour.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Pavithran, speech made on 21 April 2001 at Calicut University.

The various markers of identity that are being hinted at in these debates need to be unravelled thoroughly. References to the dark and not-handsome Prakashan in opposition to the fair and good-looking Usha do point to the mobilization of a language familiar by now from the discourse on caste. The gender/caste hierarchisation does mark many debates around sexual harassment and sexual violence. In a similar case that was widely discussed in Kerala around the same time as Usha's, a minister of the State Cabinet from a lower caste was accused of harassment by an IAS officer from an upper caste. This incident, unlike Usha's, was characterized consistently, at least by one of the leading dailies *Kerala Kaumudi*, as an issue of caste verses gender (Devika and Kodoth 2001: 3173). As the accused was from a Left-backed organization in Usha's case unlike in the above-mentioned incident, this rhetoric was not very visible. But a suggestion like the one quoted above should be taken note of. Drawing resources from a framework that foregrounded caste more or less in the same way as Pavithran was P Valsala, the well-known novelist and a supporter of Usha. She writes:

She (Usha) is from a family with tradition, she is quite beautiful, active and a workingwoman. She married out of choice. Became member of an organization that she thought better than the others. She led movements on important issues like environment (Valsala 2001: 1, emphasis added).

The phrase 'a family with tradition' in this observation by Valsala is only a euphemism for the Nambudiri family that Usha hails from. By carefully sidestepping any mention of Usha's caste, Valsala attempts to portray her as an unmarked agential woman. The unmarked nature of agency that is being discussed

here is surely marked upper-caste (and middle class) because of the stress on her origins (the family) and on choice, which again is understood in terms of quality or merit. In her retelling of the incidents, Usha herself tries to represent the argument about caste made by her opponents as a part of a cruel political strategy to attack her (Usha 2006: 116).

In a forceful discussion on how caste gets re-inscribed into gender politics in the 1990s in more marked forms in the context of the anti-Mandal agitation and the massacre of Dalits in Chundururu (Andhra Pradesh), Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana have argued that these narratives incessantly create a logic by which “all the women are upper caste (and, by implication, middle-class Hindu) and all the lower castes are men” (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 240). Usha’s agency as a woman who could take up the issue in such a way that it became a noteworthy movement and debate, needs to be seen in the context of a long history which has categorized women as respectable or otherwise (an issue that we will discuss in more detail later in the chapter). This is not to suggest that the caste issue necessarily reworks the hierarchy involved in the harasser-harassed narratives which we are discussing. I am merely pointing to patterns emerging in our discussion of woman as victim, foregrounding the fact that the deployment of both caste and gender is significant to any discussion of sexual harassment.

The developments in some of the other issues that animated Kerala in the first years of the twenty first century could be taken up as a point of contrast to Usha's case. Unlike Usha who could move from being a victim to an agent of

political action with the support of various women's groups, Rejina – one of women involved in a sexual scandal popularly called the Ice Cream Parlour case, and Nalini Jameela – a sex worker who came out with her best selling autobiography *Oru Laingikathozhilaliyude Aathmakatha* (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker 2005), have not been recognized as agents within the feminist circles in Kerala for their refusal to be victims.⁷⁹ It could be argued that the minority status of these two women – the former a Muslim, and the latter from a lower class/caste background – has been detrimental to the recognition of their interventions as political agents in the feminist debates in Kerala. Without overemphasizing this fact, I submit that the identity markers that are attached to these women do impinge upon the limits to their own attempts at representing themselves as agents rather than victims in the public domain in Kerala.

Another significant aspect of the debate was the suggestion that Usha was getting undue support from the state and other civil society institutions. In the last decades of the twentieth century, concerted efforts by the women's movement in India has made visible issues of gender hierarchies in such a way that it has impacted many reforms, especially in the domain of law. One of the responses to this has been that minorities including women have been at an unfair advantage when it comes to getting the state to support their claims. Such a sentiment is behind the statement made by the Marxist intellectual and Professor of Philosophy

⁷⁹ The available language of feminist politics in Kerala seems to be on an impasse in that it seems to be caught up in a dichotomy of victim and predator. Such a narrative is unable to account for subject positions between and beyond this binary.

at University of Calicut – PK Poker: “The *special treatment that women enjoy today* as an oppressed gender should not be used for personal and political interests” (emphasis added).⁸⁰ Meanwhile, the possibility of “injustice meted out by men being replaced by the injustice caused by women” is what Ramanunni is anxious about.⁸¹ The ‘unfair advantage’ that Usha is supposed to have gained was also looked at in terms of her class position. A short write-up that appeared in *Manassakshi* (Conscience), a two-page publication of Students Federation of India (SFI), University of Calicut unit, observed in reference to the fact that it was the newspaper *Malayala Manorama* that supported Usha’s claims: “Why do you not see the stories of harassment faced by women who work in the lower depths of our society- in the many quarries in the state, when you are singing choruses for the songs sung by *Manorama*?”⁸²

The *Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi*, established around the same period in Kerala to look into the grievances men have against women, justifies its existence on precisely the same terms that were mentioned above and suggests

⁸⁰ Poker, PK. 2001. *Theliyikkan Pattunna Oru Kuttavaum Prakasan Cheithittilla* (Prakashan has not Committed any Provable Crime). ‘Letters to the Editor’ (*Ezhuthukuthu*) *Madhyamam* Weekly (22 June 2001): 4.

⁸¹ KP Ramanunni – as reported by the newspaper *Mathrubhumi* 20 April 2001 in a news report titled *Prakashanum Kudumbavum Sathyagraham Thudangi* (Prakashan and Family has started the Satyagraha).

⁸² ‘*PE Usha Episodinte (Anti) Climax*’ (The (anti) climax of the PE Usha Episode). *Manassakshi*. Publication of the SFI Unit, Calicut University. The delegitimising of Usha’s claim on the basis of her class position has been part of the Left critique of Usha’s claims.

that men have suffered in the meanwhile.⁸³ The period which saw the emergence of the ‘male as victim because of women’ paradigm, precedes the incidents discussed in this chapter, by some years. These notions of victimhood are produced against a well-imagined monster called ‘feminism’.

The various notions of masculinities that I have identified in the debates around the case allow us to pose the question: where do these notions come from? Some pointers to this are already available in the above section but I would argue that there is a need for a historical inquiry which would tease out these patterns in their entirety. Such an inquiry would be enabled by analysing texts published during some of the moments in the history of Kerala’s modernity, with a focus on notions of masculinity that are represented in them. I argue that in the texts that I analyse, social and political changes are negotiated through the narrativisation of these notions of masculinity. Before doing that I need to bring into relief the two primary themes which work as the background for the discourse of masculinity in the debates around the case.

‘Female Sexuality’ and ‘Family’

The two themes which I think are of significance in our inquiry into masculinity are the notions of female sexuality and changing family structures in

⁸³ There are two organizations in India that I am aware of which take up the issue of male harassment. One in Nasik (the *Purush Hakka Samrakshan Samiti*, see Kulkarni 2002 and in Kerala (*Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi*, for discussion see Adimathra 1999; Parvathidevi 1999).

Kerala in the twentieth century. Concerns related to the control and regulation of female sexuality has taken various forms in this period. The need to reformulate and regulate female desire has been an important agenda of social reform and related literature in the early years of the twentieth century, keeping in line with the emergence of modern gendered identities. One of the best known instances is that of matriliney among the Nairs where the need to make respectable the women of the community had resulted in the institutionalisation of marriage and the legal sanction over the comparatively looser structure of *sambhandam*. The *marumarakkal samaram* (struggle for the right to cover the upper part of the body) which took place in 1859, where lower caste *channar* women demanded the right to cover their body in the presence of upper-castes, also presented the female body as the site for negotiations with modernity.

Discussing the poetry of Kumaran Asan, a modern poet *par excellence*, Udayakumar argues that the body in these texts becomes the limit to bodily desire itself, a liminal site where “desire abandons the body and acknowledges the soul as its further habitus” (Kumar 1997: 265). He further notes that, “all the deliberations aimed at self-understanding or self-transformation [in Asan] have female subjects of enunciation” (*ibid*: 268), and argues that such a representation has had long-lasting impact on the way the subject has come to be understood in later Malayalam writing (*ibid*: 269).⁸⁴ It could be argued following these suggestions that the refiguring of female desire and its transformations have been

⁸⁴ See also Kumar 2004.

important themes around which man-woman relationship has been constituted in modern Kerala. If one were to follow the discussions of female sexuality and desire into later periods in Kerala's history, it could be evident that these considerations and its contestations have been a central thematic (Devika 2004a: 41). Paralleling this has been the debates around newer forms of conjugality, where 'family' and its structures become a constant point of debate. From the shift from matrilineal traditions to patrilineal ones among the Nairs and the discussion about companionship as the central plank in modern conjugality in the writings from the Left to more recent debates around the nuclear family, the family still continues to be widely discussed.⁸⁵

The focus on female sexuality and the related theme of family could be understood as displacing and normalizing anxieties over the role of men vis-à-vis these. As will be argued later in the thesis, negotiating notions of masculinity in relation to these important themes, has been a feature of Kerala's modernity. I argue that these form the base on which the discourse of masculinity has been mounted historically and that these should be understood as the central planks in the discussion of masculinities in Kerala. The following section will demonstrate the various notions of female sexuality and family that inform the debates around the sexual harassment suffered by PE Usha. In this specific instance the changes that are happening in the representation of female sexuality and in the expression of female desire, and the anxieties around the stability of the family as an

⁸⁵ A more detailed discussion of some of the ways in which the family gets discussed in Kerala is taken up for analysis in Chapter III and IV.

institution, form the central thematic. The discourse of masculinity, which I foregrounded in the previous section of this chapter, exists in relation to these concerns. The themes of female sexuality and family, which I discuss in detail here, will be picked up again later in Chapter III and IV as significant links in the construction of various notions of masculinity in Kerala's modernity.

In the debates around the case, notions of female sexuality were based on the mapping of the binary of active/passive on to male/female sexualities. Further, the production of a binary of male pleasure/female co-operation was skilfully employed in constituting notions of active/passive sexuality (Bharadwaj and Raj 2002). The 'fact' of men being 'by nature' sexually more active than women, is foregrounded in the writings of most of the commentators.

Before we get into the bus to inquire into the root cause of sexual harassment that happens inside, we should analyse the general character of sexuality that nature has given to men. There are certain things that are accepted by a range of people from Sigmund Freud, the godfather of psychology [sic.] to Dr. Kothari, the sexologist. One of those is that sexual instincts are awakened much faster in men than in women. A small inspiration is all that is required. That's all. The second is the fact that men are rich and ready as far as the capacities for reproduction are concerned. As for women, it is available only for a certain period that comes cyclically. [...] Not much more evidence is needed to ascertain that nature is on the side of women. (Venu 2000b: 8)

There were attempts to foreground Usha as a disreputable woman because of her outspoken nature and non-conformist lifestyle. This is reminiscent of the nationalist construction of the ‘other’ of the ‘new nationalist woman’ as the “...‘common woman’ who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous...” (Chatterjee 1989: 244). Usha complained to the Vice-Chancellor that the left leaders were referring to her as an immoral woman, and that they were spreading stories about how she had become a favourite for internet porn searchers. This complaint could be seen as her response to the attempt at producing her as a disreputable character who is not fit for better treatment. Though there were other instances such as a letter that Usha received from one K Sajeevkumar who suggested that it was possible that the harassment happened because Usha wore a *churidar* (instead of a sari) on the day of the incident,⁸⁶ the question of Usha’s respectability as a woman revolved mostly around one important fact – her status as a single woman. This fact of Usha being single is pointed out in many of the narratives that were produced during the high days of campaigning and debates. One of the ways of introducing the binary of good woman/bad woman was to make seemingly casual references to her hypothetical love life. Here is an example from a pamphlet that was published during the struggle: “The posters regarding this issue were pasted on the campus by members of the organization called Employees Forum of which Usha is the Vice President, including George John *who is her constant companion*”

⁸⁶ Letter written to PE Usha by K Sajeevkumar, dated 6 October 2000.

(emphasis added).⁸⁷ Clear ideas about the public/private divide resonate in the words of Pavithran:

With liberalization, changes will take place in our social systems, personal relations and in value systems. During liberalization, some liberalization will happen in man-woman relationships also. A bit of liberalization will happen in extra-marital relationships. What else would occur when liberalization takes place? The wall between our drawing room and bedroom will slowly start to fall. And then it will collapse. Things that should happen in the bedroom will be visible on the television in the drawing room.⁸⁸

Further, “It was through the article written in *Manorama* that the world got to know of the fact that even her husband had left her after the incident in the bus”.⁸⁹ The fact that Usha’s marital problems had no connection with the case and that she and her husband had separated long before the incident in the bus might not be important to mention, but the presentation of Usha as a single woman and the implied connection between this fact and her being harassed is evident in these writings. Usha is not only posited as a disreputable single woman but also by extension as the ‘home breaker’ – not only has she broken up her own family, she is also destroying other families. Starting out being sympathetic to Usha, one of

⁸⁷ *Campus Manushyavakasha Samrakshana Samithi*. 2001. ‘Ushayude Satyagraham Niyama Vazhchayodulla Velluvili’ (Usha’s Struggle a Challenge to the Rule of Law). 18 March 2001.

⁸⁸ Pavithran, speech made on 21 April 2001 at Calicut University.

⁸⁹ *Campus Manushyavakasha Samrakshana Samithi* 2001.

the many news reports on the incident ends by talking about her estranged husband, a well-known environmentalist, whose life is in disarray because of her. The report goes on to say that Usha is wrecking another family, that of her colleague George (who is referred to in the pamphlet as her 'constant companion'), allegedly as related by his wife, who is not directly quoted.⁹⁰ Even supporters of Usha in their writings seem to revert to the good woman/bad woman binary. UA Khader, a prominent novelist, is outraged by the incident but adds a word of caution in the form of advice for women who are activists:

A female social activist is expected to live by socially accepted norms. The arrogance that one can handle any situation and the unacceptable forms of behaviour that suggest that one does not care about social restrictions is not good for anyone. It is in this situation that the need to answer the pointed questions of colleagues emerges. The pain that this has caused would have increased many fold if it had happened in the accepted frameworks of our society. There is another aspect that needs to be read alongside this. Why did Usha's family life get destroyed? This is surely a big question mark (quoted in Riyalu 2000: 18).

Ramanunni's assertion that only women who are unable to have a good family life become the leaders of the women's movement should be read in tandem with

⁹⁰ 'Aaraani 'Usha' Sambhavathinu Pinnil...?' (Who is behind this Usha Incident?). *Aaraamam* Magazine October 2000.

Khader's suggestion.⁹¹ Another example is of MM Sajeendran, one of the most vocal supporters of Usha, who writes, "A respectable woman would never file such a complaint against any man without ample reasons".⁹² It is very clear from these examples that irrespective of the positions that were taken by the commentators vis-à-vis the incident, they had to present the incident within the binary good woman/bad woman. For one group it was important that Usha is presented as an immoral person whereas Sajeendran argues to the contrary by stressing on Usha's 'respectability' thus reinforcing the binary.

I submit that the respectability question has been inseparable from the question of caste (and class). Tharu and Niranjana argue for the need to be sensitive to the

role played by caste in the making of the middle-class woman. In the nineteenth-century *bhadruk* campaigns against Vaishnav artistes, as much as in the anti-nautch initiatives in Madras Presidency, the virtue and purity of the middle-class woman emerged in contrast to the licentiousness of the lower-caste/class woman. It is a logic that continues to operate [...]: the women crying rape were 'prostitutes' and therefore had no right to complain

⁹¹ This statement was mentioned in one of the many reports in Mathrubhumi newspaper. *Prakashanum Kudumbavum Sathyagraham Thudangi* (Prakashan and Family has started the Satyagraha). 20 April 2001.

⁹² Sajeendran, MM. Report on the proceedings of the Complaints Committee constituted by Calicut University, submitted to the Kerala High Court.

of sexual harassment. A woman's right over her body and control over her sexuality is conflated with her virtue. So powerful does this characterization become that *only the middle-class woman has a right to purity*. In other words, *only she is entitled to the name of woman* in this society (Tharu and Niranjana 1996: 242-243, emphasis added).

The discourse of respectability foregrounds the limits that the discussion of gender seems to have reached in foregrounding complex interplay of social hierarchies making it susceptible to critiques of being structured around upper caste concerns effected by the othering of both lower caste women and lower caste men.

The fact that Prakashan came for the *prathi-samaram* or anti- struggle with his wife and daughter is significant in this respect. This allowed at one level for comparisons between Usha and Prakashan and on the other between Usha and Reshmi, Prakashan's wife. The former was played out between the family man and the single woman and the latter between the 'public woman' and the 'private' woman. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the pro-Prakashan camp represented the figure of Reshmi, who sat alongside Prakashan silently, as embodying the new private domain that they would represent in the public. Let us see how this contrast was worked out, as for example by Pavithran, in his speech:

Even though painful, I would like to do a comparative study here. Here too a woman is sitting in satyagraha. There is no media behind this woman [Reshmi]. There are Anweshis behind that woman [Usha]. There are a number of well-known destructive forces behind

that woman. There is no one with our sister Reshmi. She had become ill because of the mental agony she has had to face over the last one year. No women's commission will come to support her. [Activists] Ajitha or Padmaja will not be with her. Do you know why? She doesn't have the language. She doesn't have a job. The arrows poisoned with lies and hatred that have been thrown at Prakashan over the last year were received by this woman. Nobody sees her bleeding mind. ... we are with those who have lost their tongues.⁹³

The affirmation of the institution of the family as that one thing separating Usha and Prakashan is seen in the words of Viswanathan, the Secretary of the Calicut University Employees' Union, who is referring to Prakashan's daughter:

This girl here is mentally destroyed. Why is this little child sitting here? She is demanding that the harassment of her father and mother be stopped. Do these people understand her pain? They won't understand. *Their families are like that. They are unable to understand such sacred relationships* (emphasis added).⁹⁴

And further,

In reality, it is Prakashan, his wife and child who are being harassed. A situation has arisen where his family relations are in jeopardy because of the poisonous and false reporting of the media.

⁹³ Pavithran, speech made on 21 April 2001 at Calicut University.

⁹⁴ Viswanathan, speech made on 21 April 2001 at Calicut University.

Because the drama that is directed by Usha's 'sponsors' in the wake of impending state elections, is destroying Comrade Prakashan and his family life. This is surely a grave human rights violation. It is the duty of humanists to help Prakashan and his family who have been refused minimum human considerations.⁹⁵

Usha, interestingly, goes on to describe her own plight in relation to the humiliation and mental agony faced by her family. She describes the problems that the whole episode has created for her child and her parents. The issue is not about whether this narrative is true or not, but that she too was compelled sometimes to present her case in terms of the family.⁹⁶ It is to be noted that most of the participants in the public debate had to be content with the terms of framing that was available at the time.

The role of the child in the discourse of the family in contemporary Kerala is evident from the material that we analysed above.⁹⁷ Childrearing rather than conjugality seems to be the logic around which the family is organized among the middle classes in Kerala. The child makes his/her appearance in many kinds of narratives. Ramanunni's anxiety about his eight-year-old daughter, Viswanathan's

⁹⁵ *Campus Manushyavakasha Samrakshana Samithi* 2001. *opcit.*

⁹⁶ Report submitted to the Complaints Committee by PE Usha in reference to Memo No. CC/2/01 – 3.10.2001 on 7 October 2001.

⁹⁷ I thank P Udayakumar for bringing to my notice the significance of the 'child' in the discussion of the family in Kerala.

concern about Prakashan's daughter, and even Usha's narratives figuring her daughter or refiguring herself as a daughter are examples. One of the newspaper reports, published during the course of the struggles, talks about how children from the two camps were playing together "without knowing why their parents are on opposite sides". The report goes on to say that "when the children got involved in their own games, many of the people gathered thought about the story titled *Aa Kuttikale Kandu Padikku* (Learn from those children) that they had read in the language textbook in one of the primary classes."⁹⁸ Adulthood as opposed to childhood is seen here as a corrupt stage in the life of human beings. The idea that childhood is a stage where the human being is at his/her most complete stage and that growing up is a gradual fall from plenitude has been in circulation from the early twentieth century in Kerala (Devika 2005c).⁹⁹ Children and their innocence are seen in the instance under discussion as that which can erase differences and cement relationships across hierarchies and inequalities.

The above discussion foregrounds the fact that normative models of family and female sexuality were used as two important themes around which the incidents had to be discussed. It is the nuclear family, with an emphasis on the

⁹⁸ *Aa Kuttikale Kandu padikku* (Learn from those children) *Mathrubhumi* 20 April 2001.

⁹⁹ Discussing the works of the early twentieth century poet KSK Thalikkulam, especially his most popular poem *Ammuvite Aattinkutti* (Ammu's Lamb), Devika notes: "... the child, or the infant, rather than being an incomplete being, is completion itself. Childhood here is the pleasurable condition where a total harmony is imagined between truth and knowledge, thought and experience, self and nature. Growing up is the invariable fall from this condition of completion" (Devika 2005c: 17).

well being of children, which exists as the normative as far as the discussion of family in this case is concerned. Also significant was the representation of the husband as the face of the nuclear family in the public. On the other hand, monogamous marriage was seen as the institution which would contain female sexuality. It was also evident that respectability, tied to caste and class, is central to attribution of agency to women. I argue that the various discourses of masculinities that are mobilized in the case are linked to these themes, and that these linkages are the reasons for the exaggerated interest in the case generated in the public domain in Kerala. To reiterate, the importance of the case rests in the fact that it demonstrated the fact that the discourse of masculinity is linked to notions of family and female sexuality. Further, this link has been an important one in the formation of Kerala's modernity. I suggest that the history of Kerala's modernity could be retold by foregrounding the significance of this complex. The debates around this case also point to the centrality of a narrative public domain in our attempts at understanding the process of gendering in the present. They also help us go beyond the production of singular structures of hegemonic masculinity and the culturalist trappings of masculinity studies, instead suggesting ways in which the discourse of masculinity functions as a complex interpretative frame that structures the commonsense that allows us to negotiate our day-to-day lives.

History of the contemporary

I argue that the public domain is in a process of constant reproduction at any given time. In the present instance, the issue is to understand the historical

trajectories that produce and sustain the discourse of masculinity which I have delineated above. The role that history plays in the contemporary needs to be understood in the most complex ways. A historical understanding of the contemporary is needed to produce a

... context for prolonging the ephemeral item or the “case”:
saturating with detail an articulated place and point in time, a
critical reading can extract from its objects a parable of practice that
converts them into *models* with a past and potential for reuse, thus
aspiring to invest them with a future (Morris 1998: 3, emphasis in
the original).

The need then is to reposition our understanding of the history of the contemporary as one that is non-linear and one that foregrounds its continuing existence in the form of a variety of narratives in the public domain. Writing about history’s role in postcolonial societies, Madhava Prasad suggests that history is “... the accumulation of discourse about the past, the evolving methodologies for keeping record and for extracting meaning from a sedimented past” (Prasad 1998a: 125). Following Prasad, I suggest that we need to move towards a conjunctural understanding of contemporary which would help us to critically engage with the historical legacies that are carried by it at a particular point of time. This disallows large claims about history and the present, and tries to make very specific claims about the object under study. For this chapter then, history is important insofar as there remains a public memory of it (whether conscious or unconscious) and its narratives continue to structure the contemporary.

Let me conclude by suggesting that what I have outlined above is a starting point for a journey through some of the key moments in the history of Kerala's modernity where the different notions of masculinity I have identified from our present, existed independent from each other in narratives as normative models of masculinity. Those moments and developments in Kerala's history are the legacies of our contemporary. The next part of the thesis is organized in two chapters, which are further subdivided into two sections each. These chapters will take up historical inquiries into the four notions of masculinity that we identified in the current chapter, which are significant for the discursive formation of masculinity in contemporary Kerala.

Part II

‘Present’ing the Past – Masculinity and Modernity in Kerala

This part of the thesis is divided into two chapters. Each chapter takes up two of the notions of masculinity that have been identified in the analysis of the debates around the sexual harassment of PE Usha. The attempt here is to identify those moments in the history of modern Kerala where these forms were put together through a set of narratives. The chapters do not claim to be exhaustive historical accounts of the moments under study. Rather, they are attempts at teasing out the gendered discourses that underpin the narratives exemplifying those moments. In disciplinary terms too, I am not a historian presenting a complete account of each period. My aim is to focus on selected texts that stand out from these periods. Through reading these texts closely, I submit, it is possible to strengthen the line of argument about masculinity and the public domain that the previous chapter put forward. The following chapters however, are not attempts at tracking the history of the relationship between the discourse of masculinity and the public domain in Kerala's modernity. The notions of masculinity that I have identified from each of these historical moments *do not* represent the discourse of masculinity in that period. To repeat my argument from the previous chapter, at a particular point of time in history, it takes more than one normative notion of masculinity to produce the conjuncture that I have been calling the public domain.

It is not the burden of the thesis then to plot a history of the link between masculinity and the public domain through the twentieth century. It is also important to keep in mind that these forms of masculinity *need not* be those that have had a public significance/presence during the moment that is being

narrativised in various forms. Their public significance, as has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, is central to our understanding of the contemporary, and not necessarily for an understanding of the public domain of the time when these narratives were produced. The following chapters elaborate on the specific ways in which the four notions of masculinity were represented in these narratives. It is in reproducing and re-presenting these notions in conjuncture with one another that the contemporary public domain is formed.

Chapter III titled “Masculinities in the Public: Politics and Art” is divided into two sections. Section I titled “*Sakhavu*: The Left Revolutionary” tries to understand the production of the revolutionary figure in the narratives produced by the official left in Kerala through the notions of masculinity that were employed in its service. The various tropes employed in these narratives do not disappear at any particular point of time in history (one could potentially trace its beginnings though) as they could be identified in various narratives produced ever since. The section proceeds with two protagonists. The first is P Krishna Pillai, a communist leader who died as early as 1948, and who, the section will argue, is the prototype of the revolutionary figure. The second, Sathyan, one of the most popular actors in Malayalam cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, who, it will be argued, is the popular representation of the subject of the Communist movement. Some of the photographs published in the journal *Deshabimani* in 1953 will also be analysed to understand the techniques of representation that the movement employed. Section II titled “Cult figures and Collectives: John Abraham and *Amma Ariyaan*” moves to the 1980s to examine the narratives produced in relation

to radical cultural practice in Kerala. Moving through the lives of the some of the celebrated artists of the time including the filmmaker John Abraham and using texts including his cult film *Amma Ariyaan*, the section tries to unravel the notions of masculinity that underpin the production of the public intellectual's subjectivity in Kerala.

Chapter IV, "Negotiating Modernity: The Crisis Narratives" is also divided into two sections. Section I titled "Of Mice and Men: Matriliney and the Crisis in Masculinity" tries to understand the discussions on matriliney in the latter half of the twentieth century – the period after its official dismantling – through the works of the novelist MT Vasudevan Nair and the filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan. It will explore the possibilities that these texts offer the Nair man in the wake of the important structural changes in society and its new economic conditions. In Section II, titled "Powerlessness as Hegemony: 'Emancipated Woman' and the Crisis of Masculinity", I move to the 1990s and analyse the narratives of male victimhood that proliferated in Kerala at the time. I argue that these narratives are linked to the discourse of the 'emancipated woman' in the 'Kerala Model' and to the popular understanding of feminism. The section will look at two sets of narratives, the first a set of films that represent a crisis in masculinity through mental illness and the second the literature around *Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi*, an organization for the redressal of male grievances regarding harassment by women, in which men are represented as being powerless and without agency and women as being 'liberated'.

The temporal relationship between the discussions in the previous chapter and the narratives in this chapter is not uniform even when the theoretical relationship remains constant. The disparity in the temporal relationship owes to the fact that the following sections discuss different moments in Kerala's history, in differential temporal distance from the contemporary. The specific historical relationships that structure each of the sections, especially the first and the fourth, will be discussed in the sections themselves.

Chapter III

Masculinity in the Public: Politics and Art

This chapter, divided into two sections, takes up two sets of narratives that were produced in Kerala in the second half of the twentieth century. The first set, discussed in Section I, is about the construction of a revolutionary masculinity in the narratives produced by the official Left, and about the image of the actor Sathyan, who represented its popular representation. The second section looks at the production of certain cult figures and in 1980s Kerala to understand the notions of masculinity that are put together in the context of art practices of the extreme Left. It also attempts to understand the ways in which the intellectual public spaces in Kerala are gendered male. Apart from the fact that both these notions of masculinity deal with left politics of some kind, they are linked in that it depends on the active production of a public as a space where it performs.

Section I:

Sakhavu: The Left Revolutionary

This section – the first of four snapshots from the history of Kerala from mid to late twentieth century – is about the notions of masculinity that govern the image of the revolutionary in the official ‘left’ narratives in Kerala.¹ This image is reproduced in the public domain in contemporary Kerala, through the deployment of the figure of the revolutionary, or in other words the political subject, in the political discourse of the Left, as it emerges in the debate around the sexual harassment of PE Usha, discussed in Chapter II. The notion of masculinity I discuss here is at once the norm vis-à-vis other political subjectivities are legitimised, and the performative structure within which the members of the official Left in Kerala function. The section attempts to discuss the historical production of the left revolutionary both in the narratives produced by the official Left and in popular representations.

In this section I examine certain male figures as exemplifying revolutionary masculinity during the early years of the Communist movement in the region that came to be called Kerala after the linguistic re-organisation of states in India in 1956. The section looks at the representation of two important

¹ The ‘official left’ refers to the wide spectrum of political parties that claim a Marxist politics in Kerala. Though the discourse has had immense impact on how politics is imagined in Kerala in general, its contours are best visible in the political narratives that claim an explicitly left history.

individuals in Kerala's history. The first is P Krishna Pillai (1906-1948), popularly known as *Sakhavu* or 'Comrade', one of the founding members of the Communist Party, and the second is one of the most popular actors ever produced by Malayalam cinema, Sathyan (1912-1971). The attempt will be to look at the production of the former as the prototype of the figure of the revolutionary, especially in opposition to other leaders of the Communist Party, like EMS Nambudiripad, the first Chief Minister of Kerala. The primary object of analysis will be Krishna Pillai's official biography, *Kerala's First Communist: The Life of 'Sakhavu' Krishna Pillai*, written by TV Krishnan. The characters portrayed by Sathyan, as I will demonstrate in this section, represented the popular incarnation of the revolutionary figure. It could be argued that these representations constituted the subject of revolutionary politics – one who is modelled on the revolutionary himself. It could be argued that Prem Nazir, the other important star at the time Sathyan was popular, represented the counterpoint to the figure of the ideal political subject of the Left, paralleling the image of EMS Nambudiripad, who performed a similar function in relation to Krishna Pillai.

The ideals of the Communist movement had started circulating in Kerala as early as the mid 1920s.² It was mostly under the leadership of educated young men from rich families in Malabar and in Travancore that the ideas were being circulated. Though peasants and the workers, mostly from the lower castes, were

² The first ever biography of Karl Marx to be written in any Indian language appeared in Malayalam in 1912, a good five years before the October Revolution in Soviet Russia. See Pillai 1912/2002.

being mobilized from the early 1930s, the official unit of the Communist party was formed (secretly) only in 1939.³ Before the formation of the official party, however, the Trivandrum-based Communist League in 1931 and the Malabar-based Congress Socialist Party in 1934 had already come into being (Nambudiripad 1995: 25).

The reasons for the emergence of a Communist movement in the region in the first half of the twentieth century are still debated in academic circles. The official left history sees it as a natural development from “left national politics to working class politics” (Nambudiripad 1995: 23-29), “because of the admiration for the Soviet Union, a desire to learn from the experiences of that nation, a tendency to compare India under British rule to Tsarist Russia, and the Indian freedom struggle to the October revolution” (*ibid*: 26-27). Such a history fails to account for the contexts within which the assimilation of Marxism in the region took place. On the other hand, scholars have attached various reasons for the emergence of the movement. This includes the specificities of agrarian relations (Gough 1968), interaction of landlessness and literacy (Zagoria 1973), the breakdown of matriliney among land owning castes (Jeffrey 1978), and the dynamics of caste itself (Menon 1994). It has also been argued that it is the Communist Party’s involvement in anti-colonial movements in Kerala that has helped it become a mass based organization (Desai 2001: 40). I do not attempt to provide a resolution for the debate around the emergence of a vibrant Communist

³ The official history of the party is available in Nambudiripad 1995. For detailed accounts of the history of the Communist Movement in Kerala see Nositter 1982; Menon 1994.

movement, as it would take me away from the primary objective of this section which is to tease out the gendered notions that underpin the revolutionary subjectivity in the left discourse. Before I move on to the discussion of masculinity, let me present a quick overview of events that marked the early history of the Communist Party.

In his preface to the second edition of the biography of Karl Marx (first published in 1912), written by *Swadeshabhimani* (patriot) K Ramakrishna Pillai in 1946, K Damodaran marks the distance covered by Marxism since the first edition of the book was published: “In 1912 when this book came out, Marxism was just a political ideal (*adarsham*). But today Marxism has become an unsurpassed political force” (Damodaran 1946/2002: 10). Though Damodaran’s immediate reference is to the world situation at large, it is not very difficult to assume that the statement is addressed to a mass in the region already influenced by Marxist ideals- a mass that represents the ‘unsurpassed political force’ called Marxism. The early leaders of the party included P Krishna Pillai, AK Gopalan (later to be the first Leader of the Opposition in Indian Parliament), EMS Nambudiripad (later to be the first Chief Minister of Kerala), NC Shekhar, C Unniraja, TV Thomas and others. The party was hugely successful in organizing the working class and the peasantry throughout the region in the next couple of decades and was able to articulate a new politics – one that was based on class. The uprising in Punnapra and Vayalar in the princely state of Travancore, against the oppressive rule of the Dewan Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer, marked an important moment in the political history of the region. All this culminated in the historical victory of the

Communist Party in the first general elections in the state in 1957 and in the dismissal of the first ministry by the Central government headed by the Congress in 1959. From then on, alliances led by the Communist Party and the Congress have come to power alternately. In spite of the fact that the Left was not in power in Kerala continuously as has been the case with West Bengal, where they have been in power for over twenty years without break, it could be argued that the space of the political in the region is determined by the theoretical and organizational structures established by them. The continuing impact of the Left has been important in the formation of the region that is identified today as Kerala.

As an entry point to engage with notions of masculinity in relation to the figure of the left revolutionary, I use a set of photographs that appeared in the annual issue of the Communist Party organ *Deshabhimani* published in 1953 (18-22).⁴ One set of photographs is of the revolutionaries themselves and the other of their families. These photographs could be used to separate out the notions of the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ which are tied up with the production of the revolutionary. The first set of photographs show the members of the Communist Party who lost their lives during the various struggles that happened in the region (see images 3 and 4) published under the title ‘*Mattullavarkku Jeevikkan Vendi Avar Rakhthasakshikalayi*’ (They became Martyrs so that Others could Live). It is significant that the photographs are either passport size photographs or

⁴ *Deshabhimani* the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party was started as a weekly in 1942.

photographs of a group, both taken inside a photo studio. In the history of the photographic image in Kerala, as would be the case anywhere else, the passport size photograph occupies an important position. In a passport size photograph, the attempt is to represent the individual bereft of all identity markers (except those of gender). To understand the implications of such a mode of representing the individual, we need to analyse it in tandem with the use that these photographs are usually put to. As is commonly known, passport size photographs are used mostly for official purposes like identification in driver's licenses, passports etc. It could be argued that these photographs represent the gaze of the state on the individual whom it recognizes only as a citizen, sans the various identity markers. The photograph, even when it is used in other contexts, carries the burden of its original purpose and denotes the elevation of the individual beyond the limits of his/her immediate surroundings and identity markers, and makes possible his/her identification as representing the human in general. In the case of the photographs of the martyrs, the fact that all of them wear white shirts and white *mundu* (dhoti) further helps erase their class/caste/religious markers.⁵ As is evident, the use of passport size photographs in representing the revolutionary points to the same impulse – that of representing him as an individual who is outside the markers of domesticity and other related identity markers.

⁵ Even though Malayalee men and women started covering the upper part of their body as late as the early twentieth century, the white shirt/white *mundu* combination, like the 'set *mundu*' for women, has become the cultural marker of the Malayalee man.

On the other hand, the photographs of the family (in these cases we see mothers and children) of the martyrs of the Communist Party are taken with their houses in the background (see image 5). In these photographs, a “homology between the sitter and the background [...] a strong theme in [...] ‘anthropological’ images” (Pinney 1997: 25), is invoked.⁶ Discussing the differences between anthropological photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and portrait photographs, in which we might include passport size photographs, Christopher Pinney suggests that “the ‘anthropological’ works dealt with anonymous ‘typical’ representatives of particular categories, whereas ‘portraits’ were concerned with individual members of an elite within which markers of ethnicity were downplayed” (*ibid*: 97). Recasting this argument for a very different place and time – Kerala in the late 1940s and early 1950s – I argue that while the representational strategies of the anthropological photographs are kept more or less intact in the pictures of the families of the martyrs, a more democratised public sphere, in the wake of the newly constituted public sphere of the nation, had enabled the common man to use portrait photography where “markers of ethnicity were downplayed” as the route to citizenship.

The similarities of the latter set of photographs (of the family of the revolutionary) to the anthropological photographs are striking. These photographs, though they are of families of particular martyrs, do stand in as ‘types’ for the large number of families that have lost the man of the house for the cause of the

⁶ Christopher Pinney has discussed in detail the anthropological photographs, especially those taken during colonialism in India. See Pinney 1997: 17-71.

revolution. The photograph taken in the studio suggests agency on the part of the subject as it is the desire of the subject to be photographed which is being represented in the passport size photographs.⁷ On the other hand, the photographs of the family, as they are taken in their immediate surroundings like in front of their houses, suggest the desire on the part of the photographer or even the viewer to capture the moment, rather than of the subject itself.

The attempt at producing the unmarked male subject could be taken up as the first move in the production of the revolutionary subject. The page layout of the magazine which has published the photographs is noteworthy for its ingenious attribution of ‘class’ to the revolutionary. This is done by suggesting that the ‘family’ – the mother and children of the revolutionary – is ‘lower class’ with the help of the background in the photograph. The background, typically a hut and its surroundings, marks the family as lower class. The dress worn by the subjects of the photographs, unlike the revolutionaries who wear white shirts and dhotis, are also such that their poverty is foregrounded. By juxtaposing the photographs of the revolutionaries and their families in the pages of the magazine, a link is engendered between them – one that helps us identify the revolutionary as being

⁷ Here is Roland Barthes, discussing the act of posing for the camera:

... [I]t is metaphorically that I derive my existence from the photographer. [...]. I decide to “let drift” over my lips and in my eyes a faint smile which I mean to be “indefinable”, in which I might suggest, along with the qualities of my nature, my amused consciousness of the whole photographic ritual: I lend myself to the social game, I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know I am posing, but... this additional message must in no way alter the precious essence of my individuality: what I am, apart from an effigy (Barthes 1981: 11-12).

from the lower class. I argue that a pull between the impulse of producing the revolutionary as an unmarked individual and that of marking him as 'lower class' is evident in the way the photographs are laid out on the pages of the magazine. It is important to note that this is done not by having the revolutionaries themselves to wear the markers of class but by allowing the reader to make a semiotic link between the different photographs. The spatial ordering that is evident in the photographs is also of significance. The space of the studio where the revolutionary is placed is understood as public whereas the space where the 'family' is situated is private. The photographer's studio is one of those modern spaces, alongside cinema theatres, coffee houses and reading rooms, which engender new socialities. These spaces enable individuals to imagine themselves as part of a public sphere – a democratic space where they could literally fashion themselves vis-à-vis the image of the citizen. These new socialities in turn have been the foundations of a modern democratic society. Apart from those discussed above, there are also a couple of photographs which show either the wife or the child of the revolutionary beside him shot inside a studio and not in spaces that are marked in any specific sense (see the two photographs on the top right of image 3). These two photographs suggest the possibilities of new domesticities that have a public significance, an issue that we will have to come back to later in this section, when I discuss the image of Krishna Pillai.

Three arguments, which will reappear in the analysis of revolutionary masculinity in the rest of the chapter, emerge from this discussion. The first argument is that there exists a simultaneous attempt at cutting off the

revolutionary from his immediate surroundings and identity markers, and at narratively linking him to his family, or the family of any other revolutionary, which is clearly marked lower/ working class. This foregrounds the significant role of the family or the 'private' in the construction of the image of the revolutionary. The second argument, as was pointed out during the discussion of the photographs of the revolutionary with one member of his family taken inside a studio, is about the imagining of new forms of conjugality. The third argument relates to the designating as public the spaces occupied by the revolutionary.

In the many hoardings and wall writings all over Kerala that publicize or represent left politics, we see a regular set of faces. The most common one is of course that of Karl Marx. The other faces include Frederick Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Che Guevara (after the co-option of his image by the official Left in the late 1990s), and then the local leaders – AK Gopalan, EMS Nambudiripad and P Krishna Pillai, fondly called simply '*Sakhavu*' or 'Comrade' by the masses. The following part of the section looks at what goes into the elevation of Krishna Pillai into the pantheon of left leaders in Kerala.

The Revolutionary

In the 'Foreword' to the official biography of P Krishna Pillai, C Achutha Menon- one of the most respected Communist leaders in Kerala, introduces him thus:

To the outside world, the greatest name that the Communist movement in Kerala has produced is that of EMS Nambudiripad, but to the early cadres and workers of the movement at the grassroots, in the fields and the factories in the late thirties and early forties of the century, there was a more endearing and inspiring name and in certain respects as [sic.] commanding name – that was of Comrade P Krishna Pillai, colleague and co-worker of Nambudiripad and a host of others who founded the Communist Party in Kerala (Krishnan 1971: iii).

Pillai is most commonly referred to in contrast to EMS Nambudiripad (hereafter EMS), just as Achutha Menon does. EMS, comparing himself with Krishna Pillai, suggests that the latter has had a better vision about Communist politics because of three reasons: the first being that unlike himself, Pillai was born in a poor peasant family the second, that Pillai has had the chance to interact with revolutionaries in the north of India which had helped him to have an understanding of the various strands of revolutionary politics, and the third, that Pillai had revolted against the Congress orthodoxy much before he had done that himself (Nambudiripad 1985/1998: 218-219). “In emotional terms,” he writes, “Krishna Pillai was closer to Communism than me” (*ibid*: 219). Even as EMS seems to be privileging Krishna Pillai over himself in this narrative, he does reserve the better quality for the revolutionary – ‘reason’ – for himself.⁸ The

⁸ It is interesting to note that EMS mobilizes emotion/reason binary to represent Krishna Pillai and himself, contrary to other narratives in which Pillai represents the fearless and the courageous. Here theoretical knowledge and experience is presented as opposites, the former representing reason and the latter, emotion.

qualities desirable for the revolutionary will be taken up for discussion later in the section.

In the latter half of the 1940s the Party was more or less controlled by EMS and Krishna Pillai. While EMS was seen as an ideologue and political analyst, Pillai was seen as a man in charge of organizational and practical issues (Nossiter 1982: 89). Such a distinction between theory and party work was at the heart of the division of labour within the Party. EMS, the official theorist and historian of the party, presents Pillai in such a way that we do not miss the space that he occupies in the story of Communism in Kerala:

In the volunteer camps during the salt satyagraha, there used to be regular arguments between the leaders who were rich and upper caste, and the majority of volunteers who were common men. Krishna Pillai, who was the most important leader of the Congress Socialist Party, was among the latter group. Coming from an agricultural family which had been impoverished, he could not acquire school or college education (Nambudiripad 1995: 27).

These two tropes, the first, the contrast with EMS and the second, the focus on the difficulties that Krishna Pillai had to go through, are important in the way the revolutionary is imagined in the left narratives. Nambudiripad further adds that, “Krishna Pillai was just one of the many who came into the leadership of the most important political movement in Kerala. Many others followed him – beedi workers, mill workers and other industrial labourers joined forces” (*ibid*: 27). This representation of Pillai as a prototype for the foot soldier of the Party – the

common labourer – is also noteworthy for its longstanding presence in the public domain in Kerala.⁹ What follows is my reading of the official biography of Krishna Pillai, *Kerala's First Communist: The Life of 'Sakhavu' Krishna Pillai* (1971, hereafter *KFC*) written in English by TV Krishnan, which will attempt to analyse the ways in which Pillai emerges as the prototype of the revolutionary.

“Who was he?” asks TV Krishnan, “This swarthy young man who made a sensation and stirred a storm on the Calicut beach in the November of 1930, defying the brutalities of a colonial police out to crush the incipient salt satyagraha? [...] He was healthy and of average build. The shapely nose jutted out of his face and those sprightly eyes with a visionary look instantly distinguished him as a born leader, a man of destiny” (*KFC*: 1). The growth from being a young man hailing from an impoverished Nair family to becoming one of the important leaders of the imminent communist movement is narrated in the first chapter titled ‘Early Years’ (*KFC*: 1-7) as one of physical activity and changes. Let me list these changes: he cut off his hair in “the western style” (*KFC*: 4) and indulged in “his favourite pastimes”, swimming and boat-racing (*KFC*: 6). His preparations to become a revolutionary included becoming a labourer, working in a cycle repair shop and later in a teashop. Before we are introduced to Krishna Pillai’s political involvements, we are also told the story of

⁹ In the autobiography of VS Achuthanandan, Chief Minister of Kerala after the 2006 general elections, we encounter Krishna Pillai as his mentor (Achuthanandan 2006: 9-13). This is significant as it is in line with the image of VS Achuthanandan that was being built during the elections as a leader representing the peasantry and working class, as opposed to a new crop of leaders, considered reformists, who have emerged in the Party recently.

how he had become a sadhu in Haridwar and of his effort to learn Hindi. In all these moves, one can sense the desire to slowly erase his already existing identity markers including class and caste, and the attempt to suggest the possibility of taking up a new class identity – one that is not his by birth, but by action. It is important to note that alongside declassing, there is also an attempt to incorporate himself into a national narrative. This insertion into the national – Haridwar, Hindi and nationalist politics – is the mode by which Pillai becomes an unmarked individual. It is significant that his caste identity is more or less never mentioned in the biography after the first chapter. Krishna Pillai reappears in the narrative, after a few pages which describe the political developments of the time, as the defiant satyagrahi of the salt satyagraha in 1930 on Calicut beach. Here is how Krishna Pillai is described:

The police swooped down on the volunteers. Heads were broken. Bones cracked. Superintendent Saheb himself dealt with the leaders, beating and kicking them mercilessly. They fell unconscious. As also, the volunteers. Only one man refused to yield. The vultures of authority concentrated their fury on this unbending symbol of defiance, the dark lean figure in blood spattered white khaddar cloth, holding high the national tricolour. They beat him. Kicked him. Even as he fell flat on the ground, he would not leave the flag, come what may. Lathis rained. Boot kicked all over his body. A cry? No.... (*KFC*: 16).

Krishna Pillai's courage as a distinctive feature gets repeated throughout the text. Significantly, this characteristic can be seen as one that gets reproduced as a basic

quality of the revolutionary. This ‘masculine’ ideal becomes the norm for the revolutionary – male or female – as is evident from the one reference in the book to women who were part of the revolutionary movement.

Discussing the arrest of an activist called Koothattukulam Mary, Krishnan writes, “The police felt cowed-down and humiliated not on her refusal to divulge the whereabouts of her man *but on her not even shedding a single tear* when hurled again and again into the torture chamber” (*KFC*: 118, emphasis added). An interesting way of imagining women as part of the movement can be seen in the description of Mary’s arrest. She is described as an activist who had duties comparable to any male activist of the Party (*KFC*: 117). But her arrest, Krishnan suggests, was directed at eliciting information about her husband who had gone underground. Even when women like Mary had a significant role to play in the revolutionary project, the left narratives represent her as a wife. A double-edged move to fashion the revolutionary in masculine terms is in evidence here. The first is to erase the presence of women as active revolutionaries and to place them in their domestic identities of mother, wife and daughter. The second is to attribute qualities identified as masculine, like courage and a will to suffer in this case, to women whenever she has to be represented outside those roles.

On the other hand, Pillai’s wife Thankamma is narrated in a different register from that used in the case of Koothattukulam Mary. Thankamma is presented to us primarily as a wife, who also helped the revolutionary in his activities. There are many references to her being asked by Krishna Pillai to do

work for the Party and her doing it without hesitation. But her primary identity remains that of the wife, and she is consistently presented as the ‘other’ of Krishna Pillai. Thinking in terms of the photographic representation that we discussed earlier, Thankamma could potentially be represented as the woman next to the revolutionary in the photograph of the couple taken in the studio. She would represent the ideal partner for the revolutionary in the new conjugality imagined in the left revolutionary discourse. AK Gopalan’s reference to his wife and prominent Communist leader Susheela Gopalan in his autobiography, foregrounds the role of the woman in this newly imagined conjugal space. He writes: “*As a comrade in the Party she [Susheela] looked after me very well. She also did her work as a party worker with utmost care*” (Gopalan 1980: 194, emphasis added). It is as if the primary duty of the female ‘comrade’ is to look after her husband – a duty that has to be mentioned before discussing her role in the Party. Thus the role of women in revolution is to support the revolutionary in his pursuits. The ‘new form’ of conjugality that is assumed here is one where women at once are good wives and silent supporters of their husbands. Surely this form of conjugality is nothing new as it reproduces the ideas about the role of women in marriage and the stress on camaraderie as opposed to property relations as being the foundation of marital union, that were being circulated from the early twentieth century. The representation of this model as a new form of conjugality is based on just the fact that the couple is supposed to be involved in a larger political pursuit without any consideration as to whether she is an active party worker or not.

The re-insertion of women into such revolutionary histories, an important project undertaken by feminist scholars and activists in India (Sthree Shakthi Sanghatana 1989, Vindhya 1990), will have to take on the task of re-imagining the gendering of the revolutionary as the foundation for challenging earlier exclusions. The erasure of women in these histories is not necessarily only because of a blindness to recognising the role of women in revolutionary pursuits, but because the imagined political space was marked as masculine. To put it differently, the women in the revolutionary project had to take on certain characteristics that were understood as masculine. Thus, women who are eligible for the status of the revolutionary are those who should lose their 'femininity' and conform to a normative masculinity.

Another important aspect of Pillai's masculinity is his disinterest in worldly temptations as is evidenced in the observation by Vishnu Bharateeyan, one of his co-prisoners, that Pillai would never give in to the temptation of even a beedi while in jail. The two ideals, courage and disinterest in worldly pleasures combined with pride are the three motifs that build the image of Krishna Pillai in the early pages of the biography.

One of the oft-recalled incidents in his life that foregrounded his courage and defiance of hierarchies was when he climbed to the rostrum of the Guruvayur temple and rang the bell at a time when it was forbidden for non-Brahmins to do so. Pillai proclaimed, "Let the bold Nair ring the bell and let the timid Nair living

on crumbs beat on his back” (*KFC*: 20-21).¹⁰ In his discussion of the Guruvayur satyagraha, Dilip Menon notes: “Krishna Pillai’s statement, at this juncture, of Nair machismo as against the effeteness of the Nambudiris, and those Nayars dependent on them, became a symbol of the satyagraha” (Menon 1994: 111). The Nair machismo that is mentioned here is one that is re-inscribed after the supposed erasure of caste in the service of a class-based politics. As we will see later in the section with the film characters played by Sathyan, one of the issues that the Left had to deal with has also been the recognition of caste that was implicit in the formation of unmarked revolutionaries. Thus, it needs to be noted that the mentioning of his Nair background does not in any way contradict his status as the revolutionary.

As mentioned earlier with regard to the discussion of the photographs, the attempt here is to produce a revolutionary figure that has shed his identity markers. The only marker he needs to carry is that of class. Krishna Pillai decision to become a labourer, we saw, was the first move towards this. The narrative of his life just mentions this almost in passing in the beginning, as if the episode was just intended to prepare the reader for the transformation of the Nair youth into the leader of the working classes. From that point on, we saw that Krishna Pillai is only marked by his qualities as a unique individual. This is also effected by the

¹⁰ The Guruvayur satyagraha which was for the right for all non-Brahmins to enter the temple premises was turned into a Nair-Nambudiri confrontation. “What had started out as a campaign on behalf of the lower castes and untouchables, in the name of nationalism, had resolved itself into a conflict between the Nayars against the Nambudiris and Tamil Brahmins” (Menon 1994: 111).

erasure of his family from the narrative. The very well-known ending of EMS's autobiography – he stops at the moment the Communist Party is born in Kerala – suggesting that the story of the rest of his life is the same as the Party's, is worth referring to as representing a similar impulse (Nambudiripad 1985/1998: 327-328).¹¹ Interestingly, the one mention of Krishna Pillai's family in relation to his efforts at declassing himself is of his sister Gowri Amma who "refuses to admit that Krishna Pillai ever worked in a teashop" (*KFC*: 5). An opposition between the family and the political public is engendered in this instance.

The class status reappears once a new family is introduced – Krishna Pillai and his wife.¹² The only domestic incident from Pillai's life after he came active in the party that is noted by the biographer is when the Communist leader Moyyaram Sankaran Nambiar visits the house of Krishna Pillai and his wife Thankamma unexpectedly. A fight takes place between the couple as Pillai insists that Moyyaram (as he was called in the Party) should have lunch with them at a

¹¹ EMS writes:

... [I]t will be better that I refrain from telling my story from this point of time as it is intertwined with the history of the Communist Movement in such a way that it will be impossible to separate it out. The historians of the Movement will have to tell my story from 1938 to my death (Nambudiripad 1985/1998: 328).

¹² It is not as if Krishna Pillai did not keep in touch with his family after joining the Communist party. Krishnan writes that Krishna Pillai used to visit his sister's house often, and was her only support after her husband passed away (*KFC*: 132-133). He quotes her as saying "Krishnan loved the family" (*KFC*: 132). The point to be noted is how the narrative of his life erases any mention of this until his death is mentioned. It is this narrative strategy that is of interest, for the purposes of the argument.

time when there was not enough food for three people at home (*KFC*: 109-110). This one incident presents us with the utter poverty in which Krishna Pillai lived, and hence his class status. It also points to the fact that Pillai could transcend it, sharing whatever he had, whereas Thankamma was incapable of doing so. A notion of public good versus domesticity is introduced here to represent Krishna Pillai and Thankamma, his wife. To see how the biography marks the difference between the two, we will have to start from their courtship days.

The ninth chapter titled 'Marriage After Jail' begins dramatically: "7 October 1941: Thankamma can never forget that day" (*KFC*: 81). The story of Krishna Pillai's interest in Thankamma and the subsequent marriage is told not from a third person point of view (as is the case with the rest of the text) or from Pillai's point of view but from Thankamma's. The narrative continues, "Down her memory lane, it lingers like a patch of green, evoking tender memories" (*KFC*: 81). The need for the narrative to take on a new vantage point to narrate this episode is necessitated by the fact that it is impossible that such tender memories are aroused in the mind of the macho figure of Krishna Pillai. The revolutionary is the desired in this narrative in which there is no space for his desire. The narrative tells us that Ayyan Pillai, a policeman, came up to Thankamma and asked for some Hindi books for a political prisoner. The second book that she had given to the policeman came back with a long note on politics. Here is how TV Krishnan describes the courtship through the exchange of books:

The second book was returned with a long note, carefully hidden in the spine of its cover. *The note was political. She did not*

understand anything except the writer's name – Krishna Pillai. She wrote back to say that she was quite unfamiliar with politics. This led to a spate of political notes from Krishna Pillai, notes on the Indian National Congress, Sir CP, responsible government and a host of other themes. The notes were meant to be pieces of a political primer; not one contained a lover's sentiments (KFC: 82, emphasis added).

Thankamma's ignorance of politics and Krishna Pillai's disinterest in romance are mobilized in oppositional terms in producing a notion of masculinity of the revolutionary which is focussed and not faltering in the wake of emotional involvements like romance, deemed feminine in the narrative. Thankamma is represented throughout the narrative as a woman who is constantly judging Pillai vis-à-vis his love for her. For example it is written: "Krishna Pillai was an intense lover. After marriage that love became all consuming. Has all the warmth turned cold? Thankamma wondered" (KFC: 108). It is interesting to note that Krishna Pillai as a lover is not made visible for the reader except through Thankamma's eyes, that too at times when she has to express her own anxieties about his unavailability as a husband and a lover ("Has all the warmth turned cold?"). Even this is done in such a way that her complaints end up as compliments to the revolutionary for not expressing his emotions.

Krishna Pillai, on the other hand, comes across in the narrative as a man focussed on his work, aloof, with no time for romance. "Every time Thankamma felt his physical presence, the one thing that she longed for was to be with him

alone, secluded [sic.]. There was so much to tell and so much to know. But he was too preoccupied otherwise. He did not say anything” (*KFC*: 108). Discussing the death of the twins born to the couple TV Krishnan writes: “Personal losses, however heavy, should not allow a communist to nurse a standing wound. Krishna Pillai was not a mere communist. *He was the highest model of a good communist. A Lenin- type of revolutionary*” (*KFC*: 113, emphasis added).

Krishna Pillai’s story as the ‘first communist’ is told and retold in Kerala through the invocation of the figure through his portraits and articles and hagiographies. The man is understood through his courage, his focus on the political project, and his unemotional approach to life. The narratives like the one presented in the book discussed above, and countless images keep his memory alive. The next part of the section discusses the image of Sathyan, who started acting well after the death of Krishna Pillai. Using three of his films, I will argue that the characters played by him represent the popular version of the figure exemplified by Krishna Pillai. It was, I argue, through such representational strategies that the masculinity of the revolutionary was kept alive in Kerala in the period after the 1950s.

The Revolutionary in Popular Culture

In popular understandings of the history of the Communist party in Kerala, the model of the revolutionary, epitomised by the figure of Krishna Pillai and other martyrs, represents a period of selfless political activity. This aspect of

the model is made possible by the fact that these revolutionaries died before the Party came to power or became a respectable entity in Kerala. Even then the absence of a desire for power or other worldly matters (as we saw with Krishna Pillai) should be understood as a significant part of the way the popular model of the revolutionary is circulated. From the discussion of the biography of Krishna Pillai, it is also evident that the revolutionary is a man of few emotions and that he is represented as unapproachable and unrealisable.

It is in this connection that the characters played by the popular star Sathyan – especially those that helped create the longstanding memory of his image – become significant. The well-known Malayalam novelist MT Vasudevan Nair describes Sathyan thus: “A body very different from that of the usual star who is a matinee idol. The colour of dark wood. A short physique. Disproportionate hands and legs. He has nothing that Indian cinema demands of a hero” (quoted in Kozhikkodan 1985: 42). The *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* describes Sathyan as the “[T]op star, ..., in Malayalam cinema, providing the embodiment of Malayalee machismo” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 208) whose classic screen persona is that of the “brooding, remote and unreachable outlaw” (*ibid*: 208). Rather than being representative of ‘Malayalee machismo’ as Rajadhyaksha and Willemen would have it, Sathyan’s image should be understood as representing a political subject that was being fashioned in the context of the imagining of a political public by the Left. As has been mentioned in the earlier chapter where the problems with the use of the notion of a ‘Malayalee masculinity’ was discussed, the idea of a ‘Malayalee machismo’ does

not allow us to be sensitive to the specific historical locations that produce these masculine figures as normative masculinities. Sathyan's machismo, understood in contrast to the other popular star of the time Prem Nazir, represents the popular incarnation of the model of the revolutionary that was being fashioned in the left narratives. Unlike his counterparts in the other South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh – MG Ramachandran, Rajkumar and NT Rama Rao respectively – who came to represent regional politics and sub-national cultural aspirations (Prasad 1999), Sathyan had to take on himself the burden of representing the dynamics of the local political culture, that is, of working class politics as espoused by the Communist Party. But precisely like his counterparts, Sathyan has been central in fashioning the dominant political subject in Kerala.¹³

Sathyan, born Sathyaneshan Nadar, in a lower caste Christian family in 1912, worked as a schoolteacher, a soldier in the army and as a police officer before he joined the film industry as an actor.¹⁴ His early roles, especially those

¹³ I need to clarify that my suggestion is not that Sathyan, if he had lived longer, would have moved into the political arena, paralleling the move made by the likes of MG Ramachandran and NT Rama Rao. But keeping in mind Madhava Prasad's argument that the move made by these stars into the political arena marks the end rather than the beginning of what he calls "cine politics" (Prasad 1999: 49), it could be proposed that Sathyan's career as a star could be read as part of that history of South Indian cinema. The insertion of Malayalam cinema into the story of cine-politics in cinema requires a separate analysis, which is outside the scope of this thesis.

¹⁴ Nadars were members of a caste in South Travancore who in the nineteenth century converted to Christianity. In the history of Kerala, the caste of Christians is understood vis-à-vis the status that they enjoyed before their conversion. Thus Syrian Christians, believed to have been converted from Brahmins, consider themselves to be higher up in the hierarchy.

in films like *Snehaseema* (The Boundaries of Love, dir: SS Rajan, 1954) and *Neelakuyil* (The Blue Koel, dir: P Bhaskaran and Ramu Kariat, 1954) give us some indication of the central role he later played in producing the image of a certain political subject in Kerala. In both these early films, he portrayed schoolteachers: in the former an emancipated teacher who tries to organize the teachers in a school against the oppression of the manager, and in the latter a teacher who is changed through the narrative into someone who recognizes the problems with hierarchies of caste and turns into a virtuous man. These roles are significant not only because one of the most contentious issues after the coming to power of the Communist Party in 1957, was an ‘Education Bill’ proposed by the then Education Minister Joseph Mundassery which tried to bring more state control into education and tried to address the issues of teachers and students,¹⁵ but also because the teachers and other members of the service sector came to

¹⁵ The controversy over the Bill resulted in the dismissal of the Nambudiripad Ministry by the Central Government and the imposition of President’s Rule in Kerala in July 1959. In response to the proposed Bill, the Congress Party had joined hands with the leaders of the Nair community and the Church to unleash a mass movement, which was called the *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle). The leaders included Mannath Padmanabhan, Fr. Vadakkan and student leaders of the Congress like AK Antony, Vayalar Ravi and Oommen Chandy (who are present day leaders of the party). It is widely believed that the CIA had supported the movement. This had resulted in widespread violence in the state. It was the direct plea from the Congress Party to the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru to intervene in Kerala, which resulted in the dismissal of the Ministry. For an analysis of the political situation in Kerala written during the *Vimochana Samaram*, See Schoenfeld 1959.

represent the political force in Kerala in years to come, with active support from the Left.¹⁶

Along with these roles that represented the future hegemonic middle class, Sathyan also portrayed characters that represented a certain political subject, narrativised as the central protagonist of the revolution- the politicised worker. It is in these films, which later became those that were best remembered, that he portrayed the popular incarnation of the Krishna Pillai figure.

Before moving on to discussing this image in detail, let me suggest that it is by making this double move of portraying the subject of actual political mobilization in the state, the middle class, and also the object of fascination – the working class revolutionary – that Sathyan could represent the ideal spectator and the ideal object of Malayalam cinema in the three decades between 1950 and 1970. Let me also try to see how this division was played out in the space of political activity in the Communist Party itself. Translating this division into the Party, one could argue that Krishna Pillai represented that absence in the leadership of the Party- that of the working class revolutionary – at a time when the Party was led by more upper class leaders like EMS and AK Gopalan. His

¹⁶ The history of Kerala in the second half of the twentieth century is yet to be written. It is my contention that the usurping of the political space by the members of the service sector is central to the way Kerala has developed. The exposition of this argument, beyond the scope of this thesis, requires an entire project in itself.

presence in the left pantheon of leaders even years after his untimely death points to the attempts of the Party to negotiate this absence.

I move on to discuss the characters portrayed by Sathyan in three of his films, which helped produce his image as the ‘brooding, remote and unreachable outlaw’. The films that will be analysed here include *Mudiyanaya Puthran* (The Prodigal Son, dir: Ramu Kariat, 1961), *Mooladhanam* (Capital, dir: P Bhaskaran 1969) and *Anubhavgal Paalichakal* (Experiences and Mistakes, dir: KS Sethumadhavan 1971). Apart from Sathyan, the other common factor in all the three films is the involvement of the screenplay-writer Thoppil Bhasi, the quintessential left writer,¹⁷ who wrote plays for the Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC) of the Communist Party which are said have been the most important tools that the Party used in popularising its message.¹⁸ KPAC is one the important institutions set up during this time, which helped the “transformation of political activism into popular culture and cultural activism into popular politics, resulting in the formation of a public sphere influenced by the Left” (Jacob 2005: 27).

Mudiyanaya Puthran was first written as a play by Bhasi, whereas *Mooladhanam*

¹⁷ For a discussion of some of the plays of Thoppil Bhasi in relation to political developments in the 1950s, see Menon 2001.

¹⁸ Kerala People’s Arts Club (KPAC) was formed in 1950 when a group of young Communists came together in an attempt to use the stage for reaching out to the masses. The group was later affiliated to the Indian People’s Theatre association (IPTA), the all India body promoting political theatre. The first play that was performed by KPAC was *Ente Makananu Sheri* (My Son is Right) written by Rajagopalan and G Janardhana Kurup. The group made its presence felt in Kerala after their second play *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist 1952) by Thoppil Bhasi, which still continues to be performed. For a history of KPAC, see Mohandas 2002.

discusses the writer's own experiences of writing the very successful play *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist) while he was in hiding,¹⁹ and the third film *Anubhavangal Paalichakal* is based on a novel of the same name written by the 'Progressive Writer' Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai.²⁰

The three films represent three faces of the revolutionary figure. In *Mudiyanyaya Puthran* – the earliest of the films – Sathyan portrayed the character of an upper caste anarchist who is reformed into recognizing social inequalities in terms of class, *Mooladhanam* has him as a revolutionary who has to negotiate his family's troubles and in *Anubhavangal Paalichakal*, he is a working class man (belonging to the Ezhava caste in all probability) who, like the Nair man in the first instance, has to be reformed into becoming a true revolutionary.²¹

¹⁹ Thoppil Bhasi, an active member of the Communist Party, was in hiding when he wrote the play *Ningalenne Communistakki* under the pseudonym 'Soman'. The film fictionalises his experiences.

²⁰ The Progressive Writer's Movement started in Kerala in 1937 under the name '*Jeevalsahithya Prasthanam*' (Movement for the Literature about Life) under the leadership of socialists such as K Damodaran, EMS Nambudiripad, KA Damodara Menon, Keshava Dev etc. By 1944, when the group was renamed as *Purogamana Saahithya Sangham* (Progressive Writing Group), most of the then well-known writers in Kerala like MP Paul, Joseph Mundassey, G Shankara Kurup, Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai and Ponkunnam Varky had joined the movement. Today the group that is the direct descendant of the Movement goes by the name, *Purogamana Kala Sahithya Prasthanam* (Movement for Progressive Literature and Art). For a history of the movement, which is critical of the attempts made by the Party to control it, see Chandrashekhara 1999. See also Gopalakrishnan 1987.

²¹ There are no clear markers in the film to suggest that Chellappan, the character played by Sathyan in *Anubhavangal Paalichakal* belongs to the Ezhava caste. But if one were to be sensitive to the representative strategies in Malayalam cinema of the time, it becomes clear that this absence is itself the marker of the caste of the protagonist. If he were to be of the Nair caste, it can be safely

In *Mudiyana Puthran* (The Prodigal Son), Rajan or Rajashekharan Pillai (Sathyan) is the self-outlawed youngest son in a wealthy Nair family now controlled by his scheming elder brother Gopala Pillai. The role that he has to play in this film, which was released at a time when Communism had a very high visibility in Kerala following the formation and the dismissal of its first Ministry, is to negotiate the position of the upper caste man in the revolutionary project. A film that portrays caste structures unambiguously, *Mudiyana Puthran* marks the role of men from various castes in the revolutionary project. The Nair man, Rajan, who is introduced to us as an anarchist who harasses women and finds enjoyment in hurting his childhood sweetheart Radha (Ambika), ends up going to jail by the end of the film for a crime he has not committed, for the sake of saving Vasu (PJ Antony), an Ezhava and a Communist, whose survival is “necessary for the betterment of the world”. In the film, as is the case with *Anubhavgal Paalichakal*, it is in the hero’s engagement with the true working class people that he realizes his revolutionary self.

The experiences that the Nair man has to go through, as represented in the film, represent the locus from where Nair men enter the world of class politics.

assumed that this will be mentioned in clear terms in the film as was done with the character of Rajan (who is often referred to as Rajan Pillai by the other characters) played by Sathyan in *Mudiyana Puthran*. Again, a Dalit character will also be clearly marked. It is significant that the unmarked subject of the Left discourse in popular culture is not a Nair man, but an Ezhava man, pointing to the fact that even when the leaders of the movement were from the upper castes, the foot soldiers were imagined to be from lower castes.

He is surely (like most real life leaders of the Left) the disenfranchised younger sibling of the family.²² He does not recognize caste differences to any significant extent as he finds himself more like the lower castes than like his caste men who are rich and scheming. The only thing remaining that the narrative labours at is the disciplining of the hero into recognizing his social role and the dynamics of the social order of which he is a part. He has to become the martyr; he has to forgo his family and his romance to fulfil his role as the revolutionary.

The ending of *Mudiyanya Puthran* is testimony to this. Rajan invites his former girlfriend who is presently his sister-in-law Radha along with his mother and sister to the house of Chathan Pulayan (Kambissery Karunakaran), the lower caste labourer and the former slave of his family, where Rajan now lives. Here for the first time he agrees to recognize the changed status of his former girlfriend and calls her “sister”. He announces his romantic interest in Chellamma (Kumari), Chathan’s daughter, only to leave all of them for the gallows. The romantic in Rajan appears only to be displaced by his belief that it is Vasu, the true foot soldier of revolution, who should continue to live. This episode, thus, eliminates at the same time the possibility of the revolutionary succumbing to a romantic moment and the possibility of an inter-caste couple formation. The ending signals the fact that the energy of the revolution comes indeed from these Nair men who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the lower castes who are represented as effeminate in comparison to the former. Vasu is

²² See Jeffrey 1978 for a discussion of the role of disenfranchised upper caste men in the development of Communism in Kerala. One of his examples is P Krishna Pillai (*ibid*: 81-82).

represented as a lovable and handsome character who reacts impulsively unlike Rajan who is rugged and violent in his demeanour. The casting of a young PJ Antony and Sathyan in these roles marks these differences in physical terms.

Mooladhanam (Capital) is the story of Ravi, a Communist Party worker in the period of the resistance to the attempts made by the Dewan of Travancore, Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer, to retain Travancore as a separate state without joining the Indian Union. The film starts with Ravi inviting the wrath of both the police and the feudal lords for helping the poor in their struggle for everyday survival. Ravi's involvement in politics is in spite of stiff resistance from his wife Sharada (Sharada) and their son. He is forced to go into hiding and, as is the case with all the three films that are being discussed, ends up in the house of a lower caste labourer Veluthakunhu. Again, following the pattern seen in all the three films that I analyse, it is in the house of the lower caste labourer that the hero recognizes the potential of love. Keeping in line with the tradition of these films, Ravi says: "I am a new human being today. I have started to realize what true human emotions are!" He 'comes down' from the lower middle class life that he has been leading to recognise that the comforts of the lower class household are "much better than those in the middle class homes". Here again, as in *Mudiyanaya Puthran*, we encounter an attempt at declassing. But unlike that film where the class position is predicated completely on the caste status of the individual, here it is marked only by class. Thus Rajan's status as a privileged person is derived from his status as a Nair where as in the case of Ravi, it is his lower middle class status that is at issue.

An opposition between Ravi and Mammooty (Prem Nazir) is suggested in the fact that the latter unlike the former is unable to resist the temptation of visiting his loved ones. Unlike Mammooty who gets arrested in his attempt to meet his sweetheart Nabeesa (Jayabharathi), Ravi refuses to meet his wife and child when they come to visit him in hiding saying that “succumbing to emotions will cause trouble for us”. Nazir, who is known for his soft romantic roles and is known as the ‘evergreen hero’ in Malayalam cinema, could be understood as the ‘other’ of Sathyan in terms of star persona. As will be discussed below, the distinction between the star personae of the two actors is further elaborated in films like *Anubhavgal Paalichakal* (see image 6).

In *Mooladhanam*, there are two notions of masculinity which are contrasted to Ravi’s normative model. If the first is Mammooty, who presents the negative attributes in a potential revolutionary, the second is that of Madhu (KP Ummer) a rich man who is Ravi’s friend. Whereas Mammooty’s masculinity is undesirable because he does not fulfil the qualities needed for a good revolutionary, Madhu’s is undesirable because of his class position. The actor KP Ummer, like Prem Nazir, was considered to be one of the most handsome men in the film industry then, even though he was known for his villainous roles. Madhu is the villain in the story as he publishes in his own name the novel *Mooladhanam*, written by Ravi. Ravi who was still in hiding at that point in the plot, had handed it over to Madhu for publishing.

Though the central story of the film revolves around the publication of the novel, it is the story of the experiences that Ravi's family go through during his absence that is of more interest to my line of argument. Ravi lives in the house of Veluthakunhu for a while before moving into the city to live as a resident tuition teacher for Malathi (Ambika), the daughter of a judge. During this time, Sharada gets arrested and gets separated from their son who ends up selling peanuts in the city. The child then turns into a messenger for the Communist Party through his contact with Nabeesa, Mammooty's fiancée, and gets arrested later. Sharada, after getting out of jail, goes through a lot of suffering. By the time the family reunites, she has become a sex worker to support her family. Ravi's acceptance of her in spite of her status as a 'fallen woman' forms the climax of the film.

In a telling final sequence, Ravi lifts up an unconscious Sharada in his hands, and the camera cuts into a close up of the *pallu* of the sari that is fluttering in the wind. This shot dissolves into one of the national flag, to suggest that it is indeed in her suffering that the nation finds its birth. There is also an implicit reference to the theme of the 'Bharat Mata' in this sequence.²³ Whereas at one level, it is the suffering of the family that completes the revolutionary status of the hero, as seen in the case of the photographs, the film also lays stress on the

²³ At first glance, it would seem surprising that the visual resolution of a film about Left politics should be a nationalist image like the national flag. As the film is discussing the argument of the Left that Travancore should join the Indian Union, the ending is in keeping with the policies of the Communist Party. K Sreekumar, in his history of the Musical Theatre Tradition in Kerala, quotes Thoppil Bhasi as saying that he was not interested in Communist politics until the beginning of the struggle against the Dewan in Travancore (Sreekumar 2002: 301).

declassing of the upper middle class as a project of Communist politics. Like Paramu Pillai, the feudal lord in *Ningalenne Communistakki* who lifts the red flag at the end of the play/film and says “You have made me a Communist”, we see the judge in the house where Ravi lived in hiding also turning a supporter of the Left.

In *Anubhavgal Paalichakal* (Experiences and Mistakes), Sathyan is Chellappan, a manual labourer who is married to Bhavani (Sheela).²⁴ Chellappan is not presented as a virtuous man in the film. He is represented as a womaniser and a wife-beater. His virtue and his status as the hero arises from the fact that he is a trade union activist who helps solve the problems faced by the villagers. One of the women who gather around Bhavani after she is beaten up by Chellappan responds: “Isn’t Chellappanchettan a union leader? He will not beat you without any reason”. He is also shown as a courageous man who has no qualms inviting upon himself the wrath of the landowners of the village. Gopalan (Prem Nazir), a labour contractor, who covets Bhavani, is shown as someone who constantly fears Chellappan. An opposition between Chellappan and Gopalan is suggested

²⁴ Utpal Dutt, Bengali actor and an important figure in the progressive group Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), in an interview to the film magazine *Nana* after watching *Anubhavgal Paalichakal*, said:

[When you watch Sathyan] you know for sure that you are standing in front of a face full of life. One witnesses the complete picture of the experiences of a member of the Indian working class on his face, which has the marks of pain, of threats, strength and conviction. Sathyan appeared to me as the representative of the Indian worker who has become wiser in time through his experiences of oppression. [...]. His face- when it is calm or even when it shows anger- tells the story of a whole class (quoted in Kozhikkodan 1985: 52).

in the very early sequences of film itself. As suggested in the discussion of *Mooladhanam*, the casting convention helps accentuate the binary between the courageous and rugged Chellappan and the coward Gopalan. The difference between the two stars is evident even in the way they are listed in the credits of the film. In the list of actors, Sathyan's name is shown first, followed by Nazir's and Sheela's shown together, even though in effect Sathyan and Sheela form the primary couple in the film.

The turning point of the film is when Chellappan is forced to leave the village and go into hiding after being wrongly accused of attacking a landowner. It is interesting that even though his trade union activities are mentioned, he is never shown as taking part in any activity in the first half of the film. During his days in hiding, he gets to know that Bhavani has started living with Gopalan and that they are having a baby. The shot of his close up when he hears this news is cut to a city where he is shown wandering in the streets with a song being sung in the background. The song is about how the world has lost its virtues and about the state of despair that virtuous people in this world are in. Here Chellappan's personal crisis gets rearticulated as a philosophical crisis. The song ends with the sequence of Chellappan joining a political march on the streets of the city with chants of *Inquilab Zindabad* (long live the revolution). Thus the revolutionary's political self is constructed in the erasure of the personal and the involvement in the political public.

The change in Chellappan's personality is signalled by a sequence which also shows his denial of desire. Before the change happens in Chellappan's life, he had made unsuccessful sexual advances to Parvathy (KPAC Lalita), daughter of Kocheetty (Shankaradi), an Ezhava labourer, who provided shelter for him to hide. After his return from the city where he encounters politics in action, we see him refusing Parvathy who had by then decided to have an affair with him. The narrative marks his denial of sexual pleasure as the moment when the spectator becomes convinced of his changed nature. Chellappan's decision to murder Avaroj, an oppressive factory owner, comes as a culmination of his move beyond the personal and into the political. It is significant that there is no personal relationship between the two and that the murder is motivated solely by a sense of greater social good. This act, which invites capital punishment for him, forecloses the possibility not only of a relationship with Parvathy, but also of friendship with Hamza (Bahadur), whom he meets near Avaroj's factory- a friendship that borders on homoerotic desire between the two as is evident from the latter's lament after Chellappan is arrested. The narrative of *Anubhavangal Paalichakal*, in this manner, foregrounds the necessary experiences that a man of revolutionary potential has to go through to become the true revolutionary – the martyr.

Let me pull out the various characteristics of the revolutionary masculinity as emerging from the discussion of the three films. We saw that the revolutionary masculinity is constructed vis-à-vis other male figures who represent its other. A set of characteristics like courage, pride and an ability to survive through odds

have been mobilized in these narratives, similar to what was evident in the discussion of the figure of Krishna Pillai.

It was noted that the world of the lower caste labourers is represented as one that the hero has to encounter in order to fashion himself as the true revolutionary. This also suggests the relationship that the revolutionary (even if we include the Ezhava man Vasu from *Mudiyana Puthran*), mostly from upper or middle castes, have with the lower castes whom the movement sees as the populace to be organised in the service of the revolution. It has been noted that the lower caste labourer in the works of Thoppil Bhasi “remains someone who will witness the political activity of the upper-caste protagonists who lead them into controlled political participation” (Menon 2001: 264). Only one lower caste character in the three films that have been discussed above, Shasthrikal in *Mudiyana Puthran*, is represented as upward mobile as he is educated – one who has passed the ‘Shasthri’ examination. He, unlike the other lower caste characters in these films, is a comic figure and an ally of the villains. It is his refusal to remain the mute agricultural labourer that he is historically supposed to be, that makes him the undesirable subject of revolution.²⁵

²⁵ The representation of Shasthrikal in the film also points to another important element in the political discourse of the Left. He is shown as wearing *khadi* (suggesting that he is a congressman) and is referred to as ‘a community leader’ (*samudaya nethavu*). The attempt is clearly to fracture the political arguments that are based on caste and community and to put in place one that is based on class.

A third issue foregrounded in the above discussion was that of the demarcation between the domestic and the political, where all the characters played by Sathyan discussed in this section, have to leave their homes to become fully formed political beings. Thus it is imperative for the revolutionary masculinity to construct the family as the ‘other’ within the narrative itself. Along with the family, desire is also erased. The new forms of conjugality that is imagined in these films also need mention. Apart from *Anubhavgal Paalichakal*, these films do present a discussion of couple formation at the end of their narratives. In *Mudiyanyaya Puthran*, an inter-caste relationship is proposed as the ideal, though it does not take place in the narrative. In *Mooladhanam*, on the other hand, the experiences that the protagonist’s wife go through, presents the possibility where she has now become part of the revolutionary project, but as the loyal, caring and indeed politically aware wife of the revolutionary. As is evident from the discussion of the construction of the image of the revolutionary both in the official left discourse and in popular narratives, there seems to be similar notions that are employed. Even though there are differences in the way popular culture in the contemporary represents the revolutionary, this model is still in circulation more or less in an unchanged fashion in the official left narratives.

The next section of the chapter will look at another notion of masculinity that is represented as resolutely public in obvious ways like the one we have discussed above. This is one that is fashioned within the context of radical cultural practices in 1980s Kerala.



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Section II

Cult Figure and Collectives: John Abraham and *Amma Ariyaan*

This section elaborates on another notion of masculinity that emerged in the discussion of the discourse of masculinity around the sexual harassment of PE Usha. In Chapter II, we saw in the debates, the use of a language inflected with metaphors from existentialist literature of the 1970s and 1980s. Notions like ‘redemption’ were employed here along with an invocation of progressive politics. It was suggested in Chapter II that the notion of masculinity that is employed in this part of the debate functioned by positing an ideal femininity which was placed beyond/above the human.

This section presents a picture of the late 1980s intellectual scene in Kerala, which allowed for the use of such a notion. This history is tied up with the political churning after the Emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977, and the development of two streams of thought in the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) (CPI-ML, hereafter) – one stream concentrating on direct action (like the liquidation of landlords) and the other on cultural activism arguing that the revolution will be carried out by the masses who had to be educated through revolutionary art, modelled mostly on the experiments in Latin America. The story that is to unfold in this section is linked to the latter group of extremists who, in the late 1970s, organized themselves as the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi* (People’s Cultural Forum, *Vedi* hereafter),

concentrating on political activism through public reading of poetry, theatre and film screenings.²⁶ They were also involved in organizing a number of popular trials- well known in the history of Kerala as *Janakeeya Vicharana* (people's trial)- of corrupt public officials all over Kerala. The most publicized of these trials happened outside the Government Medical College in Calicut where the members of the *Vedi* conducted the trial of a medical doctor, known for taking huge amounts of money as bribes from his patients, who was forcefully brought out to the square outside the college. The trial was conducted in front of the public, including the relatives of the patients admitted in the hospital attached to the college, with one of the activists, A Soman, acting as the judge. Even though the trial received popular support, the members of the *Vedi* were arrested by the police.

The specific period I examine in this section is the one that comes immediately after the active history of the *Vedi*, a period where political nihilism

²⁶ It was in the immediate aftermath of the Emergency that the CPI-ML decided to stress cultural activism. It was with the support of the party that *Vedi* started functioning as an autonomous entity in the late 1970s. Debates in radical journals during 1978-79 led to the formation of the *Vedi*. See Venu, K. *Oranveshanathnte Katha* (The Story of a Quest) – 85 *Samalika Malayalam Weekly* 24 March 2000. Poets like Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan and Balachandran Chullikkad were among those who travelled all over Kerala reciting their poetry. KG Sankara Pillai's poems like *Bengal*, *Ananadan*, *Kashandi* (Baldness) etc. were very popular in radical circles. It was Chullikkad's poems like *Yaathramozhi* (Words of Good Bye), *Maappusaakshi* (The Repentant) etc. which captured the anxieties of the youth of that period, putting notions of romance and revolution together. The plays that were performed included *Padayani*, *Naadugaddika*, *Spartacus*, and *Mother*. We will have occasion to come back to some of these texts and contexts in the course of this section.

was coupled with existential anxieties. The 1970s was the time when both existentialist thought, as exemplified in the works of writers like OV Vijayan, Anand, M Mukundan, Kakkanadan etc. and filmmakers like Pavithran²⁷, and political activism affiliated to Marxist-Leninist politics were most popular in different intellectual circles in Kerala. These streams of thought viewed each other with suspicion, and especially in the radical left circles existential angst was seen as part of bourgeois decadence. The existentialist stream of literature in Kerala was inspired by both the Western existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre, the works of writers like Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. and the emergence of a hippie culture in the West. Existentialism circulated in Kerala in such a way that it erased the difference between the Sartre and the Camus versions and tried to integrate the latter's 'outsider' logic with the former. The hippie culture was also linked with this process as existential angst was tied to the loss of a real self, articulated mostly in terms of an authentic local identity. This thought tried to represent the failure of the dreams of the modern nation, not necessarily by posing a challenge to it but by inhabiting its spaces with a 'licentious' lifestyle – tied to drug abuse and 'licentious' lifestyles. In these novels, the city now becomes a space which the modern youth has to negotiate by hook or by crook, as depicted in a number of protagonists of the novelist M Mukundan, especially Aravindan in *Delhi* (1969) and Ramesh Panikker in *Haridwaril Manimuzhangumbol* (When the bell tolls in Haridwar 1972), or by reworking what were seen as immoral activities or modern vices, into legitimate ones as seen in the novels of Mukundan, Vijayan

²⁷ OV Vijayan's *Khasakkinte Ithihaasam* published in 1969 is seen as an important text that marks the existentialist turn in Malayalam literature.

and Kakkanadan or in discussing the modern nation as the indigenous version of Kafka's castle in Anand's *Marubhoomikal Undakunnathu* (As Deserts are Formed 1989).²⁸ Marxist-Leninist politics on the other hand took root in Kerala in 1969-1970 after the peasant uprising in Naxalbari in West Bengal. The period before the Emergency was the high point in extreme left politics in Kerala when a number of feudal lords were killed and many police stations attacked by the naxalites.²⁹ This period also saw acute forms of state repression in Kerala. The radical politics of the time viewed existentialist writings as apolitical and at odds with class struggle.

In the second half of the 1980s there was an interesting coming together of these two streams, where the existential angst was now tied to a political crisis, signalled by the 'failure' of the radical left project giving rise to "...a radical, nihilist poetics that marked the ground for Indian art..." (Kapur 2000: 343).³⁰ Even though this happened by the mid 1980s, the beginnings of this move could be identified in the activities of the *Vedi* right from its inception during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the words of 'Civic' Chandran, one of the founding leaders of the *Vedi*,

²⁸ Existentialist writing is often called 'modernism' in Malayalam literary debates. Though it could be seen as a part of the modernist moment in Malayalam, the period needs to be marked differently.

²⁹ 'Naxalites' was the name popularly used to refer to members of the extreme left. The name comes from 'Naxalbari', a village in West Bengal where the first Marxist-Leninist uprising happened.

³⁰ Geeta Kapur mentions the name of two Indian artists as representing that period- the sculptor Krishnakumar of the Radical Painters' Association and John Abraham.

Most of those who came into the Naxalite movement after the first wave that saw leaders starting from Kunnikkal Narayanan, A Varghese, A Vasu to K Venu and KN Ramachandran, did not come from the base of Marxist politics. We, those of us who came to the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi*, those of us who built it and disbanded it, were products more of the existentialist movement rather than any political thought. We were taking the anarchy presented by modernist literature towards its logical rationale and end (Chandran 2002: 102).³¹

A description of an extreme left activist of the time that went, “A hardcore class politician [sic.] in his politics, Soman was an existentialist dandy at heart. TS Eliot and Faulkner (his favourites) virtually brought tears to his eyes just like Mao or [the revolutionary] Varghese” (Venkiteshwaran, nd.), could be pointed out as one that summed up the political subject of the time. Taking off from these different strands, the *Vedi* worked out a form of cultural activism that determined intellectual subjectivities among the middle classes in the state for years to come, even though the forum itself was short-lived. Though founded on collective action, the focus on a politically motivated existentialism created a history for the *Vedi* that was based on the memory of individuals. The contemporary intellectual

³¹ Chandran's observation is at odds with the observation made by K Venu who was the leader of the Party at that time. Venu suggests that apart from people like Chandran and others, it was the unhappy cadres of the official left parties who joined the *Vedi*. See Venu, K. *Oranveshanathnte Katha – 79 Samakalika Malayalam Weekly* 11 February 2000: 43-44. But the fact is that the legacies of the *Vedi* corroborate Chandran's ideas rather than Venu's on this matter.

map in Kerala is filled with narratives around various cult figures from that period, often those who committed suicide or those who met an untimely death.³²

As is evident, the political agenda of the dominant forms of the revolutionary politics of the time had little to do with gender or related issues in any explicit way, similar to some of the other moments that I study in this chapter. In my attempt to ask questions regarding gender about this historical moment in Kerala, I consider two issues: One, the mobilization of notions of masculinity in the production of some of the cult figures from this period, and two, the formation of publics as collectives around such figures, especially in relation to the notion of *suhrut sangham* or ‘friends’ circle’. In discussing these, I focus on some of the important artists/activists of that period who were later elevated into a cult figures – the filmmaker John Abraham, as well as Surasu, the playwright and anarchist, A Aiyappan the poet and Krishnakumar the sculptor, the last two make fleeting appearances in the discussion.³³ I primarily analyse two volumes brought out on

³² A cursory glance at the many college magazines in the state in the 1990s will prove my point. A number of them pay homage to John Abraham. Intellectuals in almost all colleges in Kerala were ‘expected’ to screen Abraham’s films. A recent volume titled *Aathmahatya* (Suicide), in its section titled “Sacrifice of life predicated on idealism and love for humanity” (Sajeesh and Shahjahan 2004: 153-180) lists the following names – Sanildas, KG Subrahmanya Das and Guhan – all having a past connected with the 1980s cultural activism.

³³ Aiyappan and Krishnakumar are different from my main characters, Abraham and Surasu in very many respects. As I suggested earlier the death of the artist is an important issue in relation to his elevation to a cult. Aiyappan is alive, waiting to become the next in line. Krishnakumar, on the other hand does fit in perfectly as a candidate, but what stands against him is the fact that he lived outside Kerala for most of his active life. There have been recent attempts to write

John Abraham, *John Abraham* (Shaji 1993/1994) and *John Smrithi* (In Memory of John, Odessa – John Abraham Trust 1998), which include his own writings, obituaries, criticisms of his work etc. and John Abraham's cult classic *Amma Ariyaan* (Report to the Mother 1986) in my attempt to discuss the two issues I mentioned above. Other texts that will be examined include *Surasu: Jeevithavum Rachanakalum* (Surasu: Life and Works, Padabhedam 2000), the documentary *Ithrayum Yathabhagam* (The Journey So Far, dir: Sathyan 2004) made on the life of A Aiyappan, and articles on Krishnakumar.

Cult Figures

My attempt in this section is not to track the production of a cult around these individuals. Rather, it will be to understand the gendered production of these cults and to link them to the larger political dynamics of the time. As suggested earlier, these cult figures could only be understood when seen in the context of a historical moment that saw the coming together of existential thought functioning with the construct of the modern individual and a notion of art as collective political action. The significance of the cult formation lies in the fact that it also functions as a constraining factor in our attempts to understand either the history of the period or the works of these artists. One of the commentators presents the difficulties in discussing John Abraham's works thus:

Krishnakumar back into the history of radical art practice in Kerala. See Ratnakaran 2000, Subin 2005.

We have already heard a lot about John: about John's drinking, John's irreverence, and the many other 'cruel deeds' of John.... The 'cult figure' called John Abraham has thus become a special metaphor, a signifier that escapes all signifieds in the minds of the Malayalees. The films that John made, the stories that John wrote – moreover, the films that John did not make and stories about John – all of these presents us with some special moments of reading and pleasure. Still, the fact remains that the situation is such that one has to be very careful in writing about John (Harris 1999: 31).

In relation to the John Abraham cult, R Nandakumar asks whether "... the myth surrounding his deliberately and perhaps avoidably [sic.] bizarre persona and weird habits, was characteristically a product of the Kerala society of the post Emergency period, made possible only by the film culture" (Nandakumar 2005: 16). Nandakumar's explanation, with its emphasis on the tendency of Kerala society, and 'Malayalees' later in the essay, to produce an argument around 'art films'- is at once an attempt to psychologise or culturalise the issue by suggesting that it is a problem with the Malayalee psyche, and to explain it in terms of the elevated status enjoyed by art house cinema in Kerala. But he misses the important historical location that made the John Abraham cult possible even when he mentions it cursorily (as post Emergency).³⁴ His attempt to locate the production of the cult in the medium of cinema in general, rather than the

³⁴ What Nandakumar completely misses is the question of the audience for whom art house cinema has acquired cult status. By making it an issue of the Malayalee psyche he remains blind to the demographic distinctions one need to make in analysing audiences in Kerala.

historical space occupied by the *Vedi*, is problematic. The fact remains that Malayalam cinema has not produced another cult figure quite like John Abraham even in the art house circuit. This points to the fact that it requires an invocation of a figure in relation to a collective to produce cults. It remains impossible to identify or discuss a cult figure without examining the public that it engenders.

Discussing the period between 1980 and 1986 (between Abraham's last two films), Premchand suggests that Abraham was "an idol desired by the positive intellectual climate post the Emergency, the cinema related friendships that emerged as part of the film society movement, the neo Marxist initiatives and the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi*" (Premchand 2005: 21). It is this context that at once works as the background of the production of the John Abraham cult and as the discourse structuring the public that was engendered around it. The similarities between the production of stardom in cinema and the production of cults are not coincidental. Discussing the production of stardom, Richard Dyer suggests the extra-diegetic materials that go on to produce a star:

A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pinups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the

star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech (Dyer 1986: 2-3).

The kinds of materials that produce stars and other cult figures could be different. The specific mechanics by which a relationship between the cult figure and the collective, and the star and the fan is structured would also be different.³⁵ By mechanics I mean the concrete modalities of forging a relationship between the cult figure and the collectives which has to be different in the case of John Abraham when compared to that of the fan and the star in representational art forms like the cinema. Let me repeat. I will not dwell on the mechanics of the production of cults, as the focus of the section is just one aspect of this cult formation, namely the mobilization of certain notions of gender termed 'primordial and tribalistic' that are employed in its service in the narratives around John Abraham and others.³⁶

Here is a brief biographical sketch of my protagonist: John Abraham was born in a Syrian Christian family in Kunnankulam in 1937. He joined the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII, Pune) after working with Life Insurance Company (LIC) for three years. He passed his diploma in direction from the

³⁵ Cults are constantly produced in popular culture all the time. Elvis Presley and the Beatles come to mind immediately. For example, see Chadwick 1997. In these cases, the collectives are the fan clubs and related groups. At the other extreme of the Elvis cult would be the elevation of Gandhi into the Mahatma in the nationalist period (Amin 1984).

³⁶ 'Primordial and tribalistic' are not my descriptive terms but are my gloss on the terminology of the discourse itself.

institute in 1969 and assisted Mani Kaul in *Uski Roti* (1969). He made his first feature film *Vidhyarthikale Ithile Ithile* (Students, This Way) in 1969. His filmography also includes *Agraharathil Kazhuthu* (Donkey in the Brahmin Courtyard, Tamil 1978), *Cheriyacante Krurakrthyangal* (The Cruel Deeds of Cheriyaachan, Malayalam 1980) and *Amma Ariyaan* (Report to the Mother, Malayalam 1986). He has also produced a play called *Oru Naikkali*. He died in 1987 following a fall from the top of a building under construction in Calicut.

His association with the Odessa Film Society which later produced his last film needs special mention. Odessa, unlike regular film societies, took films to the villages in an attempt to popularise alternative cinema among the masses. Influenced by the concept of 'Third Cinema' advanced by Latin American filmmakers Ferdinand E Solanas and Octavio Getino³⁷, Odessa screened the films of John Abraham, Charlie Chaplin, Anand Patwardhan, Buddhadebdas Gupta, Pattabhirama Reddi, Girish Kasaravalli, Chalam Banurag, Majeera Datta, Amita Chakravarty, Radhamani, Dennis Auruck, Dan Weldon and organized debates around them.³⁸ Abraham's last film *Amma Ariyaan*, is significant in the history of

³⁷ 'Third Cinema' was a concept put forward by the Latin American filmmakers Solanas and Getino who argued for a political cinema different from the films made by Hollywood and European cinema which they called 'first cinema' and 'second cinema' respectively. They envisaged a cinema that is revolutionary where the camera is a weapon for the cause of the revolution. See Solanas and Getino 1993. *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), directed by the duo along with Santiago Alvarez is considered to be an important film in this tradition.

³⁸ The names of filmmakers whose films were screened by Odessa are taken from an appeal for cooperation published by the John Abraham Trust constituted by a section of Odessa in one of the later appearances of the *Odessa Journal* – a special issue on John Abraham in 1998. It is possible

Indian cinema not only for its approach to cinematic form in its use of documentary and fictional footage, but also for its unconventional production and exhibition histories. The money for the production of *Amma Ariyaan* was collected from people all over Kerala and the film was never released in commercial theatres nor was it intended to be. Odessa took the film all over the state organizing screenings in public places. There are a number of screenplays like *Joseph – Oru Purohithan* (Joseph – A Priest), *Nanmayil Gopalan* (Gopalan, in Goodness) and *The Zoo* that John had prepared during his lifetime, which were never filmed. Another of his ambitious projects that was left incomplete was a film on the famous Communist uprising in Kayyur.

The most interesting aspect of the production of a cult figure in John Abraham is the invocation of an apparent primordial past in constructing his gendered identity.³⁹ However, in closer examination, it becomes clear that it is in reality not an invocation of a prototype, nor is there a notion of a past in the narratives around John Abraham (though he later becomes a prototype), and that a

that there are some mistakes in the list of filmmakers, as the names Chalam Banurag and Manjeera Datta should be referring to the documentary filmmakers Chalam Bennurkar and Madhusree Datta respectively.

³⁹ Such a return to heroic figures from the past is not uncommon in narratives of masculinities emerging from various parts of the world. In response to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese American Men are looking at their own mythologies and even to Homer for prototypes of 'real Chinese man' (Cheung 2002: 180) whereas one of the many successful versions of the American men's movement, led by the poet Robert Bly, suggests a return to those characteristics of masculinity that men have lost in the twentieth century. Here the prototype that is invoked is that of the character Iron John in Western mythology (Bly 1990).

language reminiscent of such an invocation is deployed for a different end, as I will demonstrate later in the section. It is also important to note that rather than being a response to feminist interventions, here such an invocation is at the service of creating indigenous radical political subjectivities. Though these narratives use gendered metaphors in elaborating their political agenda, women's issues are not part of it. This political agenda, as we will see below, was linked to the attempts to break new political ground in Kerala, with a stress on the indigenous and the local. Geeta Kapur talks about the notion of the 'local' that comes to define the space of the political in India at this historical moment:

Certainly in a valorised mode of contemporary ethnography the local is a place of knowledge; the local in India often signifies vernacular culture, tribal authenticity. The local is also the site for politically honed sets of choices at a given place and time. (Kapur 2000: 343)

This notion of the 'local' is not that of a space that is produced out of an imaginary past, but one that is supposed to be residing in the present. Kapur identifies John Abraham and Krishnakumar as important cultural figures that represent this aspect of that period.

The images of John Abraham, A Aiyappan⁴⁰ and Surasu⁴¹ emerging in the various writings about them is that of a childlike innocence closer to nature than culture – ‘culture’ defined in terms of modernity. This in Abraham and Aiyappan is seen as part of their persona, whereas in Surasu it is more connected to the forms like *Mozhiyattom*, the performance of radical poetry that he developed for political expression. See a description of Abraham’s attitude towards various kinds of people:

There existed no hierarchies, for John. It was the same muddy footsteps that moved in the shacks in Kodambakkam that muddied the soft carpets inside the Asoka hotel in Indraprastha. He received a Derek Malcolm or a John Warrington⁴² with the same simplicity

⁴⁰ A Aiyappan was born in 1949. Orphaned at a young age, he was brought up by his sister and brother-in-law. He has published a number of collections of poetry, and his early poems are considered to be important ones in the canon of modern poetry in Malayalam. He has been leading a nomadic life for more than a decade now.

⁴¹ Surasu was born Balagopala Kurup in 1937 in Rangoon (Burma). After a short stint with the Indian Air Force, he became a full time playwright. He was also a dancer, performing with eminent dancers like Kalamandalam Kalyanikuttiamma and Guru Gopinath. In 1968, his first play *Vishwaroopam* was performed to high acclaim. He played the role of the protagonist Balagopalan in this play, whose death he identified as the death of one phase of his own life. After the play he took on the name “Surasu” which meant ‘drunkard’. His second play was *Thalavattom* (1979). From the late 1970s, he was involved with the *Janakeeya Saamskaarika Vedi*. During this time he developed his own art form called *Mozhiyattam*. His articles, poems and other writings came out in 1984 titled *Suraayanam*. He was found dead after consuming poison on the platform of Kottayam railway station on the morning of 5 June 1997.

⁴² Derek Malcolm and John Warrington are internationally known film critics who have, through the years, promoted Malayalam cinema on the international circuit.

with which he would put his hands around an *Adivaram* Jose⁴³

(Shaji 1993/1994: 4).

The celebratory tone of the quote suggests a form of undomesticated egalitarianism that goes beyond the confines of bourgeois modernity. In the words of another commentator, Abraham is supposed to be the embodiment of a “rustic rurality veneered by a sophisticated cosmopolitanism” (Venkiteshwaran nd.). The narrative use that such descriptions are put to will emerge when it is read alongside the various other elements that are introduced in producing the “John” persona. As will be demonstrated below, such a description goes towards building a gendered identity for the cult figure. Before I link this description with issues of gender, I intend to present other similar descriptions, in an attempt to foreground the other tropes that are introduced to supplement it. Here is how his friend and painter Rajan Kakkanadan remembers John’s appearance in public:

In one of those far away evenings fresh in my memory, someone tried to wake me up from a cement bench at the Kottayam Railway Station. When I opened my eyes with irritation, I saw a familiar face with the care and love of Francis Assisi, the courage of a warrior, the knowledge and experience of a tribal leader and the lightness of a cynic. Long hair and beard unoiled. Moustache with strands of red hair.⁴⁴

⁴³ Adivaram Jose was a well-known rowdy in Calicut.

⁴⁴ Kakkanadan, Rajan. “Oru Pidi Plastic Pookkal” (A bunch of plastic flowers) in Shaji 1993/1994: 186.

A description of John Abraham by the well-known poet KG Shankara Pillai goes thus:

(He was) away from domestic anxieties and its daily pressures. Not domesticated by either the village traditions or the advances of the city. [...] The intense form of the unreconciled. As the angry witness of the realities of the age in the fire of the streets or in the moonlight in the courtyard. Or as a wanderer- in the burning courtyards where alms, flowers, spit and the broom fall, or in the deep colds of the streets where the nights sing. With a negation of existing systems, with the sharpness of a self-desired masculinity that could be condemned as anti-life:

“You are the new form taken by the tiger”

“Not a chameleon.”⁴⁵

The 'self-desired masculinity' that Pillai refers to at one level posits the Cartesian self with the 'individual' as a base entity. Also, a masculinity represented as linked to a tiger and not a chameleon is not one that is excavated from the past but a contemporary one. Thus the seemingly anti-modern positioning of these figures is founded upon a clearly modern notion of the individual, invoking an 'internality' that has been discussed as being the base of modern gender distinctions in Kerala, in earlier chapters of the thesis.

⁴⁵ Pillai, KG Shankara. “Mishihayude Moonamathe Vellipparava” (The Third Silver Bird of the Lord) in Shaji 1993/1994: 158-159.

It is important to tease out the implications of the tiger/chameleon distinction that marks the notion of masculinity that is employed here. The tigerness of the tiger is surely an intrinsic inner quality whereas the chameleonness of the chameleon is about the surface, about the performative. Thus the tiger/chameleon binary stands in for the real/performative distinction. What gets worked out here is a notion of masculinity that stresses a rawness internal to the individual. Thus the primordiality and the tribalness are not of the temporal past, but the representation of the inner being. We see a similar representation in the sequences of the documentary film *Ithrayum Yathabhagam* made on the life of the poet A Aiyappan.

Immediately after the introduction of A Aiyappan, we see him conversing with a group of people at a tribal hamlet in a very long sequence (images 7 and 8). It could be argued that the sequence attempts to present Aiyappan as belonging to the tribal hamlet. As he does not hail from the community, his tribalness could only be something beyond what the eye can see. The choice of location and the implied suggestion of his being 'at home' with the tribals, when there is nothing that ties him to the locale either in his life or his work, should be understood as being part of a move to attribute a primordiality and a natural rawness to his persona. As is evident, here an interiority opposed to external identity markers, is alluded to. This has an implication for the discussion on the gender identities which are central to the production of these cult figures- a discussion we will come to soon.

Two other significant issues are raised by Pillai in the above statement. One is that of the undomesticated subjectivity which is under consideration and the other is a primordial rawness and wildness that constitute the public persona of these individuals. The way in which domesticity is discussed – as something that could be performed at will in the case of these figures – needs to be glossed. That it is their identities as men that structure their relationship with domesticity is important. The repositioning of these figures from unmarked individuals to 'men' easily dismantles the difficulties many commentators seem to have with some of their actions. Take for example OV Vijayan's difficulty in understanding Abraham's "dual personality":

I am inclined to compare the John who became part of the private space of my family discussing matters of domesticity with my father and my sister and the John who was heralded by the public as the primal symbol of alienation. Were they two antithetical incarnations? Today I am not ready to say that it was or that it wasn't.⁴⁶

Vijayan tries to explain the simultaneous existence of these disparate personae in terms of the possibilities of the multiple selves that reside in every individual, but misses the gendered nature of Abraham's relationship to domesticity. Surasu also emerges in the book that is dedicated to him as having a double existence in relation to the public and the private. He is presented as a completely public figure whose public persona appears to be at odds with some of the narratives that

⁴⁶ Vijayan, OV. "Vishamasmrithi" (A Difficult Memory) in Shaji 1993/1994: 139

look at his private moments. Thus in the memories of Surasu's wife Ambujam, he can be seen as being narrated in two registers when the public and the private are discussed. Thus most of these narratives stress the cosy domesticity that they appeared to have enjoyed, leaving the public-anarchic persona of the protagonist for the last couple of paragraphs.⁴⁷ It is significant that the only women who appear as contributors in the volumes on both John and Surasu are those who encountered them mostly in the private sphere – wife, sisters etc.⁴⁸

In the memoir written by one of his childhood male friends Surasu is remembered as a man who was weak at heart and used to recite an Urdu couplet which meant “I am weak. Even the cloth that is used to cover my dead body should be thin. My love, cover my body using only the shadow of the edge of your sari”.⁴⁹ The interplay of weakness as constituting the private and the domestic, with strength and wildness as constituting the public, structured the personae of these cult figures. Here family is figured as a space of refuge, a space inhabited by women who are actual or potential caretakers of the intellectual. John Abraham is remembered by his sister Leelamma Jacob thus:

⁴⁷ See for instance a note on Surasu by his aunt Devi. Devi. “Rajakumaraneppoloru Makan” (A Prince-like Son) in Padabhedham 2000: 427.

⁴⁸ In the volume on John Abraham, it is Leelamma Jacob and Shanthamma Cheriyan – both his sisters who are featured whereas in the book on Surasu it is his aunt Devi and wife Ambujam who feature as writers.

⁴⁹ Raveendran, Naduvattam. “Surasu enna genius” (A genius called Surasu) in Padabhedham 2000: 435-436.

When he came here, I used to oil him thoroughly and bathe him. He used to obey me like a small kid. He was particular about cleanliness. He even used to spend a lot of time cutting the nails on his hands and feet. After having a bath he liked to walk around, wearing good clothes.⁵⁰

She ends the paragraph with this one line: “ But he was worse than a beggar when he was wandering.” The non-contradictory existence of these two performative structures makes possible simultaneously the identity of the intellectual as a domesticated being and an existentialist (See images 9 and 10).

This undomesticated and wild character could be seen as constituting the public persona of both John Abraham and Surasu. Two interesting stories about “booing” circulate about them. The first is of how John apparently booed down his own film *Agraharathil Kazhuthu* when it was being screened at the Pesaro International film festival in Italy.⁵¹ The story regarding Surasu describes how he forcefully made his wife Ambujam (known as Ammuedathi) boo at a church from

⁵⁰ Jacob, Leelamma. “Ella Prakarathilum Avan Nallavanayirunnu” (He was Good in all Respects) in Shaji 1993/1994: 183.

⁵¹ This story is mentioned by noted filmmaker Kumar Shahani in his obituary for Abraham. Shahani, Kumar. “Rathriyude Aranyakathil” (In the Forest of the Night) in Shaji 1993/1994: 145. Befitting the story of a cult figure there are variations to the story too. Some later retellings of the story say that he booed down the critics who went on to praise his film. See Neelan. “Oru John Koothanubhavam” (A John Acting Experience) in Shaji 1993/1994: 224. It is also said that nothing of this sort happened at all.

the street as a sign of protest.⁵² Both these stories point towards a response to decorum and sophistication (as was seen in the first quote in this section too), seen here as being part of ‘western’ (modern) value systems.⁵³

The reproduction of these narratives, along with the analytical positioning of Abraham's art in the realm of the primordial, as seen in the observation made by Neelan about his play *Oru Naikkali* (A Dog's Play) that the form of the play is “ritualistic with tribalistic aesthetics” structures most intellectual performances in Kerala.⁵⁴ A joke that has been related again and again in various writings about Abraham is about how when an airhostess asked him if he was vegetarian or a non-vegetarian, he apparently answered that he was a cannibal.⁵⁵

This was a time when radical politics in Kerala had discovered its non-Brahmanical, often termed Dravidian tribal roots, especially through the highly successful staging of the street play *Nadugaddika* by KJ Baby (filming which was

⁵² Surasu apparently insisted that Ambujam boo at the church while they were walking on the street, and made her do it. Ambujam, “Swantham Ammu” (Yours Ammu) in Padabhedham 2000: 527-528.

⁵³ One could only speculate on the reasons for such behaviour on the part of both John Abraham and Surasu. The point however, is that such explanations are never sought in the case of cult production.

⁵⁴ Neelan. “John Abrahaminte Naikkali” (The Dog Play of John Abraham) in *Odessa* – John Abraham Trust 1998: 14.

⁵⁵ Gowthaman, D. “Elo hi lamma Sabkathani” in Shaji 1993/1994: 166.

one of Abraham's unfulfilled dreams)⁵⁶ and the poetry of Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, both performed under the aegis of the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi*. Surasu, on the other hand, had in the meanwhile developed his own art form, *Mozhiyattam* – stage enactment of poetry, and his choice was Kadammanitta's poetry. Ramachandran Mokeri, playwright and professor of theatre in Calicut University, reproduces this art form in his play titled *Su-Ra-Su Adhava Chihnnabinnavijnaneeyathinoraamukha Natakam* (Su-Ra-Su, Or A Prefatory Play to Destructive Knowledge Systems) using Kadammanitta's poem *Kirathavaritham*. Though in the late 1990s and the early years of the twenty first century, works like *Nadugaddika* and *Kurathi* have been reclaimed as texts that represent the alienation of the adivasi community in Kerala, at the time of its production these texts were seen as describing the lives of a universally oppressed class.⁵⁷ It could be argued that the invocation of the tribal as the oppressed class was an attempt to reproduce a self that is marginalized by virtue of being split in a certain way. Thus, a marginalized self represented as 'tribal' and 'authentic' resides inside the modern individual and the political struggle is between these selves. Significantly, these narratives precede the formation of identity-based political groups in Kerala,

⁵⁶ Chandran, Civic. "John Abraham Iniyum Namukidayilundu" (John Abraham is still Amidst us) in Shaji 1993/1994: 285. *Gaddika* is a ritual/art form of one of the tribal communities in Wayanad.

⁵⁷ This retelling of these narratives happened in the 1990s in the context of the increased visibility of the adivasi land struggle under the leadership of the charismatic CK Janu. KJ Baby's acclaimed novel *Mavelimantram* (1991) also helped in repositioning his earlier play in terms of issues of identity. Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan's avatar as a CPI-M MLA drew flak from his earlier comrades on the extreme left when he voted against the implementation of the 1975 'Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction of Transfer of Lands and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act' in the Kerala State Assembly in 1996.

such as the women's movement that began by the late 1980s, the adivasi movement that became active in the mid 1990s and the dalit movement which emerged in the late 1990s.

Paralleling this vision of a primordial masculinity is the figure of the mother. In relation to Kadammanitta's poetry it is evident in the poems *Kurathi* and *Kaattalan* (Ramakrishnan 1997: 92). In John Abraham's case we see an invocation of the mother goddess as the Other of the revolutionary subject. Let us look at some of his ideas on the notion of the mother:

At this moment when I am making this film (*Amma Ariyaan*), let me reiterate that all human actions are political acts. The concept of 'mother' has always touched me emotionally. In the explanations of humanism, 'mother' has a unique position. But we usually ignore our mother who gives us everything. We are always hesitant even to talk to our mothers openly. It is to my mother that I have to report about the truths of the reality that I see. In one way, *Amma Ariyaan* will be a film that addresses women. This emphasis is not in such a way that it reduces the importance of other aspects of the film. *Only if our mothers realize the conditions that we live in will there be any change* (emphasis added).⁵⁸

This claim is replayed with admiration by many critics as representing the politics of the film. K Velappan writes:

⁵⁸ Abraham, John. "Janakeeya Cinemayile Rashtriyam" (The Politics of People's Cinema) in Shaji 1993/1994: 120.

John has attempted in this film to salvage women from the machines that produce heat and milk [sic.], from housewifery, from being the lover and the mother and to make her into the goddess of action who is the incarnation of strength and the *mother in the great annals of thought*" (Velappan 1994: 40).

What is important in Abraham's statement is the role of the mother envisaged by this project. A shifting of agency from the revolutionary to the mother is seemingly effected in the above formulation. But on closer analysis it becomes clear that what ails the revolution is the fact that mothers are not politically aware: that is, they are not agents of the revolution but the reason for its non-success. Significantly, this does conform to the division of gendered domains effected in the nationalist period which structures the entire history of modernity in Kerala as discussed earlier in the thesis.

When Surasu writes about the difficulties faced by himself and his wife Ambujam during the time when his drunkenness destroyed the possibilities of their building a house, a similar suggestion is made. He says, "Ammu (Ambujam) went mad. And I was admitted to the mental hospital".⁵⁹ In this bizarre statement, repeated in Surasu's writings many times, although the disease seemingly affects the woman although it is the man who undergoes the treatment. Let me use this statement of Surasu's to understand Abraham's statement about the revolutionary

⁵⁹ Surasu. "Njan oru thudarkkada" (I am a Continuing Story) in Padabhedam 2000: 47.

and his mother.⁶⁰ To invert this observation in the light of Abraham's notion of revolution, the actual cause for the revolution not happening is the fact that mothers are not politically conscious! Then why blame (and treat) the men! As far as Abraham is concerned, it is not the social/revolutionary consciousness of the young men that is at issue. At issue is the heightened consciousness of the woman as a mother. The role of the women is surely one that is set by the revolutionary project and not by the women themselves as is clear from the explanation he offers on the political positioning of the mother figure. He clarifies that he is not talking about women's liberation:

In spite of all this, do not mistake that this is a theme of women's liberation. What we need is women's realization and not women's liberation. Women's liberation is an activity like that of the Rotary Club. A fireless shot.⁶¹

'Mother' in this discussion stands for women in general, as will be evident from the following statement. In an interview with the well-known existentialist writer Kakkanadan conducted at his house, Abraham said:

I come here not to see Bebichayan (Kakkanadan). I come here to see your mother. Amminichechi (Kakkanadan's wife) is also

⁶⁰ I am not here suggesting that Surasu is talking about the same things as Abraham. What I am trying to do is to use a structure of enunciation to explain the latter's statement.

⁶¹ Abraham, John. "Janakeeya Cinemayile Rashtriyam" (The Politics of People's Cinema) in Shaji 1993/1994: 120.

mother for me. This Radha (Kakkanadan's daughter) is also mother for me. 'Woman' is mother for me.⁶²

It is evident from this suggestion that the move is to elevate women to the status of the 'mother' figure. Abraham seeks the emancipation of women through such a move rather than addressing the concerns of gender.

As was foregrounded in the discussion around primordially and tribalness of the cult figure earlier in the section, the basis of gender difference has also been one that is tied to a notion of interiority. Here the foundations and the alleged strengths of such a difference reside inside the individual- both men and women- overshadowed by 'skin deep' changes in modernity. Here we also see a reproduction of a public/private divide that constitutes the gendered identities – not very different from the structure that has made modern gender functional. The spatial ordering of gender is complete when Abraham affirms that his visit to Kakkanadan's house is to see the 'mother' and not Kakkanadan himself. The house is not Kakkanadan's natural space. This simple spatial ordering gets complicated by the fact that this conversation actually happens in his house which is in this instance represented as the space where the men actually meet.

⁶² A dialogue with Kakkanadan in Shaji 1993/1994: 109. Such a statement has become commonplace in Kerala among intellectuals. A recent instance where one heard such a comment was when the filmmaker TV Chandran was being interviewed on television on his film *Susanna* (2000) where he argued that the protagonist of the film represented all women, who in turn represented the mother.

The public intellectual performance (in the act of conversation) is brought into the spatial private, thus giving the notion of public a new meaning, as one that is performative. That is, the spatial private could become the public depending on the act that is performed. Following the structure of public/private distinction that initiated the discussion in this thesis, the public and the private are performances (gendered, of course) that can cut across spatial barriers. A similar structure is invoked in the documentary film *Ithrayum Yathbhagam* when an interview with Aiyappan is shot at his sister's house. The poet's attempt here is to open up the private into the public and to contrast his attitude to life with his sister's. He urges his sister to talk about their mother being a sex worker and says to his sister: "You keep things private. I am a public man – an ad man. Come, all of you. Come and see. This is my philosophy" (see image 11).⁶³ The intrusion of the camera and the presence of the poet transform the private domain – the house – into the public.

Let us put John Abraham's above-mentioned statement about all women being mothers and the discussion of the public/private alongside an observation made by Civic Chandran, more than fifteen years after the disbanding of the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi*, about the difficulties faced by the 'comrades' in relation to the women who were interested in the activities of the *Vedi*. What is at issue here is the opposite of the problem of the man in the private sphere, that is, the woman in the public sphere. Chandran, looking back at the 1980s writes in 2002:

⁶³ The Malayalam word used for both 'public' and 'advertisement' is *parasyam*.

We were afraid of those women ... who wanted to join the movement during the days of the *Janakeeya Samskarika Vedi*. What do we do with them? What work do we give them? What are they good for other than to sit in the back rows when the lion-like men (*purushasimhangal*) were involved in important theoretical debates, or to fetch coffee in between these discussions, or to make copies of the resolutions made at these meetings? Some of them later did get the 'status' of lovers or of wives. The involvement of women in the seventies did not go beyond that. (Chandran 2002: 53)

John Abraham's manoeuvre seems to help resolve a crisis for the revolutionary movements in relation to the role of women as cadres by giving concrete expressions for the public/private as son-revolutionary/mother. Was it that Abraham was providing a solution to this anxiety by defining the role of women in the revolutionary project? A new resolution for a new 'women's question'? Another text that could be juxtaposed to Abraham's ideas is the hugely popular poem by Kadammanitta titled *Kurathi*, which is written as the lament of a mother, and begins thus: "You burned to death my black sons...". John Abraham's 'mother' and Kadammanitta's *Kurathi* could be seen as figures in the same political discourse. It is important to note that it is the notion of motherhood that is foregrounded in all these narratives. The position of the woman in the revolutionary moment, then is that of the mother who 'understands'. In a recent article based on the artist Krishnakumar's mother's memory of her son, she is

quoted as saying: “You will not understand when I say this. *But who else will understand him better than me?*” (Subin 2005: 11, emphasis added).

In their memories of John Abraham a number of important public figures in Kerala revert to the metaphor of the mother-son relationship. Writing about *Amma Ariyaan* OV Vijayan says, “We should not pardon ourselves for not recognizing the mother’s message and her historical significance”.⁶⁴ Listen to MV Devan, noted painter, writing about the filmmaker’s death: “John fell like a tired little child falling onto the bosom of the loving mother. Who knew it was the deep fall into the darkened crevices of death?”⁶⁵ Abraham’s idea of the mythical mother who could resolve the political crisis also becomes a sort of anti-colonial indigenism when he says, “In my film, the concept ‘mother’ is all-pervasive. The concept of the *devi* has always been there in the mind of the Indian. If it has been shaken, it is because of the patriarchal thinking that was imposed by the Europeans”.⁶⁶ The unselfconscious falling back upon the nationalist model discussed by Partha Chatterjee in relation to the ‘women’s question’ is significant. The revolutionary role of the mother as at once the overseer of the project and as the custodian of the private was one of the most important features of the

⁶⁴ Vijayan, OV. “Vishamasmrithi” (A Sad Memory) in Shaji 1993/1994: 140.

⁶⁵ Devan, MV. “Bhoomiyilekku Nimathikkunna oru Nizhalroopam” (A Shadow Form Falling on the Earth) in Shaji 1993/1994: 135.

⁶⁶ Interview with KNT Shastri in Shaji 1993/1994: 106.

nationalist imagination, found also in the construction of well-known figures like the 'Bharat Mata' (Gupta 2001: 196-221).

Here it is important to note that *Amma Ariyaan*, which presents the fullest elaboration of the mother figure, is the story of a group of men who travel from north to central Kerala to inform the 'mother' (played by Iringal Narayani) about the death of her son Hari, a mridangam player. It ends with a sequence where the mother, who when told her son is dead, asks, "It was a suicide, wasn't it?" (see image 12). This mother is introduced to us in an earlier sequence where she is participating in a baptizing ceremony in a church. Hari's father, who does not show any sympathy towards the activities of his friends, is seen as outside the revolutionary project that the group comes out of- the patriarchal figure who cannot be integrated into that project because he doesn't (or rather, cannot) 'understand'.

There is another mother who is featured prominently in the film- the mother of Purushan (Joy Mathew), the protagonist of the film and the leader figure of the group. His mother (Kunhulakshmi Amma) is introduced to us in the first sequences of the film. Then she appears in the film through Purushan's memory. This mother, as is evident from her clothes and the rituals she participates in, is Hindu – or to be more specific, a Nair woman. She is shown in a house built in a Nair architectural style and later at a temple. Another significant female character in the depicted film is Purushan's girlfriend, who is researching mother goddesses. Thus we see an attempt to produce a mother figure from the

virgin Mary and the mother goddesses through upper caste female characters. This is not to exclude the many other mothers who are shown through the film, but to point out that it is within a field determined by these two mother figures that the other mothers function. These two women are represented as the mothers who ‘understand’ – understand the role that their sons are taking up for the revolution.

As is foregrounded in the discussion above, the political discourse of the time narrativised notions of masculinity not necessarily by discussing them head on, but by constructing notions of womanhood as the constitutive outside of the discourse. Further, even when these notions of womanhood are presented as if they are radically different from earlier models, they follow directly from notions of gender difference that were established in the nationalist and social reform rhetoric. Thus as Chandran says, women could be either girlfriends or wives, or as in Abraham’s conceptualisation, the mother. These figures, including the girl friend, are not represented as sexual beings in these narratives. The erasure of desire and the body and the invocation of platonic love mark the narratives of companionship. Abraham’s hugely popular note on his interest in women who wear spectacles, emphasizes companionship that is more intellectual than one based on desire.⁶⁷ In “Letters to the Beloved”, published after his death, he writes to his lover, “ You are my ‘home’ and my destiny”.⁶⁸ Interestingly, unlike the

⁶⁷ Abraham, John. “Kannadi Vecha Pennineyayirunnu Enikkishtam” (I Like Women who Wear Spectacles) Shaji 1993/1994: 29- 31.

⁶⁸ Abraham, John. “Letters to the Beloved” in *Odessa* – John Abraham Trust 1998: 98.

narratives of masculinity that are taken up for analysis in the rest of Part II, where family and female sexuality are represented as important themes around which it is woven, these narratives are made possible in their absence, or rather in its negation. The family then is the outside space for the intellectual, and women for him are all mothers.

Collectives

The film *Amma Ariyaan* revolves around Purushan who on his way to Delhi sees a dead body which he thinks is that of Hari – a mridangam player he vaguely knew in the context of extremist politics in Kerala. He decides to abandon his trip and to confirm whether it is indeed Hari and if so to go to Cochin to inform his mother. It turns out that the dead man is Hari and after this revelation a number of young men join Purushan in his trip to meet Hari's mother. They travel through many conflict-ridden areas in Kerala where various kinds of people's struggles are underway. The film, which uses fictional narrative and documentary style footage, has been recognized as a landmark in Kerala's film history. I contend that the film also provides a model for intellectual collectives in Kerala, especially those active in the last decade of the twentieth century. These collectives, like the group that comes together because of Hari's death, are those that are gathered around the memory of dead artists. These collectives are usually formed as the *suhrut sanghams* or friends' circles of the dead intellectual/artist (e.g. Surasu Suhrut Sangham).

I suggest that the film *Amma Ariyaan* inaugurates the notion of collectives that are formed around dead iconic figures in the form of *suhrut sanghams* that have today become commonplace in Kerala, especially in the Malabar region. The parallels between Abraham's death and the portrayal of Hari's death, and between the trip to inform "John's Calicut mother, Kunhulakshmiamma" about his death and the trip to Cochin in the film has been noted by Civic Chandran.⁶⁹ The foregrounding of the 'prophetic nature' of the representation of Hari's death by Chandran could be seen as one of the first moves in producing the 'John cult'. Here John Abraham and his friends/admirers, along with the similar episodes in his film, get elevated to a prototype of the cult-collective formation that we encounter in the public domain in Kerala.

It is around intellectuals associated with the left radical discourse of the 1980s that such collectives are formed. In the 1990s, collectives were formed for example, following the death of the journalist Jayachandran and the cultural critic A Soman. The city of Calicut which housed *Odessa*, and has the most number of *suhrut sanghams* today, has had a history that facilitated collectives. With a history that begins with the Congress Party's *Chalappuram Gang* during the nationalist period and the Commune where the leaders of the Communist Party lived in, to the gang that formed around the filmmaker G Aravindan – leading to the production of his first feature film *Uttharayanam* (1974), Calicut's cultural

⁶⁹ Chandran, Civic. "John Abraham Iniyum Namukidayilundu" (John Abraham is Still Amidst Us) in Shaji 1993/1994: 284.

history is a history of collectives. Whereas it was the nationalist newspaper *Mathrubhumi* with its highly respected weekly literary magazine that provided the context of the earlier collectives, it was radical politics that facilitated the later ones.⁷⁰

These collectives were (and still continue to be) all male. In a poem written on Abraham's death, Kakkanadan foregrounds the gender of the 'friends':

...
sitting around him
women were singing elegies
we, his friends
waited near the lake
for him to wake up
....⁷¹

The friends are indeed marked as men and women are outside the sphere of friends by definition.

More important is the fact that it is the death of male intellectuals that has contributed to the formation of such collectives to that the organizing principle of such a collective is indeed death. The earlier political associations between the

⁷⁰ The *Mathrubhumi* newspaper started publication from Calicut in 1923 in an attempt to support anti-colonial politics of the Congress. The weekly of the same name started in 1932.

⁷¹ Kakkanadan. "Avan Urangkayaayirunnu" (He was Sleeping) in *Odessa – John Abraham Trust* 1998: 78.

individuals in these collectives are more or less unimportant. However, without the history of the radical left politics of the 1980s, these collectives would have been impossible. The collective in *Amma Ariyaan* foregrounds precisely this issue (see image 13). In the film, it is the death of Hari that brings the group together. That the people in the group share a political past seems important yet incidental to their coming together. Along with death, there is also the foregrounding of art as the ground on which such a collective is possible. Hari commits suicide when his fingers – the fingers with which he used to play his mridangam – are broken by the police. Thus the impossibility of artistic expression is refigured as the death of the artist and this in turn becomes the ground for these collectives in the form of *suhrut sanghams*.

The organization of the public spaces of intellectual activity in Kerala is significant in the history of the *suhrut sanghams*. Such an organization was at the same time continuing the older forms of ordering the public but is in significant ways constituting newer forms of intellectual publics as masculine domains. Public intellectualism foregrounds its masculine characteristics not by excluding women from its fold, as is evident from the collective that is formed in *Amma Ariyaan* and as seen in the poem quoted above, but by ordering itself through public performances of the cult figures that have been discussed earlier.

The importance of the invocation of figures like John Abraham in the organizing of these publics is immense. This had begun in the descriptions of his cremation. Civic Chandran in his obituary wrote, “Angry youth had come together

from all parts of Kerala to witness John's last sleep. Hundreds of young men who, like John himself, are careless about their dress and manners"⁷². KN Shaji writes, "John Abraham is still not fully digested in our society. In public fora, private rooms, in the semi-darkened spaces of the bar, future generations in different ways remember and discuss John." (Shaji 1993/1994: 6) And here is the presentation of the book on Surasu written by Civic Chandran representing the *suhrut sangham* which published the book: "Thus, here we keep alive the 'lower breath' of Surasu for those who are still alive in Kerala. Someone like him might still come this way. Let these notes help us understand them". As is evident from this suggestion that these books are published in the expectation that it will help reproduce the intellectual persona of these cult figures in the hypothetical readers- Abraham and Surasu as the St. Johns for the Jesus who is yet to come. During the theatre festival organized in memory of Surasu in 2005, Civic Chandran argued that it was the memory of people like Surasu that would help continue the theatre tradition in Calicut by bringing together a large number of people, as constituting a new political public.⁷³ The art object that is produced, the film, the play etc. in turn engenders the public performance of a collective outside of it, for the consumption of the audience of, say, a Surasu Memorial Theatre Festival or a John Abraham memorial meeting.

⁷² Chandran, Civic. "John Abraham Iniyum Namukidayilundu" (John Abraham is Still Amidst Us) in Shaji 1993/1994: 284.

⁷³ Speech delivered by Civic Chandran on 20 May 2005 at Town Hall, Calicut.

Thus there are two levels of performances that presently structure the production of the intellectual public. One is the reproduction of the image of the cult figure- through speeches, theatrical performances etc., and the second is the collective itself as performance. This double ordering of the public, a fact that foregrounds publicness as performative, is made clear in the last sequence of *Amma Ariyaan*.

The last shots of *Amma Ariyaan* shows a group of people watching the sequence in the film where Hari's mother is seen at the centre of the collective (see image 14). The camera pans from the screen showing Hari's mother to the spectators watching the film slowly focusing on Purushan's mother and girlfriend among them (see image 15). The film ends with the spectator suddenly shifted one remove from both the narrative of death and the collectives, by making the film that they have watched for hours a film that is being watched by a set of people on screen- the diegetic space suddenly expands to include a section of the spectators, and here the prominent figures that we encounter are Purushan's mother and girlfriend. Thus it becomes the responsibility of the film to inform Purushan's mother both about the collectives that death has engendered and about the mother who understands, that is, Hari's mother in the film, who asked "It was suicide, wasn't it?". With this one last sequence, the gendering takes a new turn.

Now the viewers – passive till they are awakened by the medium of cinema – are interpellated as non-understanding beings – an abstraction whose 'redemption' lies in following the mother – Purushan's mother in this case, who

leads them outside the frame. The film addresses this mother as the one who can potentially understand and recognize the response of Hari's mother on the screen. Two collectives, one on-screen inside the film, and the other outside this screen (both inside the diegetic space of *Amma Ariyaan*), both led by mothers, are represented in the film as the model for the public to emulate. This also feminises the audience of the cult-collective performance. In this context one can come to the conclusion that the naming of the protagonist of the film as 'Purushan' ('man' as opposed to woman as '*prakruthi*') is not coincidental at all. He represents the collective which is gendered male, with him embodying the ideal within the intellectual public while those outside that space (like the people watching the film in the film) are gendered as female.

These narratives mobilize gendered categories in the service of producing the cult by a process of othering- a process of othering the feminine both as the constitutive outside of the cult itself and as the collective that is formed around it. As was foregrounded in the discussion of the sexual harassment of PE Usha in Chapter II, the lineages of this discourse in producing intellectual subjectivities and ideal masculinities are important in our understanding of the political public in contemporary Kerala. The next chapter takes up two sets of narratives from different historical moments in Kerala to analyse narratives of crisis that constitute notions of normative masculinities.

Chapter IV

Negotiating Modernity: The Crisis Narratives

This chapter, divided into two sections, takes up two moments from the history of Kerala's modernity for analysis, in the attempt to understand the notions of masculinity that were deployed in negotiating them. In the first section I take up two texts that deal with the history of the Nair community in the post-matrilineal, post-land reforms period. I argue that these texts provide the Nair men with normative models for refashioning the self. They point to the specific changes that have happened in Kerala that the Nair man has to reckon with, suggest ways of negotiating these changes and also set the limits for their refashioning. The second section moves to the 1990s where a discourse of the 'emancipated woman', a central theme in the development model called the 'Kerala Model' and the mobilization around feminism seems to engender a narrative of crisis that the Malayalee man allegedly has to deal with. Unconnected at first glance, these sets of narratives share a certain common ground as both are trying to negotiate changes at times when the status quo is disturbed within modernity. Whereas the crisis that Nair men seem to face is directly linked to modernity, the crisis that men face in the 1990s is in relation to what is in commonsensical terms understood as the 'modern educated woman'.

Section I:

Of Mice and Men: Matriliney and the Crisis of Masculinity

In Chapter II, one of the patterns that were identified in the discourse of masculinity in contemporary Kerala was that which tried to reconstruct a mythical past where the possibility of better gender relations existed. This was evident especially in some of the writings of well known literary figures in Malayalam like KP Ramanunni and Sugathakumari, among others. It was suggested that this narrative was based on the invocation of a specific caste history- a history of the Nair community- rather than it being a mere nostalgia for the past, especially in relation to the kinship patterns that were represented.¹ This specific caste history, as this chapter will demonstrate, is tied to the history of matriliney in Kerala. The section looks at texts from the recent past in Kerala's history, where a crisis in masculinity was narrated in relation to the changes that happened in matrilineal kinship among the Nair community. The first part of the section elaborates on the changes that happened in the lives of Nairs in Kerala due to colonial intervention. Looking at two texts produced in the second half of the 20th century – the novel

¹ In relation to the varnas, Nairs are considered to be Sudras in the context of Kerala. They have historically been warriors to the various kings of the region and have tried to claim Kshatriya status. Unlike other parts of India where the Sudra caste is considered to be part of the state category 'Other Backward Castes' (OBC), Nairs are counted in Kerala as part of the upper castes because of the specificities of the history of the region. The formation of the Nair identity happened during the social reform period by bringing together a number of jatis who were considered Sudras.

Naalukettu (1958) written by MT Vasudevan Nair and the film *Elippathayam* (1981) directed by Adoor Gopalakrishnan, I argue that it is mobility which is seen as the desired characteristic for Nair masculinity of the period in question. This mobility in turn is understood in relation to the changes in familial structures and in new moral codes that were imposed on marriage and conjugality.

The existence of matriliney as a system that governed property relations and sexual organization in Kerala has been of great interest to anthropologists and historians working on the state² and has also contributed to the production of a popular myth about Kerala as a ‘female dominated society’.³ In such a system, property was handed down through the eldest woman of the family. The system was called *marumakkathayam* in Malayalam, suggesting the centrality of the nephew, (*marumakan*) and by inference the uncle (*ammaman*), in the structure, thus underscoring the lineage through the mother, who is the link between the two. The conjugal system which was called *sambandham* allowed the woman to stay in her own family home while her male partner had visiting rights.⁴ This

² See works by Saradmoni 1999; Arunima 1996, 2000, 2003b; Kodoth 2001a, 2004a; Gough 1952, 1959; Fuller 1976; Jeffrey 1975 and others.

³ The history of matriliney coupled with statistics regarding female literacy has contributed to the production of Kerala for people outside the state as a ‘female dominated society’. One of the common mistakes that allows for such a construction is the popular conflation of matriliney with ‘matriarchy’. Matriliney refers to a system where property is handed down through the mother, where as ‘matriarchy’ refers to a system where social/ family structure is controlled by the mother (as opposed to patriarchy, which is the rule of the father).

⁴ A *sambandham* typically involved the giving of a cloth to the Nair woman by the man- Nair or Nambudiri. This ritual was called *pudamuri*. Though *sambhandham* was more often than not

allowed her children to be seen as part of her family (rather than the father's) and to be the inheritors of the property controlled by the uncle. The women, it has been suggested, had an important role to play in the ownership and management of the property.⁵ One of the reasons for the scholarly interest in matriliney has been the fact that it was one of the most visible sites of colonial legal intervention in Kerala and also because it was "... the only kinship system in the world to be abolished" (Arunima 2003a: 1), in this case by the colonial legal machinery.

One of the recent works on matriliney describes it as it existed in the days before the intervention of the colonial legal system:

Conceptually, a matrilineal household was composed of people related to each other in the female line. In other words, relationships were traced through the mother; at any given time, membership of the household would consist of all women and their children and grandchildren. They would live and eat together, but more importantly, they would hold joint rights to the family property. Inheritance again, was traced through women, which implied that women had the right to receive and bequeath ancestral property.

arranged by the families, both the man and the woman had the liberty to discontinue the relationship at any point, and the male members of the woman's family had little say in the matter. It should be noted that it would be erroneous to call this conjugal system a marriage, as marriage is a specifically modern arrangement based on modern law.

⁵ The extent to which the women had a say in the matters relating to ownership and management property in the matrilineal system is a contested issue. But the various authors on the topic do agree on the fact that there was some amount of control available to the women.

Men of the household, be they brothers, sons or nephews, had a right to a share of the family property only while living in it, which they could not bequeath to their wives or children. (Arunima 2003a: 10)

The existing literature points to the fact that at least for some communities in Kerala which followed matriliney, especially the Nairs, a radical break had occurred in their kinship patterns and property relations, engendered by a modernizing colonial zeal.

The emergent legal discourse, both textual and procedural, altered power relations within the *taravad* between men and women: it also transformed the nature of authority and property rights. The events of these decades were critical not only because irrevocable changes were taking place in the lives of matrilineal Nayars- but also because they demonstrated the possibility of state intervention into what is often considered to be the 'private' sphere. (Arunima 2000: 114)

The various legislations enacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries initiated on the one hand by the colonial administration and on the other by the princely states, marked the shift to a system that could be termed patrilineal.⁶ This change was seen both by the colonial administration and the

⁶ The role of both the colonial government and the princely state are important as Kerala as we know it today was divided into three regions, the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, and Malabar which was part of the Madras Presidency.

social reformers as an evolutionary move. The shift from matriliney to patriliney was represented as a shift from primitivity to modernity.⁷ The shift was a gradual one and was completely in place only by the 1970s.⁸ Land reform, initiated by the two Left governments in the state in the 1950s and 1960s, was also a factor in further ensuring the collapse of the system.⁹ This disallowed the existence of large land and property holdings that supported the large joint families which were the backdrop of the matrilineal system. The joint family system that was the norm thus disintegrated as a result of the radical restructuring of kinship and property relations.

Matriliney was not practised by the Nair community alone before the colonial legal intervention. G Arunima indicates that “[I]n the nineteenth century, nearly fifty percent of the Malayalee population, of different castes and

⁷ For example, the Syrian Christian community, one of the communities which was patrilineal, was projected as an example of modernity and unexplained connections were made between their prosperity and the fact that they were patrilineal.

⁸ The Kerala Joint Hindu family System (Abolition) Act was passed in 1975 and came into effect from 1 December 1976. One of the significant clauses of the Act is the one to convert joint ownership of property into co-ownership. This allowed individual members of the family to claim their share in the property as their own.

⁹ Land reforms in Kerala is another fascinating area that is understudied. The land reforms initiated by the first Left ministry in Kerala, and put in place during the second Left ministry in 1969 abolished tenancy. A ceiling of 10 acres was fixed for a family of five. For discussion on land reforms in Kerala see Radhakrishnan 1989, Raj and Tharakan 1983. For a discussion of land reforms in Kerala in relation to issues of gender see Kodoth 2001, 2004b. Critics have argued that land reforms have in no way changed the status of the agricultural labourers from the lower castes in the state. See Prakash 2005; Kunhaman 2005.

communities, were matrilineal” (Arunima 2003a: 2). Though the matrilineal system was practised by many communities, including a section of the Tiyys and the Muslims, it has always been reproduced for popular understanding as a system of the Nair community. During the period of the social reform movement in the early twentieth century, the demolition of the system was high on the agenda of the Nair reformers.¹⁰ I argue that the narrativisation of matriliney as an exclusively Nair system during the reform period has influenced the popular retelling of matriliney in various kinds of texts since then. Most of the anthropological studies on Kerala, while focusing on matriliney, have contributed to the Nair-centred-ness of the discussion.¹¹

This section attempts to understand what was at stake for a discourse of masculinities as far as the collapse of the matrilineal system was concerned. At one level it can be safely assumed that men were to gain by this process. The crisis of authority and control faced by young Nair men in relation to matriliney has been noted by Praveena Kodoth (2003, 2004a). She argues that the reform in matriliney was an attempt also to “produce ‘men’ out of those who lived as useless

¹⁰ The social reform movement in Kerala saw the consolidation of community identities by the attempt to erase the smaller hierarchical structures, and was based on the reform of customs within the community.

¹¹ I am referring to the early anthropological writings on matriliney. It has been suggested by later writers on the subject that the former not only place matriliney exclusively in the Nair community but their early works also produce an ideal type of matriliney from the practices of South Malabar. These writers suggest that the practice, before colonial intervention, had not been similar in all the places where it existed. For a critical discussion of this position, See Arunima, 2003: 4; Kodoth 2005.

entities under the matrilineal system” (2004a: 27). O Chandu Menon’s much discussed novel *Indulekha* (1889) is an example of a narrative that demonstrates how the social reform context during the turn of the century in Malabar was also a period of radical refashioning of Nair male identity.¹² Madhavan, the hero of the novel, is pitted against the decadent Suri Nambudiripad, a Brahmin, whose ‘unacceptable’ sexual advances are facilitated by matriliney. It is worth noting, as an aside, that even the mobility that Nair men seem to have developed over the years, an issue we will have occasion to come back to later in this section, is modelled on Madhavan’s experiences outside Kerala. Madhavan could be seen as the prototype of the Nair man as represented in later writings in Kerala.

The story of the collapse of matriliney is sometimes presented as one of a shift from the power of the women to the power of the men. The question of power is more complicated than this narrative allows for, if we take into account the various ways in which both matriliney and patriliney function. It needs to be noted that the men were not at a complete disadvantage in matriliney, as the uncles (or the *karanavars* as they were called) and the nephews did potentially stand to gain.¹³ An attempt to understand masculinity in the wake of shifts in kinship

¹² For discussions on various aspects of *Indulekha*, see Balakrishnan 1957; Panikker 1998; Arunima 1997; Devasia and Tharu 1995; Kumar 2002; Ansari 2002. See also the articles collected in Rajashekharan 2001.

¹³ Most of the narratives, both fictional and otherwise, present the role of the nephew as a figurative one. He is supposed to inherit. But when the uncle who is the *karanavar* is alive, the accusation has traditionally been that the fruits from the *taravad* property are spent on his own children – who usually reside in his wife’s house. Thus the nephews are usually presented as an unhappy and dissenting group.

patterns need not necessarily peg its arguments on how power functions in the family. That at most can only be one of the issues involved. To put the issue in more precise terms, it is the burden of the shifting social structure, which seemingly has to be negotiated by the men in the community, coupled with uncertainties related to issues of power, which could potentially create a crisis in masculinity. The resolution of the women's question in the Nair reform rhetoric functioned as a foundation for resolving masculine anxieties in relation to notions of community and, more importantly, those of domesticity, property etc. The emergence of newer economic and social structures, especially in the period after the social reform movements, did leave a lot to be desired for the Nair men in consolidating their social position and power, especially in relation to other communities.

I would like to propose that the major shifts which took place within the time span of a century – between the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century – or more presented a crisis for Nair men, one which called for a radical refashioning of the self. The crisis was one of adaptation – adaptation to modernity. In this context modernity was understood primarily in relation to two changes: (a) changing family structures, that is, the formation of nuclear families and the resultant restructuring of economic activity within and without the family and, (b) the way female sexuality came to be understood in the context of new conjugal models. The move away from joint families to nuclear families as the normative structure of modern conjugality was the most important change that happened at this time. New notions of romantic love and conjugality intrinsically

connected to the formation of the nuclear family produced notions of female sexuality, especially in the form of moral norms like monogamy, which were quite different from those of the earlier days. Though the reform period did see important shifts in the above cited directions, it was only by the late 1970s that the integration of Nair men into modernity and the new economic fields like the emerging service sector was complete. I would like to propose then, that the issue of a projected crisis of masculinity is foundational to the various narratives around matriliney that have been in circulation in Kerala through this period.

This chapter will proceed using the works of the novelist MT Vasudevan Nair¹⁴ (hereafter, MT) and the early films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan¹⁵ (hereafter, Adoor) to think through the narrative production of this crisis in Nair masculinity. MT's *Naalukettu*¹⁶ (1958) and Adoor's *Elippathayam* (The Rat Trap 1981,) will be analysed in detail in this chapter, with occasional references made to the other

¹⁴ MT Vasudevan Nair is one of the most prominent novelist and short story writers in Malayalam. He has written nine novels and published a number of short stories. He has also written one play, and a number of articles and travelogues. Winner of the coveted Jnanapith Award, Nair has also written and directed many award winning films.

¹⁵ Adoor Gopalakrishnan is the first of the 'New Malayalam Cinema' directors. His first film was *Swayamvaram* (1972). He has directed nine features and has worked as director or editor in many documentaries and short films. A master realist, his films are internationally renowned.

¹⁶ *Naalukettu* refers to the architectural style used in the construction of Nair *taravads*. These were big houses with an open space in the middle and with small temples attached. Bigger versions were called '*ettukettu*', '*pathinarukettu*' etc. For a discussion of this form of architecture, see Moore 1990 and for an analysis of matriliney through through the organisation of the *taravad*, see Moore 1985. For an analysis of the novel using the architectural style as an entry point, see Harris 1999: 80-85.

works produced by them. Both MT and Adoor are two figures who have consistently produced texts about Nair history and who are also considered to be the most important figures in their respective fields. Though these texts present themselves as pertaining to a Nair history, this aspect had been more or less ignored by most of the commentators who represent these works as referring to a feudal past common to all Malayalees.¹⁷

It needs to be noted that instead of revisiting the colonial period and the matrilineal tradition that was in place at that time, this section attempts to focus on the latter half of the twentieth century, a period that had by then seen a number of changes in relation to social reform, the advent of the Communist movement and the formation of the state of Kerala. Land reforms, initiated by the Communist government through the ‘Land Reforms Amendment Act of 1969’, was the culmination of a process of state intervention into property holdings, which had their beginnings in the colonial period (Kodoth 2001: 297-298). By this time the Nair community had invented the figure of the father, who had been hitherto absent for all practical purposes from the Nair familial structure, and, in Robin Jeffrey’s words, the “decline of the Nair dominance” (Jeffrey 1975) in relation to its traditional locations of power was almost complete.¹⁸

¹⁷ Most of the commentators, after referring to the specific caste location of these texts, try to argue for the universal relevance of these texts in an attempt to present them as ‘great’ works of literature and cinema. For an example of such a writing in relation to MT, See Premachandran 1996.

¹⁸ The narrative produced by Robin Jeffrey about the Nairs and the decline of their dominance does not pay attention to the ways in which their dominance was reorganized in relation to

The section focuses on the ways in which kinship is understood in the Nair context in the narratives produced by MT and Adoor, and the possible linkages one could make with the matrilineal past. The argument that narratives from the historical moments under consideration in the thesis do produce protagonists as exemplars will be carried forward. The notions of masculinities that are produced, I suggest, present the possibilities a historical moment offers to Nair men. What was the changed context that these narratives were responding to, and what were the exemplary subject positions they offer? Let us look for answers in the texts themselves.

“It’s Me Appunni, Son of Konthunni Nair”

MT’s *Naalukettu* (1958, hereafter *NK*) begins by presenting the protagonist’s thoughts thus:

I will grow up. I will grow up and become a big man. My hands will be very strong. Then I don’t have to be afraid of anyone. I can stand with my head high. When someone asks, “Who’s that?” I can say without stuttering and stammering- “It’s me Appunni, son of Konthunni Nair”(NK: 7).¹⁹

modernity. I suggest that instead of a decline, Nair dominance in Kerala shifted its base from the economy of Kerala to the emerging national economy, in the period after independence.

¹⁹ All quotations are from the 16th impression of the novel published by Current Books (Thrissur) in 2003. Translations, if not mentioned otherwise, are mine.

The invocation of the absent father in the first paragraph of the novel presents us with a parallel or, as I will argue, a contrast to the much-discussed Ravi Varma painting titled *There Comes Papa* (1893).²⁰ The painting shows a Nair woman holding a child pointing towards the outside of its frame, with a pet dog on the floor, also looking in that direction (see image 16). Arunima understands the painting, created before the invention of the conjugal couple of the kind it was attempting to portray among Nairs in Kerala, as a sign of the “growing patrilineal sensibilities” (Arunima 2003a: 1) of the artist and suggests elsewhere that the gesture of the figure in the painting “can be seen as a metaphor for the uncertainty that matrilineal families were undergoing at this time in Kerala” (Arunima 2003b: 65). The painting represents the newly imagined form of the family- one of the transformations that were happening in the late nineteenth century in the Nair community.

As suggested earlier, an understanding of what happened in the sixty-five years between 1893 and 1958 should enable a different explanation for the absence of the father in MT’s work in comparison to the same in Ravi Varma’s. The most important development during this time was the passing of the Madras Marumakkathayam Act 1932 which legalized all *sambandhams*, hitherto seen by the colonial legal system as not constituting marriage. The ritual of *pudamuri* or

²⁰ Most commentators on matriliney have noted the importance of this painting to the extent that Arunima’s book on matriliney takes its title from it and the painting adorns its cover. Art historians have understood Ravi Varma’s oeuvre as a location where renaissance realist conventions met the social reform/nationalist discourse in India. For other discussions on Ravi Varma’s oeuvre and this painting see, Arunima 2003b; Nandakumar 1996.

the offering of a piece of cloth by the man to the woman, which the Act named marriage, was now to be carried out in the daytime (unlike the earlier practice of it being carried out in the night) in an attempt to make it a public act, now under the purview of the law. The Act “sealed the demise of the households by legitimizing its partition into branches, by either a male or a female member, as well as *ratifying the right of wives and children to inherit a man’s property and succeed to it*” (Arunima 2003a: 177, emphasis added). This therefore allowed for the formation of smaller households with the male as the head. The husband and the father were thus legally produced by this Act.

In *There Comes Papa* the diegetic space of the painting does include a father in a space outside the frame but inside the narrative. In sharp contrast, in *Naalukettu*, the father exists only in Appunni’s memory, as his ideal.²¹ If the father was an immediate future in Ravi Varma’s painting, he is already the past in MT- a character that precedes the narrative. But here again comes another twist to the tale- Konthunni Nair’s place in the established Nair order is that of a rebel. This rebellion, which becomes a model for Appunni, whose success in life is in

²¹ The absent father is a trope often seen in MT’s writings. A number of his short stories testify to this fact. The most interesting example of the writer’s fascination with this idea is in his novel *Randamoozham* (The Second Turn, 1984a), a retelling of the *Mahabharata* from Bheema’s viewpoint, which begins with a chapter where the protagonist Bheema imagines his father to be the god of wind, Varuna (the novel suggests that the divine origin theory of the Pandavas is a myth and that they have real human parents- Bheema’s being a tribal king). There cannot possibly be a better way to represent an absence than to refer to the wind. The absence of the father is always referred to as an important factor in MT’s life. During his childhood, his father worked in Ceylon. See Basheer 1996: 13.

negotiating his own illegal location in the familial structure, is of significance as it is imperative for him to leave the *taravad* in the course of the narrative. Appunni's obsession with his father is not a direct response to the absence of the father in a matrilineal system as suggested by some commentators (Tharamel 1999: 36-37). Since the absence of the father was never recognized in the matrilineal context it could not have been part of the cultural memory of a boy born much after the colonial-legal invention of the father. This is a father who can only be envisaged in the context of modernity – a father who makes himself present in defiance of tradition. The mother-centred family of Appunni is not a replica of a matrilineal household but the remnant of a failed 'modern' experiment. Thus the past in which Konthunni Nair exists is not the same past which was the high point of matrilineality. This presents us with two different temporalities which are imagined in the novel, two pasts, two significant pasts for the modern Nair man- one that includes Konthunni Nair's triumphs and failures, and the other of matrilineality.

Konthunni Nair was a modern man like the father for whom the woman is waiting in the Ravi Varma painting. His (modern) 'vices' included having tea at a teashop run by a Muslim ("drinking tea itself was considered wrong in those days") eating with lower castes, gambling and drinking (NK: 16). Let me quote a rather long passage from the novel where Appunni imagines his father through the memories of the latter's contemporaries.

Konthunni Nair was a well-known dice player.

Even today there will be dice play under the banyan tree during Onam, Vishu and Thiruvathira. The game is between people from Kudallur and Perumbalam villages.

The bigwigs of the game are all gone. Only the youngsters are left. The old men in the village say that ‘these days the spirit of the game is gone’.

When I hear the sound of the dice in someone’s hands, when I hear the cheers, it’s my father who comes to my mind. More than pain, the thoughts make me proud.

There has been only one player in the village who could call a number and get it on his dice. It was his father.

“My friends – I saw it with my eyes. It was the last round game with the Perumbalam guys. Marar is the player on the other side. They need just three to win. If we lose, our pride is gone. There is no point in remaining there. All our players are dropping out with fatigue. We only realized later that they had done some black magic with the help of Mannan Choppan. We need thirty-two to win. Achumman was standing looking at the sky with the dice in the hand...

‘All is lost, my God!’ – To tell the truth Achumman also had no confidence to play. If we don’t win in that round, we are done for. He looked at me and said – Kutta, the pride of the land is in trouble!

But Achumman was not ready to give up yet. He was some guy! He turned around and asked loudly. ‘Is there anyone among the youngsters?’

It was then the voice was heard – ‘Give me the dice, uncle’.

It was Konthunni Nair!

Marar and company were calling all the gods in the land loudly, to distract us. Their sound could be heard at a distance.

‘Why should I pray to that useless woman?’ – Konthunni Nair hit his chest and abused loudly – who was he abusing? The Goddess.

He was shivering with excitement when he said it. He closed his eyes, prayed for a bit and threw the dice – a crystal-clear twelve.

His eyes were all red. It was a scary sight.

He threw again – again a twelve.

Played again – two threes – six.

He threw his last dice, turned around and walked saying – here’s your win. The dice stopped turning when he reached the steps at the end of the plot. We all looked – it was a win!

‘There will never be a man like that!’ (NK: 15, emphasis added)

The way in which Konthunni Nair’s ‘vices’ and his irreverence are narratively linked is visible in this extract. The significance of the defiance of the goddess, an important invocation of female power, is obvious. Konthunni Nair emerges as a modern man both in his defiance of the past by indulging in vices like gambling, as well as in his defiance of the ‘Mother Goddess’ – an important image for a

system headed by women. It is in this context that Konthunni Nair emerges as the model for a normative masculinity as far as Appunni is concerned.

In the early part of the novel where Konthunni Nair is remembered, we see a repetition of the affirmation of his masculinity through exclamations similar to that in the passage above. In the above extract it was the famed dice player Kuttan Nair talking about Konthunni and his masculinity, whereas later we see another character, Koonan Chathu Nair, saying the same in connection with Konthunni's courage to elope with Ammukutty, Appunni's mother. He says, "A man like that will never be born again" (NK: 18). Chathu Nair remembers how Konthunni Nair replied when asked whether he was afraid of Ammukutty's family – "Chathu, *I am a man. There's only one death after you are born*" (NK: 18, emphasis added).

In the novel, Konthunni Nair's aggressive masculinity is produced as the ideal by positing the equally aggressive Muslim man as the other.²² Saithalikutty, the alleged murderer of Konthunni Nair, is constantly evoked by Appunni for most of the early part of the novel as a form of undesirable masculinity, as Konthunni Nair's alter ego. The fact that it is not a form of masculinity from the earlier matrilineal order that is posited as the other to Konthunni Nair is significant. This illuminates the earlier point that Konthunni Nair's identity is structured not in relation to matrilineality but to modernity. The representation of

²² The *karanavar* is not of much consequence to the construction of masculinity in the novel as he is of an older order. The new emerging masculinities had to be produced not in relation to a past but a present that functions as its other.

masculinity in relation to the Muslim man as the other comes later in the novel.

This is in reference to Bapputty, a minor character in the novel.

Everyone looked at Bapputty with anxiety. There was fire in his eyes. He never hesitates to do anything. He has already been the accused in three criminal offences. Though he has been put in jail only once, *he believes that 'the Kannur jail is for real men'* (NK: 86, emphasis added).

It is important to note that Bapputty's belief that 'the Kannur jail is for real men' is a comment by the narrator and not something that is said by him. MT Ansari has demonstrated how mainstream Malayalam literature has always posited the Muslim man as the 'other' in producing ideal modern hero types (Ansari 1999, 2002).²³ Discussing NS Madhavan's highly acclaimed short story *Higuitta* (1990/1993), he argues that the othering of Muslim men has provided the frame in which modernity has been worked out in Malayalam literature.²⁴ I suggest that, in *Naalukettu* there is a shift in this tendency identified by Ansari.

²³ Ansari produces a linear history without breaks about the othering of the Muslim man in Malayalam literature in two separate essays mentioning the works of Chandu Menon in the 1880s, Kumaran Asan in the 1920s, and NS Madhavan in the 1990s. Devika's attempt to read Uroob's novels in the same light has added to this argument. See Devika 2005a. Though I am inclined to agree with Ansari that modernity in Malayalam literature is narrated by a process of othering Islam in most cases, I would like to suggest that there are significant shifts in the representation of the Muslim in Malayalam literature over the years. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's writings and its influence on later Malayalam literature are yet to be investigated in relation to this. MT's own construction of Basheer as a father figure in his various writings is also worth remembering here. See for example Nair 1984b: 67-80.

²⁴ Ansari's critique of NS Madhavan's story sparked off a significant debate in Kerala in relation to what was termed 'communalisation of literature'. Madhavan then went on to suggest that it is

Appunni's identity as a ten-year-old boy allows for the presentation of a character that represents at once a lineage and a future. It is interesting to note that in most of MT's important works of the time, be it the one under discussion or the widely acclaimed *Kaalam* (1969) or even his short stories, his protagonist is a young boy. The *bildungsroman* mode of story telling allows the author to present the contexts of social change as a narrative of 'becoming a man' (it is never a woman!) and at the same time as if it is a story merely of growing up, by not foregrounding gender.²⁵ For example *Kaalam*, MT's subsequent work explicitly deals with the classic motif of modernity, i.e. the theme of the emergent urban economies, and attempts to work out the space for the Nair man in it through Sethu, the protagonist who grows up into middle age from a schoolboy in the novel.²⁶

the fact that Ansari hails from Hyderabad, for him a den of Islamic fundamentalists, which is behind the critique. I submit that the response Ansari received only goes to prove his point about Malayalam literature where the Muslim always embodies undesirable modernity.

²⁵ The only novel featuring a female protagonist that written by MT is *Manju* (The Mist 1964). Significantly the narrative is not about the Nair community and is set in Dehra Dun. The novel employs the stream of consciousness mode to discuss hope and waiting as the basic conditions of human existence.

²⁶ This is true of his short stories also. Interestingly, MT has, in many of his memoirs and interviews, narrated the impact made on him by his own move from the village to the city of Palghat during his youth. The discussion of the child protagonist in MT's works has more or less concentrated on the child as representing 'innocence' and as an unmarked being. See Bevincha 1996. P Soman argues that the heroes of MT's works, especially the child protagonists, are modelled on his own life (Soman 1996: 110-111).

Appunni in *Naalukettu* lives with his mother Ammukutty who was ostracized by her family for marrying Konthunni Nair, who was from a poor Nair family. Appunni's parents did in fact construct the modern conjugal unit of the nuclear family, but the narrative begins by presenting that as a failed attempt, because of Konthunni Nair's untimely death.²⁷ To represent the present moment of the narrative as one that signals change, both the systems, in this case matriliney and the modern nuclear family, need to be represented as unstable and it is for Appunni to stabilize either or both. The novel represents Appunni as imagining his future as part of two possible systems. One is the mother's family and the matrilineal system it represents – which many of the characters in novel remind him as being his rightful space – and the other, the route to modernity which has been opened up by his father.

The memory of the past glories of the matrilineal system are alluded to in the novel either as memories of the older characters in the novel or as the narrator's 'memory' of the breakdown of an earlier social system. The novel describes the *taravad* just once.

It is said that tens of thousands of measures of paddy were grown in front of that *taravad*. All that was a long time ago. It was during the

²⁷ It is a very compelling thought to think of MT's work as following from *Indulekha* (1889), as a number of tropes from the former seem to reappear in the latter. In *Indulekha*, the protagonists Madhavan and Indulekha move out of the matrilineal household to set up a modern nuclear family. The possible parallels with Appunni's parents are apparent.

time when *muthachi* had her second husband that the *taravad* was broken up and distributed. Apparently there were sixty-four members when the division took place.

A household with sixty-four members!

At that time the *taravad* consisted of two *naalukettus*. More than half of it has been broken down by now. What remains is the *naalukettu* where the goddess is supposed to be residing. The granary is still there. And so is the compound wall. (NK: 19)

As for the sexual organization in the now non-existent system, the novel mentions it in passing in relation to the oldest character in the novel: “There is not a single soul in Kudallur who doesn’t know the *muthachi* (grandma) of Kottil. *She had three husbands in her youth. She didn’t have any children. The first husband left her and she left the other two*” (NK: 14, emphasis added). Appunni chooses to leave the world of the memory of a glorified past to choose his father’s legacy. He does this not necessarily out of conscious deliberations, but in a context where he realizes that he has no role in the world of the *taravad*. This choice – the choice of an individuated system over a community oriented system – after his failed attempts at integrating with mother’s *taravad*, is the future for him. Appunni, interestingly never shows any love for his mother who had taken as many risks as his father in her life. Distancing himself from her, Appunni’s search is for a father. Even his attempt to reclaim his mother’s *taravad* is nothing more than an attempt to replace the memory of his father with another kind of authority. And interestingly enough, he finds his father figure in Saithalikutty, the murderer of his father and a Muslim.

At the beginning of the novel, the Muslim man is at once presented as the ‘other’ of Nair masculinity (exemplified by Konthunni Nair), as well as the representation of the modern. The entrepreneurial qualities of the Muslim community are commented upon many times in the novel. The first signs of modernity in Kudallur are the developments in the shop run by Yusuf.

Lamps have been lit in the shops. Most of them are old ‘fourteen number’ lamps. *Only Yusuf’s shop has a petromax lamp.* That is the biggest shop in the village. It is only there that crackers are sold at the time of Vishu. *A new tailor has come to the village from Pattambi.* He is the first tailor at Kudallur. He sits in Yusuf’s shop sewing *on his machine* (NK: 9, emphasis added).

Saithalikutty, who appears many times in the novel at moments when Appunni is completely lost, is another Muslim entrepreneur who has left the village and has been running a shop in the hill area of Wayanad. It is he who, later in the narrative, helps Appunni get a job on an estate. Thus, even though it is the Muslim man who is produced as the ‘other’ for the Nair man in the earlier moments in the novel, the blurring of this distinction seems to be part of MT’s project of imagining a modern Nair male identity. VC Sreejan, in his analysis of the novel argues that, Saithalikutty, by suggesting that Appunni has the legal right to his mother’s *taravad* and by asking “why do you think we have courts and *vakils* in this country, child?” (NK: 98), actually provides the “... *necessary* entry of the notions of rights, legality and systems of legal safety into the scene” (Sreejan

2003: 72, emphasis added).²⁸ Even though Saithalikutty and the other Muslims are presented merely as catalysts in a modernizing moment for the Nair man, and despite the fact that the ending of the novel presents us with the modern household in a landscape devoid of outsiders (both Muslims and the lower castes), the narrative does move away from the demonizing of the Muslim man as the other. The fact that Appunni is able to forgive Saithalikutty but not his uncle (both of them villains for him for wronging his father and mother respectively), a fact identified by literary critic George Onakkur as a flaw in characterization which creates a feeling that the narrative is non-realistic (Onakkur 1986: 167), can be explained in this context: It is imperative for Appunni to appropriate the economic structures of modernity, exemplified in the narrative of the Muslim man, along with an active denial of matrilineal structures.

Appunni's move from being merely Appunni to being recognized as Appunni Nair (and later to being called VA Nair during his days working on the estate) is initiated by Saithalikutty. Saithalikutty refers to Appunni as Appunni Nair in the same letter that informs the latter that he might have a job waiting for him at the estate (157).²⁹ Thus the moment of Appunni's growing up – growing up

²⁸ Sreejan's understanding of the idea of 'necessary entry' is different from the meaning that I attribute to it. His entire reading of *Naalukettu* is based on the idea that it is a narrative about fate, as exemplified in the coincidences and chance happenings in it. He relates chance to divinity and spirituality. I would submit that the necessity for the entry of law and the notion of rights can be understood only in the light of modernity.

²⁹ It is not only the reader who notes the reference to Appunni as Appunni Nair. Appunni himself points it out as an important moment in his life.

to be worthy of a caste name – and his movement outside the village, happen at the same time. It needs to be noted here that the undervaluing of traditions throughout the narrative is not a disengagement with caste identity. It is rather the reformulation of the caste identity, one that is recast in the wake of new social structures – new structures of power and economy. This is the ‘modern Nair man’. The contrast between the triumphant Appunni and the tragic heroes of the later novels written by MT is also worth mentioning here as it has implications for the way the modern Nair man is imagined. In *Asuravithu* (1962), the protagonist Govindankutty’s tragedy is signaled by the fact that he goes beyond redemption as the crisis he faces vis-à-vis the changes in matriliney makes him convert to Islam while in *Kaalam* Sethu does not engage with his own caste location as he gives up the village for the city and is lost in its treachery. These two novels do suggest that the mobility which is desirable for the modern Nair man has its limits. Caste and religious identities are still important for him in negotiating modernity.

The various directions that Appunni takes in the novel are significant for the future envisaged for the modern Nair man. He leaves his mother, fails to reconnect with the *taravad* and its matrilineal history, and ends up on an estate as a clerk with the help of a Muslim. A process of negotiation with the rapid shifts in the social structure is evident in these movements. He continues the tradition in which the production of Madhavan in *Indulekha* as the ideal man was executed. Appunni travels out of his traditional space in order to work at the estate, but returns to reclaim his tradition – only to modernize it. For Madhavan it was

Indulekha who had to be reclaimed, and for Appunni it was a larger heritage, which had to be rebuilt.

We saw earlier how a text produced in the late 1950s has to produce a past in order to reclaim it as a future, in comparison to one produced in the late 1890s where the imagining of a future is at issue. In *Indulekha*, as in *There Comes Papa*, the radically changed/changing system, similar to what is evident in *Naalukettu*, is absent for obvious reasons. In the former set of texts, what was being made possible was the “engendering of individuals” (Devika 1999) in the context of the reform of a community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁰ Thus the reform of the system was carried out to produce modern subjectivities rather than to restructure the system itself. By the time *Naalukettu* got written, it was possible for the narrative to suggest that the social structure itself needed remoulding. The individuals, MT seems to tell us, can mould themselves differently only with an active re-imagining of social structures.³¹

³⁰ Devika has argued that the public discourse that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Kerala had the construction of modern gendered identities as its primary objective. Based on a set of qualities termed internal and natural, gender as a system that governed social order was legitimised over caste and community (Devika 1999: 26-46). See also the article by P Udayakumar on the emergence of a notion of interiority in the writings of the social reformers of the Ezhava (Tiyya) community in Kerala. See Kumar 1997.

³¹ MT’s attempt differs from Chandu Menon’s in that the former attempts to universalise his narrative in sharp contrast to the very community-based location of *Indulekha*.

The triumphant Appunni, at the end of the novel, executes the most symbolic of actions for the new Nair man. He buys his mother's *taravad*, presents it to his mother, and announces his decision to break it down to build a new house:

The young man stopped when he reached the front step and said to the woman behind him:

“Mother, you can go in.”

Noticing her hesitation, he said, “You can go in confidently.”

The thin woman, hair streaked in grey, stepped into the front yard.

....

Getting inside, the woman said.

“It's so dark inside, Appunni”

“It's dark even in the daytime. The ghosts of the *karanavars* must be moving around in here.”

Mother looked at him anxiously.

“Mother, don't be afraid. We should make arrangements to break down this *naalukettu*. We need a small house with a lot of air and sunlight.”

“Break it? The goddesses reside in here.”

He laughed loudly. The sound of the laughter echoed on the broken walls, the dilapidated pillars and the dark corners of the house. (NK:

190-191, emphases added)

Appunni's laughter at the mention of the Goddess could be seen as a re-enactment of the earlier response of Konthunni Nair towards the Goddess during the dice

game. This irreverence is an act that reclaims a history – one that needs to be reshaped into a future- a modern one- where one resides in a space “with a lot of air and sunlight”. The call is one to imagine new spaces which are more inclusive and open to the changes around it, unlike the closed and exclusive nature of the *taravad*. Here domesticity and its space are delinked from the religious, which did govern earlier forms of architecture of Nair households.³² Contrary to the argument forwarded by Onakkur who, in his character-based study of the novel, suggests that it is the nature of Appunni, unforgiving towards people who had wronged him, that makes him suggest the breaking down of the *naalukettu* (Onakkur 1986: 168), I argue that the last chapter is necessitated by the fact that Appunni sees himself as part of a modern future in which even the memory of the older system has to be erased.

KP Appan argues that the optimism presented by the ending of the novel is weak as it is devoid of “any higher philosophical consciousness or of the shadows of the epic sorrow that is called life” (Appan 1988: 33). Here, Appan, a modernist critic influenced by existentialism, is pointing to a lack in relation to a presupposed notion of radical change that he envisages. Disagreeing with this progressivist reading, VC Harris argues that the ending cannot be considered

³² Dilip Menon suggests that this is the moment when Appunni becomes the representative of the universal human (Menon 2005: 55). Though I agree with this observation to the extent that the moment does represent him as the embodiment of modernity, the unmarked universal, I suggest, as discussed above, that the transformation happens much earlier. This happens at the time of his moving to the estate, where his travel beyond the local also marks the moment of his newly organized caste identity.

optimistic at all, as it is based on a “regression from the revolutionary moves made by his father” (Harris 1999: 83). He goes on to suggest that, “in spite of the fact that Appunni’s return appears to be a revenge, it is nothing but a reconciliation which is marked by the dark shadows of nostalgia” (*ibid*: 83). It is important to note that Harris also ends up isolating the last chapter of the novel in trying to measure the value of its optimism in relation to the notion of a radical break. The comparison of Appunni with the father, who leaves the traditional space of the Nairs, is done without taking into account the changed conditions within which Nair identity is being negotiated in the novel. Rather than attempt to measure the value of such moves, as is the practice of both Appan and Harris, I suggest that we should elaborate the conditions within which the argument is being made in the narrative.

Madhavan and Indulekha could move to the city of Madras and form a new conjugal unit in *Indulekha* and Konthunni Nair could move out of the *taravad*, whereas Appunni has to build his house on the ruins of a social system in *Naalukettu* to complete the collapse of the older system. It is important to note that Appunni had made the move outside the system, during his days working on the estate, before coming back to his village at the end of the novel. The return is an additional move which should be seen in relation to the developments during the period of the novel and examined vis-à-vis the larger narrative of the novel.

It is evident that the crisis of masculinity presented here is resolved at one level by reorganizing property. This is also evident in the context of a secondary

narrative in the novel – the story of Kuttammama, Appunni’s uncle. His position in the family, that of the nephew of the *karanavar*, is presented as one of powerlessness since he is doomed to be in the care of his uncle till the latter’s death. The rebellion of Kuttammama happens when the *karanavar* is about to throw Appunni, who had left his home and his mother by then, out of the *taravad*. Kuttammama empathizes with Appunni’s situation and seems to respond to it in terms of his own emasculation arising out of lack of control over property. He goes on to demand a bifurcation of property and brings in the law in the garb of a *vakil* to oversee this. He says to the *vakil*: “What if the property is shared? Then it’s each for himself. Don’t advise me otherwise; I am not going to listen. *I am almost thirty-eight years old. I too am a man. In that house, even the kids don’t listen to me...*” (NK: 105, emphasis added). He goes on to map a caste metaphor onto the notions of masculinity by comparing his propertyless state after years of hard work with the men of the *cheruma* caste who at least get some rice or oil for their work.

The link between caste hierarchy and the discourse of masculinity, where one reinforces the other, is foregrounded in this episode. Here the complexity of the discursive regime of masculinity becomes clear. For Kuttammama, who is negotiating the power structures of what is left of matriliney, has to deal not only with the *karanavar*, that is, his uncle, but also with lower caste men. Here not only is a crisis of masculinity linked to a caste metaphor, caste actually gets articulated in terms of masculinity. Kuttammama’s sense of emasculation vis-à-vis his lack of control over property forces him to compare himself to a *cheruman*. As it is

emasculatation that provides the context for this comparison, I argue that in this instance, caste hierarchy is understood in terms of notions of masculinity. This provides interesting insights into how in this narrative, normative masculinity is delinked from physical work and strength and tied instead to status and power.

Kuttammama does succeed in breaking the matrilineal household and in creating a nuclear family, but he fails to transform his future, since unlike Appunni, he doesn't have the means (including modern education) to become part of an emerging modern economy. A new nuclear family is produced at the end of the novel – a nuclear family that is constructed in the context of Appunni's complete integration into modernity, and one that will not have to carry with it the shadows of the traditional familial system. This is the difference between the nuclear family that Konthunni Nair (or even Kuttammama) had tried to construct and the one which Appunni did. The latter is complete in the context of an absolute adaptation to modernity which is signified by his occupational mobility, the new form of employment and the construction of the new house.

The other significant aspect in relation to Appunni's masculinity is his relationship with women. Explored in detail in *Kaalam*, the link between masculinity and female sexuality is hinted at in *Naalukettu* in significant ways. Starting from the reform movement within the Nair community, one of the issues that was high on the reform agenda was the regulation of female sexuality by the imposition of new moral codes. The primary cause of concern for the reformers was the immorality attached to *sambandham* in the context of notions of

monogamy and marriage circulating through the colonial/missionary apparatus. During the discussions of the Malabar Marriage Commission of 1890- 1891, the reformers in the Nair community argued against matriliney also on the grounds that such a reform would help in "...protecting the virtue and chastity of women"(Arunima 2003a: 139).³³ The sarcastic representation of the Brahmin Suri Nambudiripad in *Indulekha*, who visits the heroine's *taravad* to have a *sambandham* with her, could be seen as a direct attack on the Nambudiri-Nair sexual relationships that were part of the practice of *sambandham*.

In *Naalukettu*, Appunni's response to the news that his mother Ammukutty, after years of widowhood, is having an affair with Sankaran Nair, offers us some insights into the ways in which women's sexuality came to be understood among the Nairs after the reform initiatives. It is curious that Appunni should react to this news with such vehemence, and run away from home leaving his mother alone, as such a relationship had been a historically accepted practice among the women in the Nair community (remember *muthachi* who had three husbands). This can be explained only through the narrative's strong resistance to a history that has any positive reference to matriliney. Sankaran Nair's act of moving in with Ammukutty, in keeping with the best of matrilineal traditions, is thwarted by a flood that uproots the latter's house. During the floods, Sankaran Nair saves Ammukutty. The narrative leaves their future ambiguous only after

³³ For detailed discussion of the Malabar Marriage Commission see Arunima 2003a: 128-156; Kodoth 2001a: 362-384.

giving us enough indications that they would move in together and live in the man's house, as suggested by the norms of modern conjugality.

The other instance where Appunni encounters female sexuality is when Amminiyedathi³⁴, his cousin – the daughter of his maternal uncle – initiates him into sex in the maternal *taravad*.³⁵ It is during a ritual performance to appease the snake gods that Appunni sees the naked torso of Ammini and becomes conscious his desire for her. Dilip Menon argues that this moment is one where “femininity is at its fullness” (Menon 2005: 51) because this encounter happens in a space that is “of natural time and of uninterrupted matriliney”(ibid: 51). This incident, Appunni's one real encounter with matriliney, continues to haunt him through the narrative till we see him as a young man on the estate (after which that memory is never replayed) as his first and only sexual experience in the novel and also because of its illegitimate nature as Amminiyedathi is older than him. But again the significant fact is that the encounter happens in the *taravad* – a space where such ‘illegitimate’ encounters are common. And further, the fact that this encounter is never remembered after his integration into modernity suggests that even this is a memory that has to be erased as being part of a ‘fallen’ system. His life outside the village is represented as a period of self fashioning- a period

³⁴ The name is Ammini and the suffix *edathi* suggests that she is elder.

³⁵ The daughter of the maternal uncle is considered to be the traditionally prescribed bride for a Nair man. Though rare in contemporary times, such a relationship can still obtain immediate sanction among the Nairs.

devoid of any distractions like romantic/sexual encounters- which would help Appunni become the modern Nair man.

Thus, by making such a radical break from any possible links with his matrilineal past, Appunni emerges triumphant. MT's heroes, of which Appunni is an important example, foreground the possible future of Nair men after matriliney and the emergence of modernity.³⁶ Here mobility and the resultant refashioning of the self is combined with a reclaimed caste identity marking his success within modernity.

Of Mice and Men... and Matrilineal Rat Traps

Adoor's *Elippathayam* presents a different perspective on the same period in the history of Kerala- a period of the last phases of the collapse of matriliney. A tale of the crumbling joint family in the wake of the collapse of matriliney, this film further backs up the argument that has been proposed, i.e. that masculinity is foundational to the texts dealing with the post- matrilineal, post- land reforms Nair society.³⁷ Unlike Appunni in *Naalukettu*, the protagonist of this film, Unni

³⁶ Sethu, the protagonist in *Kaalam*, on the other hand, presents us with the complexity of MT's heroes. His settling down in the city does not allow him to be triumphant like Appunni in his encounter with modernity, but leaves him in a state of despair and remorse. This happens because Sethu, unlike Appunni, imagines the space outside his village as an end rather than a means to survive.

³⁷ Following the discussions around 'new cinema' in India, *Elippathayam* was seen as a film about the crumbling of the feudal system in Kerala. It was never seen as a narrative on the Nair

(Karamana Janardhanan Nair), is a middle-aged man trapped inside a disintegrating *taravad* with his two sisters, Rajamma (Sharada) and Sreedevi (Jalaja).

The film opens with the credits sequence which shows in detail the ruined state of a *naalukettu* in eighteen successive shots. Unni, the protagonist is introduced in a sequence where he is shown crying out that a rat has fallen on him (see image 17). The trapping of this rat is then shown in detail and finally it is drowned in a pond. Furthermore, the film ends with a sequence where Unni himself is caught like a rat and is drowned in a pond with the same haunting background score. Thus rat and trap become metaphors for the Nair man and the *taravad*, which are in a state of collapse. Unni's sisters, and the other characters in the film who visit the *taravad* now and then, constitute the world in which Unni lives. Rajamma, Unni's sister, a more or less mute character in the film who dies just before its ending, points to the collapse of a familial structure that had supported the likes of Unni till then. Her significance as the last of a tradition is signalled by the fact that it is her death and not Sreedevi's elopement that seals its demise. Unni's life, as represented in the film, is devoid of labour and is full of reference to a hierarchical structure of power- a system that apparently provides Unni with a claim to power as the *karanavar* of the family.

community. For a critical inquiry into 'new Indian cinema', see Prasad 1998b: 188-216, and for a discussion of art house cinema in Kerala, see Muraleedharan 2005b.

Here are some interesting sequences in the film that signal the crisis that Unni is facing. The first is when we see Unni sitting on his chair reading the newspaper. He notices a cow that has entered the compound and is eating the coconut saplings. He refuses to get up from his seat, but makes all kinds of noises to scare the cow away. The cow continues to eat, and finally after long contemplation about the course of action, Unni calls Rajamma for help. She comes and drives away the cow instantly. Unni's complete immobility even inside the *taravad*, is in stark contrast with Rajamma's mobility. A second instance is when Unni is on his way to attend a wedding. He walks for a distance and finally reaches a place on the narrow road with a shallow puddle. We see a young boy with a heavy load on his head easily crossing the water. Unni, on the other hand, is confused about whether to walk over it or not. He thinks about what to do next and finally decides to go back as he imagines the puddle to be an obstacle – the limit to his mobility. A number of such revealing sequences drive home the point of Unni's lack of mobility.

As suggested earlier in this section, from the early days of reform, the mobility of Nair men has been an important part of their relationship with modernity. Though in a novel like *Indulekha*, it is also the spirit of nationalism that prompts the writer to make the hero Madhavan travel through North India (Panikkar 1998: 139), I suggest that by the 1980s travel and mobility had become metaphorically linked to Nair male identity. The mass movement of (mostly) Nair men towards the various metros like Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore, happened in

the first two decades after the formation of Kerala and continued well into the 1980s.

The narrative does not even present Unni as a character who is comfortable and mobile inside the confines of the *taravad*. In contrast to Rajamma, Unni is completely incapable of any action inside the *taravad* and in contrast to Sreedevi he is unable to negotiate the exterior. The different ways in which mobility is represented in the film is evident in a sequence where Sreedevi sees an airplane in the sky. Rajamma runs outside to see it but fails (reminiscent of Durga in Satyajit Ray's Bengali film *Pather Panchali* (1955) who falls down and is thus unable to reach the speeding train along with Apu) and the sequence does not involve Unni at all. The sequence is significant in that it is only Sreedevi who is able to move out of the *taravad* later in the film. Rajamma's lack of movement to the outside, on the other hand, is not necessarily because of a lack of desire to do so, but by the inability caused by her complete insertion in the domain of matriliney and the *taravad*.

The only character in the film to display any marker of modernity is the Gulf-returned Mathaikutty. While the women, especially Sreedevi, are charmed by him, Unni responds to him with full sarcasm. His response is that of the typical traditionally landed elite to the newly rich. The aspirant to modernity in the film is definitely Sreedevi. She, unlike Rajamma who waits for a relationship to happen, is in love with someone and finally elopes. It is interesting that Unni is not very upset about this. He is the one who has to witness the completion of the collapse

of the joint family and he seems to be taking it as his historic responsibility. The film thus presents a clear binary between the world of the *taravad* and the outside understood in terms of pre-modern and modern.

It needs to be noted that unlike in MT's work, here it is the younger woman and the Christian man who represent a modern future. The Nair man is by definition outside the reach of this modernity. The one Nair man in the film who is the representative of the future modern is not presented in a good light. Ravikuttan, Unni's nephew who displays the markers of modernity in his clothes and his habits, is shown as a caricature. In his reading of the film, film critic I Shanmughadas claims that it is Ravikuttan who symbolically breaks the traditional authority vested in Unni when he breaks his torch (Shanmughadas 2001: 10).

Unni's emasculation is presented in the film in his inability to respond to Meenakshi, a woman of the lower caste who makes very overt advances to him. One such incident is followed by Unni looking at an advertisement for an aphrodisiac in the newspaper. This emasculation, presented in the form of sexual inability, is related to his immobility. The caste inflection of the narrative is also foregrounded in this instance, where immobility gets tied to the inability of the Nair man to have a relationship with a lower caste woman (the most 'natural' sexual encounter considering their social positions!). Every other character in the film who is mobile – this includes Sreedevi, Ravikuttan and even Meenakshi –

seem to be comfortable while dealing with their desires.³⁸ Unni's inability to channel his own sexual desire in the film is symptomatic of a larger crisis. This is the crisis of immobility – physical and historical.

The crisis faced by Nair men is understood as one related to an inability to adapt to modernity. This presentation of the problem is visible in other films of Adoor also. In his first film, *Swayamvaram* (1972), Adoor narrates the story of a couple who have eloped from a village to a city. The inability of the protagonists to adapt to the life in the city culminates in the death of the hero Viswam. The last freeze frame of the film is of the wife, after the death of her husband, looking at the camera, which suggests that the end is open for interpretation. Such an ambiguous end suggests that the problem of adaptation is something that she will have to deal with head on, unlike her husband who has left the narrative in failure. The sequences at the beginning of *Swayamvaram*, where both Viswam and his wife are shown visibly excited about their future together, are shot entirely inside a moving bus, foregrounding the link between mobility (the space of the bus) and modernity. Sreedevi's escape from the *taravad* and Unni's death could be seen as paralleling this representation in the earlier film. Thus it is interesting that in

³⁸ It needs to be noted that the representation of the lower caste woman as promiscuous follows a long tradition of representation in literature and cinema. See Rowena 2002: 34-37 for a discussion of the representation of Dalit women in early Malayalam cinema. Thus Sreedevi's relationship and elopement is realistically portrayed in the film where as Meenakshi's desires seem to be slightly caricatured. In the realist conventions of cinema like Adoor's this mode of representation could be read only as his commentary on the 'reality' that he tries to represent.

Adoor's early films it is the women who are endowed with the responsibility of negotiating modernity.³⁹

The two issues that we have been tracking in relation to masculinity- that of family and female sexuality are central thematics in Adoor's film. The sexuality of Meenakshi and the desires of Rajamma and Sreedevi are central to the overall sense of crisis that the film presents. Unni's inability to respond to the love letter that he finds on Sreedevi's table is significant. The cut away from the love letter to Rajamma- a cut that follows Unni's eyes- is telling in this context. It depicts his acknowledgment of female sexuality but also his inability to deal with it. He cannot survive without Rajamma. In two separate sequences in the film Unni is shown waiting for hot water to be prepared for his bath. In the first Rajamma makes him the hot water but he complains that it has gone lukewarm. In the second instance he is awaiting the preparation of hot water and Rajamma is ill. His elder sister Janamma who is visiting refuses to indulge him and leaves him with his oiled body. Janamma is a woman who has moved out to her husband's house but would like to be part of the economy of her own *taravad*. She is presented as a scheming character (played by Rajam K Nair, an actress known for her vampish character roles), whereas Rajamma who remains in her house in the best of matrilineal traditions is presented in a sympathetic light (played by

³⁹ It is more than a coincidence that the other character in *Swayamvaram* who is comfortable with modernity is Smuggler Vasu, who deals with goods smuggled from the Gulf. The men who have moved up in life by adapting to modernity in both the films are non-Nair men who have connections with the Gulf.

Sharada who is popularly called *dukhaputhri* or the ‘ever-sad daughter’ in Malayalam cinema).

Unni is trapped in the rat trap of matriliney – the *taravad*. Like all rats who continue to thrive in ruins, Unni is not dead after he is drowned like a rat in the pond. The torch, broken by Ravikuttan by the end of film, is the only remnant of the life of traditional authority which Unni is left with. We encounter this torch being used by a number of characters at various points in the film where we see it used to arrest the movement of others. But with that torch, he can at best illuminate himself for the spectators, by the end of the film. The move by the end of the narrative to change the spectatorial response from sarcasm towards Unni to empathy with his condition makes the film a tragedy. Adoor’s film, I argue, represents the ‘tragic’ end of a man signalling an equally ‘tragic’ end of a system. Let me narrate another sequence from the film, which tilts the balance by shifting the identification of the spectator with the outside, to the inside. This is a sequence immediately after Rajamma’s death. Unni is shown sitting thinking in his armchair. The shot cuts to the exterior where we see a child trying to run into the compound of Unni’s *taravad* and her mother running behind her and preventing her from entering it. With the external world and the *taravad* now separated out as two geographies and the external world isolating the *taravad* and by extension the social system it represents, Unni becomes the recipient of the last blows to matriliney.

I end this discussion of the film with some ideas about the reasons for the change in the way the future for the Nair man is envisaged between the two texts. It is significant that the films by Adoor and the later works by MT show a similar pessimism vis-à-vis the future of Nair men (Menon 2005: 55). What historical developments could have intervened in the period between the late 1950s and early 1980s? One can only speculate, since the issue needs separate and detailed research. The presence of Gulf-returned Mathaikutty in *Elippathayam* could give us some clues in this direction. The change in the economic structures which allowed for men from communities like Tiyyas and Muslims to move up the economic ladder seems to have hampered the dreams of mobility of Nair men. The limits within which Appunni's mobility is organized by MT in *Naalukettu* could have by the 1980s become restrictive. The negative portrayal of these Gulf returnees in Adoor's early films and in MT's later films like *Vilkanundu Swapnangal* (*Dreams to be Sold*, dir: Azad 1980) could be an indication of the difficulties faced by Nair men in the wake of a production sector which has now moved away into the Persian Gulf.⁴⁰ A detailed discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁴⁰ It is only in the late 1980s, once it became evident that the remittances from the Gulf were what was sustaining an economy within Kerala, and when the film industry itself was being supported by producers who had links in the Gulf, that we see narratives with Nair men longing to go to the Gulf emerging in Malayalam cinema. Mohanlal has played the unemployed Nair hero planning or even actually going to the Gulf in a number of films, especially in those directed by Sathyan Anthikkad. For discussion, see Radhakrishnan 2006a.

Masculinity and Matriliny

It is clear that the narrativisation of matriliny in the texts under discussion has depended heavily on questions of masculinity. The crisis engendered by the collapse of the matrilineal households is represented here as a crisis of masculinity. While MT in the late 1950s attempts to imagine the possibilities of a historical negotiation, Adoor participates in the decline of Nair dominance narrative through his protagonist Unni who is unable to negotiate change. The ruins of matriliny are the backdrops of both these texts. But it is very clear that in *Naalukettu* what is being represented is the possibility that the *taravad* itself could be demolished to build a modern house, whereas in *Elippathayam* the modern possibilities lie outside the physical space of the *taravad*. Unni's re-emergence from the water like a wet rat at the end of the film suggests that the ruins of the *taravad* or its memory will survive as a space where the spectres of matriliny continue to exist.

The next section of the chapter takes up the narratives of male victimhood in the 1990s to understand how a newer normative model of masculinity is constructed.

Section II

Powerlessness as Hegemony: ‘Emancipated woman’ and the Crisis of Masculinity

This section tries to understand the notions of male victimhood that circulated in Kerala in the 1990s. It was noted in the discussions in Chapter II around the sexual harassment of PE Usha that there are two ways in which male victimhood is narrated in the contemporary public domain in Kerala. The first is the narrative that tried to present a pathological male subject, where Rameshan who masturbated on Usha in the bus was seen as suffering from a disease called frotteurism. The second was an attempt to represent the social disadvantages of men in contemporary Kerala, as was seen in the narratives around Usha’s colleague Prakashan, where his identity as a man was foregrounded as a handicap especially in the context of a state and a society that was supportive of women. In the following pages, I will present a detailed account of both these narratives as they circulated in other contexts in Kerala in the 1990s.

I begin by looking at two different sets of narratives to understand the larger discursive patterns that allowed for the deployment of these ideas in the Usha case. The first set includes Malayalam popular films that present us with pathological male subjects. The second set of narratives are related to the *Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi* – an organization for “men who are harassed by women” – which began functioning in Kottayam in 1999, and include interviews with

some of its leaders, newspaper reports and letters that the organization received. These materials will be analysed in the context of the discourse of the 'emancipated woman' in Kerala in the 1990s. It will be argued that though apparently unconnected, the two sets of narratives are linked through their constant othering of various notions of femininity and female sexuality to the extent that both the pathological male subject and the anxieties around the future of men in society are constituted through the production of female characters that either challenge male roles or do occupy the public domain. Another noteworthy trope in these narratives is that of 'family' as an institution that is facing a serious challenge in contemporary times. These narratives will be looked at not merely as a backdrop for the debates that constitute the incident of sexual harassment of PE Usha. As I have argued, the notion of masculinity that is represented in these narratives constitutes one of the nodes that become a part of the conjuncture that is the public domain in contemporary Kerala.

Unlike the discussions in the earlier sections, this section looks at a historical moment that is temporally coexistent with the primary object of analysis. Even when this is so, the status of this moment vis-à-vis the incident of sexual harassment is the same as the other moments under study. In other words, the discussion around male victimhood forms only a part of the historical background to the Usha case. As the attempt in this thesis has been to argue for a mode of historicizing that goes beyond the immediate context of an event, the narratives examined here represent just one of its many historical lineages. In this situation the relationship between the sexual harassment incident and the

narratives under study needs to be glossed. It is undeniable that the language employed in the discussions around the incident draws heavily from the male victimhood narrative, to the extent that it could be even seen as an important example for the latter. I suggest that both sets of narratives I study here and the Usha case do intersect, but in such a way that the former does not help us fully explain the latter.

This discussion does not follow the text/context logic that is familiar to us especially from literary studies, but instead will present the discourse of male victimhood as one of the many historical discourses that engendered the narrativisation of the incident of sexual harassment of PE Usha. The incident of sexual harassment, as has been demonstrated in Chapter III and the preceding section of this chapter, is linked to various moments in the history of Kerala's modernity. Similarly, an attempt to investigate the narratives of male victimhood will have to deal with a number of its historical lineages. It is the small segment- that of intersection between the Usha case and the victimhood narrative- that is of interest to us in this section.

I argue here that both the narratives of pathologies, one of the individual subject and the other of society, are premised upon a narrative of 'progress' in Kerala. This narrative of progress is further premised upon, among other things, the status of women. There are two levels at which the notion of the emancipated woman is seen in public debates in Kerala. One is in the more or less statist

discourse of development that has produced the notion of the ‘Kerala Model’⁴¹ and the second is through the discourse of feminism that has become a significant political rallying point in contemporary Kerala.⁴² Before I broach the question of masculinities I need to gloss the two discourses that I have mentioned above. What follows is not a full elaboration of these complex discourses but one that will put forward their most significant co-ordinates.

‘Emancipated Woman’ and the Notion of ‘Crisis’

Of the many indices that have been used to point to a distinctive model of development in Kerala, popularly known as the ‘Kerala model’, the status of women has been central. The notion of the model started circulating after an influential report on Kerala researched by scholars of the Centre for Development Studies (Trivandrum) titled *Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy: a Case study of Selected Issues with Reference to Kerala* was published by the United Nations in New York in 1975 and later in India in 1977 (CDS 1975). This report noted that Kerala had made considerable progress in the health and

⁴¹ Because of the peculiar history of Kerala where the oppositional Left has been the dominant ruling coalition for at least half the number of years when a state government was functioning, the statist developmentalist narrative, a product of the Left imagination, is also the dominant way in which Kerala is imagined. The region of Kerala post 1957, when it was put together, can be understood only as one that is imagined by the Left. This developmental model is different from the post-independence nationalist model because of the absence of a plan to put in place a production sector, which was an important agenda for the latter.

⁴² As will be discussed below, it is more the narrative of feminism rather than an organized women’s movement to which I refer.

education sector even when it had low per capita income (*ibid*: 153), and the fact of a decrease in population figures (*ibid*: 143). A number of scholars have worked on the area ever since, cementing the idea of a distinctive model (Dreze and Sen 1995, Heller 1995, Lieten, 2002)⁴³, often as one that could be replicated for other developing societies (Cairo 2001).⁴⁴ There has not been a planned system of development understood as a whole (or model), or one that is consciously put in place, in the way Kerala's successive governments functioned. As one writer points out:

The name 'Kerala Model' is misplaced. A model has to be put together self-consciously and should be something that could be accepted or rejected at will. A better usage is 'Kerala Experience' - one from which one could learn some things (Parameshwaran 2003: 74).

The debates around nomenclatures apart, the notion of a model is still in use in the descriptions of Kerala. Here is how one scholar describes the data that came to constitute the Kerala Model:

The data are dramatic. Kerala's 1991 birth rate was 20 per 1,000 females compared with India's rate of 31 and a world poor country average of 38. Kerala's infant mortality was 17 per 1,000 live births

⁴³ For collections of articles on the 'Kerala Model' see Parayil 2000; Sreekumar and Sanjeev 2003. See also Ramachandran 1997.

⁴⁴ Gemma Cairo provides an analysis of the state-society relationship that is supposed to be at the heart of the development mode, which could be seen as a model for developing societies. See Cairo 2001.

versus 85 for India and 91 for other poor countries. Kerala's adult literacy rate was 91% while India's was 52% and other poor countries had 55%. Yet Kerala's per capita income in 1991 was \$298 compared to the all-India average of \$330 and a world poor country average of \$350. By comparison, the USA in 1991 had a per capita GNP of \$22,240. Yet Kerala's material quality of life indicators were far closer to those of the USA than to those of the rest of India or those countries with similar income levels. (Franke 1995)

Most of the scholars who discuss the success of the development model in Kerala do suggest that it has been the policies followed by the various governments, especially those of the Left, that have made that success possible. Land reforms, a well-organized public distribution system, successful family planning programme, welfare measures especially in the health and education sectors are pointed to as the reasons behind this model. The recent People's Plan Campaign⁴⁵ initiated by the Left government is seen as a logical extension of the earlier initiatives.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The People's Plan Campaign was initiated by the Left government in 1996 by allocating 40% of the Ninth Five Year Plan funds to the local bodies like panchayats.

⁴⁶ A book on gender published by the State Planning Board as part of the People's Plan Campaign begins thus:

The social-economic-cultural invisibility of women is being discussed along with the mistakes and gaps that happened in the process of Kerala's development. Welfare gains like high literacy, better health etc. is not helping women to have the socio-economic gains they ought to have had. [...] The Decentralization Movement ([People's Plan Campaign]) looks at the backwardness of women as a crisis in development like the stagnation in the production sector and the fall in standards in the service sector (Seema *et al* 2000: 15).

The position of women in Kerala is foregrounded whenever the discussion of ‘Kerala Model’ comes up. As Saradamoni notes:

“Whenever the need comes to show off the story of development or the progressive nature of Kerala, everyone including the government is eager to talk about the higher ratio of women to men, women’s literacy, education, the acceptance of family planning” (Saradamoni 1993/1999: 125).

Here is how Dreze and Sen discuss the issue of gender in Kerala:

To what extent the *relative absence of gender bias in Kerala* relates to its radical public policy is hard to say. It would be surprising if a greater level of female education- and less gender inequality in the sharing of education- had not contributed to better prospects of a plausible life for women, both through raising the status of women and through increasing female economic power and independence in ‘cooperative conflicts’ (Dreze and Sen 1989: 224, emphasis added).

The pronouncements of ‘experts’ such as Amartya Sen, who is convinced of the ‘relative absence of gender bias’ in Kerala, have contributed to the production of

It was at the height of critique of the Kerala Model that the Left government initiated the People’s Plan Campaign in 1996 as an effort to involve people in developmental activities at the local level. This move hoped to give more powers to local level bodies with 35- 40% of the Ninth Five Year Plan outlay being allotted to the local bodies for development. The rigour of the campaign is on the wane today. The Campaign has been projected as a new model of innovative development in Kerala. See Isaac and Franke 2000.

Kerala as a state that has moved ahead in ensuring gender justice.⁴⁷ This idea gets circulated in aid of producing a narrative of difference- a difference from other parts of the country, as is seen in the case of the statement by Michael Tharakan and Thomas Isaac: “Women in Kerala are as literate and healthy as the males and not victims of the worst forms of gender discrimination *as in most other parts in India*” (Tharakan and Isaac 1995: 26, emphasis added). Historian Robin Jeffrey, who argues that it is female literacy that is the index of a literate society and further that it is literacy that has enabled the success of Kerala’s development experience, writes:

The acceleration of literacy in Kerala resulted from the exploitation of existing cultural strengths: the relative freedom of women and the popular old style schools. Malayalees were attuned to a schooling of a particular, local kind in which girls participated (Jeffrey 1987: 469).

And further, “Kerala’s culture gave women a remarkable independence, and women have made Kerala literate” (471).⁴⁸ The narrative of women’s emancipation in Kerala invokes the mid-nineteenth century as its pre-history, when missionaries and local kings emphasized female education and the histories

⁴⁷ The authority attributed to Amartya Sen in left intellectual circles in Kerala is evident from a debate between MA Oommen and EK Nayanar (leader of the CPI-M and two time Chief Minister), reprinted in Sreekumar and Sanjeev 2003, especially on issues of health services and the status of adivasis. EK Nayanar writes off Oommen solely for being critical of Sen (107-133).

⁴⁸ It should be underscored that Jeffrey is not romanticizing the emancipation of women in Kerala. He also pointed to some of the glaring contradictions in the women’s empowerment narrative. These contradictions will be discussed later in the chapter.

of matriliney. It is argued that it was the public policies after the formation of the state that enabled the alleged emancipation of women.

Kerala has produced itself as a region narrated through statistics- of literacy, health, education etc. – in the aid of its identity as a state that has developed differently from other parts of the country.⁴⁹ In recent times, there has emerged a new set of statistics that have done serious damage to the image created by the Kerala model. These include the increasing number of suicides, number of reported cases of AIDS, domestic violence and sexual harassment. These along with critiques that have suggested that the model couldn't have survived without the remittances from the Gulf (Jeffrey 1992: 218), which were on the wane in the 1990s, have created a situation where a narrative of dystopia is replacing the earlier narratives of utopia.⁵⁰

It is significant that the strongest critiques of the Kerala Model have come from feminist scholars. It has been noted at the empirical level that the positive record of sex ratio is on the decline, that there has been an increase in the practice of dowry and that domestic violence is high in the state (Panda 2004). It is ironic

⁴⁹ See Devika 2005d for a discussion of how Kerala as a region is imagined in relation to a notion of development.

⁵⁰ The migration to the Persian Gulf in search of employment is an important story in Kerala's development narrative. This started in the 1970s, continued through the 1980s till the Gulf war in the early 1990s. It was mostly men from the Ezhava community and Muslims who had migrated to the Gulf in this period. See Osella and Osella 2000; Zachariah *et al* 2002. The practice still continues, with significant changes in the profile of the migrants. See Zachariah and Rajan 2004.

that gender, which has been one of the important nodes around which the model was built, is now reappearing as the point around which critique of the model is organized. Along with the gender related issues mentioned above, gender critique has also focussed on the issue of women and labour, and has noted that female unemployment is high in Kerala (Eapen and Kodoth 2002; Eapen 2004), while participation of women in the public domain is low (Saradamoni 2003: 165).

Scholars of contemporary Kerala have tried to deal with this new set of negative statistics, especially those related to gender, in two different ways. One set of writers, mostly from the Left, have suggested “an ultra conservative backlash” (Ramachandran 1995: 110) to the structures of development that were put in place by the early left governments, who are also credited with producing the Kerala Model. For Ramachandran, the backlash is

[C]haracterized by its pronounced anti-progressive, anti-left stances, its unabashed idealism of the feudal past, its belligerent apolitical posturing, *its unconcealed male-chauvinistic and sexist bias*, its pathological dread of people’s movements and its strident revivalist rhetoric (*ibid*: 110, emphasis added).

Michael Tharakan and Thomas Isaac, in their defense of the Model suggest that it is certain ‘recent tendencies’ like spread of dowry system, purdah among Muslims, degrading depiction of women in the mass media, sexual harassment and violence that have caused the changes that are indicated by the less optimistic statistics (Tharakan and Isaac 1995: 26-27). These writings do not take into account the possibility that the emergence of these trends (if at all they are new as

is claimed) could be written into some of the ways in which modern Kerala has developed. Ramachandran, after talking about the backlash registers his surprise at the silence of the ‘emancipated’ women of Kerala: “What is more striking is the *enigmatic* silence of women themselves in the face of these atrocities- and that despite the impressive achievements of Kerala in spheres like women’s education and employment!” (Ramachandran 1995: 110, emphasis added). Robin Jeffrey was one of the first scholars to point out the anomaly of women’s emancipation in Kerala when he argued that “[T]he autonomy of women in Kerala has not expanded steadily since the 1920s, nor has the influence of women in politics and domestic affairs constantly increased” (Jeffrey 1992: 10). He goes on to prove the point by looking at the lives of women who have made their mark in Kerala’s political history, only after re-stating the thesis that women in Kerala are autonomous beings compared to women in other parts of the country (*ibid*: 10-11).

A set of recent studies have tried to understand the emergence of modern notions of gender as having much to do with both how female emancipation is understood and the dismal status of women in Kerala. These studies argue that it is neither some recent backlash (that is engineered by ‘regressive’ forces) nor the remnants from a pre-modern past that are behind the contemporary status of women, but that it is indeed the way in which the role of women was understood in the context of social reform and in modernity that contributed to this. It was the structuring of ideal femininity as having the natural and inherent capacity for nurturing and caring that has at once created a situation where women’s

emancipation was understood in terms of education (they were to be good teachers and be adept in modern domestic values) and in terms of health deterring the possibility of radical changes in their status (Devika and Kodoth 2003: 176- 178). Even after decades of debates on the 'Kerala Model' and its critiques, the common sense about the Kerala model still survives as is evident from the myriad avatars it takes in the debates on contemporary Kerala. Thus one of the vocal parties in the recent debates on international financial aid for development activities in Kerala seems to believe in the first of the two arguments suggested above- the one on the golden past and present degradation paradigm.⁵¹ The narratives of the region, especially the Amartya Sen-endorsed narratives of female empowerment, have contributed to a popular understanding that Kerala is an emancipatory space for women. It is a notion shared by people from both inside and outside the state.⁵²

The second discourse forming the background for a crisis in how masculinity is understood is that of feminism. Unlike in many other states in India such as Andhra Pradesh where the women's movement has a history of almost twenty five years, in Kerala feminism emerged as an offshoot of extreme left

⁵¹ There is much to be said about the debate on international funding in Kerala. There seems to be two well etched positions in the CPI-M in Kerala: one that argues that an imperialist ploy is at work to destroy the fruits of Kerala's development and the other more willing to accept funds 'if there is no ideological baggage attached to it'. Interestingly intellectuals from both the sides have been expelled from the party, even though currently the latter argument seems to be the official version.

⁵² The number of friends from other parts of India who have asked me whether it is true that Kerala is a 'female dominated society' points to this misconception. Along with these developmentalist narratives, the stories of matriliney have also aided the construction of this myth.

politics only in the mid-1980s.⁵³ Ever since there have been sporadic movements based on issues like dowry, domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment. At present there exists a number of women's groups spread all over Kerala with 'Kerala Sthree Vedi' (started in 1995) functioning as an umbrella organization.⁵⁴ In recent times, feminist concerns or women's issues have been receiving immense attention both from the established political parties and from the state. It needs to be underscored that more than any of these becoming gender sensitive, it is that the mainstream has started using the language of female emancipation extensively. As one feminist activist notes,

At least to retain the silent majority of its cadres under their folds, the political parties too were compelled to discuss gender-based contradictions, though indirectly. Women's issues got sufficient attention through the Vanitha Kala Jathas organized by the Kerala Shasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP) – a very big popular organization – and the 'Samatha' dramas staged under the auspices of CPI (M). While such parallel activities were going on, there had been attempts on the part of the established parties to create an impression that they were absorbing feminist activities (Girija 2001).

⁵³ The first meeting of women from all over the state was held in Vavannoor in 1982.

⁵⁴ Not many histories of feminism in Kerala are available. See Chandrika 2000 for the only book length history.

The People's Plan Campaign mentioned above, included gender as an important category of development in its programme. It has been suggested that the surfacing of gender issues in recent developmental discourse occurred not only because of pressures from international funding agencies but also because the planners have been successful in "separate[ing] out practical gender needs from strategic gender interests" (Devika 2005b: 22), keeping possibilities of any critique of gendered dominance at bay.⁵⁵ Through such mainstream narratives, like those of development, and through some of the issues that the various women's groups have taken up in recent times, the public domain in Kerala has today become familiar with the language of feminism and gender politics. A number of sexual harassment cases have been widely reported in the media. There have also been debates around *pennethuthu* or 'women's writing' initiated by the poet Sachidanandan and later taken up by well-known feminist writer Sarah Joseph.⁵⁶ Though the debates have not had any significant success either in

⁵⁵ Devika writes:

Those projects that were aimed at satisfying women's practical needs were generally endorsed, while those which addressed their strategic interests were either ignored or opposed (with, of course, important pockets of exception). Thus [...] while schemes for training girls in self-defence techniques was generally ridiculed, others which simply distributed sewing machines to women were readily approved. The dominant tendency, it seems, has been to keep apart the two – i.e., to separate out practical gender needs from strategic gender interests, as if the two were so watertight that they could be addressed only through different projects. When they appeared mixed, a great deal of 'moral opposition' seems to have been provoked (Devika 2005b: 22).

⁵⁶ For discussion of *pennethuthu* see Thachil 2000. Also see TT Sreekumar's article on some of the stories male writers have written in response to feminist concerns, in Sreekumar 2000.

penetrating the general political discourse or in theorizing the specific nature of gender in Kerala, there has been a considerable visibility for feminism in Kerala since the 1990s. Various popular magazines have regular columns that deal with feminist concerns, have brought out special issues on gender and have also carried discussions on feminist concerns over the years.⁵⁷ Recently, the debates that have animated the media have been those regarding violence against women and the legalization of sex work.⁵⁸

We saw in the discussion of the Kerala Model's emancipated woman that there is a gap between the actual lives of women and the narratives about women in Kerala. In a similar way there seems to be a mismatch between the visibility gained by feminism in Kerala and the impact it seems to have had beyond the notional recognition of gender issues. The narratives about women vis-à-vis the Kerala Model and the visibility that feminism has gained have produced the impression that Kerala is a vibrant society that has always been benevolent or one that has yielded to the pressures of collective action on the part of women.

⁵⁷ The space titled *Sthreekalude Lokam* (Women's World) in *Samakalika Malayalam* Weekly for example.

⁵⁸ The issue that is reported most in the media is that of sexual violence, also because of alleged involvement in one case of a Minister in the state cabinet and other high officials. In the case of legalization of sex work, the feminists in Kerala are divided and this issue is the one that is animating the debates today.

It is the sense of crisis that these two discourses – of the emancipated woman from the Kerala Model and that of feminism – seem to have engendered that is at the heart of the discourse of masculinity that we are analyzing. Let me list out some examples of the anxieties that these narratives have produced in the public domain in Kerala. Here is an example of a narrative of the crisis in masculinity articulated against a literary debate like *pennezhuthu* in a journal published by the Kerala Sahithya Academy: “Is the aim of this new thinking (*pennezhuthu*) to show off their masculinity (*paurusham*) by misusing the freedom to narrate sex without taste?” (Jonnes 1996: 96). The writer then goes on to foreground his anxiety that it is the domination of women which is the future: “It is on the divine face of the world, which considers femininity as the treasure and glory of the earth that the procession of 'feminism' rooted in hatred and creating distances, is being hastened by some.... Is their 'great' aim to bring in the domination of 'free sex'?” (*ibid*: 97). I use these here as random examples of how the responses are articulated in the public domain in Kerala. A curious newspaper report about the marriage of “Gloria Steinem who was the godmother of the feminist movement in America, which had completely negated marriage as an institution” uses phrases like “when she bends her head to receive the marriage garland...”, “the person who is to possess her...” (about her fiancé) and ends by asking if this is “a change that happens to all feminists thus underlining the pride of male dominance”.⁵⁹ The language used to present the perceived failure of a political project is indicative of the anxieties that the discourse of feminism has

⁵⁹ *Feminisathodu Vida: Gloriyakku Anthunayayi* (Goodbye to Feminism: Gloria finds a Man's Support) in *Malayala Manoram Daily* 14 September 2000.

produced. It is easy to find many more responses to feminism from both men and women that show paranoia about certain imagined changes that are supposed to have taken place in Kerala. This anxiety, I submit, constitutes a crisis in the discourse of masculinity in the 1990s in Kerala.

There has been stiff resistance among scholars to using the notion of crisis in studying masculinity. Richard Collier argues that this idea of crisis should be resisted (Collier 1995: 13-17). He suggests that it is in the sphere of law that this narrative is always projected, writing that in the US

The crisis has had ... a specifically legal dimension and has been marked perhaps most clearly by *perceived* changes in men's lives in relation to both family and work. One aspect of this crisis, for example, has been identified as the occurrence of a breakdown of traditional masculine authority in relation to the family and around men's relationships with women and children. The scale of the transition in men's familial relations has been marked by the *perceived* diminution of specifically legal rights- notably over women, children and property. (Collier 1995: 13-14, emphasis added)

Collier here is making a claim that the notion of crisis is merely a perceived notion, and goes on to demonstrate that it is not real. Stephen Whitehead, who provides a detailed account of the 'crisis thesis', also suggests that we should make a distinction between real and perceived crises. "At the level of factual 'truth' the crisis of masculinity does not exist; it is speculation underpinned by

mythology” (Whitehead 2002: 61). Both Collier and Whitehead provide empirical details to suggest that there is no truth-value to the claim of crisis and that the world is not much of a changed place even after decades of feminism. Whitehead, even though he has moved a step further than Collier in recognizing the importance of the existence of the ‘crisis narrative’ in popular lore, does not hit upon the significance of it as he makes a separation between the discursive and the real: he suggests that ‘crisis’ is important when we look at the discourse of masculinity whereas we need to keep it out of our theoretical frameworks when we look at the ‘real world’.

Even when we take Collier’s and Whitehead’s suggestion that the narratives of masculinities have always been those of crisis and that to accept the notion that the present is a specific moment of crisis might be counter-productive, their discussion does not take into account the importance of dealing with the specific ways in which a notion of crisis is deployed in the discourse of masculinity. The fear articulated by the theorists of masculinity around the ‘crisis narrative’, I suggest, is that any recognition of it would lead to a validation of the crisis claim. Whitehead writes about the uses to which the crisis claim is put:

... many men are using this discourse as a political platform from which to attempt to reverse any material benefits to women arising from equal opportunity legislation and feminist politics more generally. It is particularly worrying that this discourse is subsequently finding its way into social policy. (*ibid*: 79)

It is clear that what he is wary of is validating any claim of crisis in masculinity in an empirical sense. But the statement foregrounds the fact that in terms of analyzing social processes, and also in terms of producing political claims about emancipation, it is the representation of masculinity that is at issue. Masculinity is always represented as constituting a lack. That is, the discourse of masculinity is always pitched at the level of an ideal that can never be achieved. The reiteration of masculinity or its performance then comes from this feeling of lack.

I agree with both Collier and Whitehead that masculinity is always in crisis, but unlike them, I would like to argue that this very fact is important, as it is part of the discourse itself which legitimizes itself by continuously producing a crisis. Further, I suggest that any attempt to unravel the assumptions on which notions of masculinity are based will have to take the crisis claim seriously, as they are invariably constituted by such a claim. In the specific instance under discussion, the discourse of masculinity in crisis in 1990s Kerala, it is a crisis produced by the deployment of the notion of the 'emancipated woman' and of feminism. This should not, I submit, be understood as any singular or organized backlash against either the discourse of feminism or the presence of women in newer economic spheres.⁶⁰ The rest of the chapter will examine these narratives of crisis, as constituting both the personal as well as the social life of men in Kerala.

⁶⁰ There has been a score of writings from feminists in Kerala that rely on a backlash narrative. It is interesting that it is the theoretical claims that argue for a dismantling of the notion of 'women' in the context of challenges from Dalit women and alternate sexualities that are seen as part of a backlash. See Ajitha 2006; Geetha 2006. The one work that looks at a backlash to feminism is that of Susan Faludi in the American context. See Faludi 1991. Her notion of the backlash in America

Mental Illness and Men

This part of the section tries to look at some of the representations of mental illness in men in popular narratives in the 1990s in Kerala. I will argue that it is a crisis in masculinity that produces mental illness in these narratives and further that it is the discourse of the ‘emancipated’ or rather the ‘public woman’ that is at the heart of these crises. For this purpose I look at the protagonists of some popular Malayalam films that were released in the 1990s. These are *Bhoothakkannadi* (The Magnifying Glass, dir: Lohithadas 1997), *Manathe Vellitheru* (The Silver Chariot in the Sky, dir: Fazil 1994) and *Aham* (The Self, dir: Rajivnath 1992). What follows is not a detailed analysis of individual films but an attempt to see what are the discourses of gender that structure these films. The selection of these films has been more or less arbitrary, although one is an art house film, the other a successful middlebrow film and the third a popular film.⁶¹ The intention is not to make an argument about the whole of Malayalam cinema but to foreground a narrative tendency.

cannot be used in the context of Kerala as it is difficult to imagine any organized move on the part of any groups. Also, the notion of backlash assumes stages of political negotiations and ignores the continuing political struggles.

⁶¹ The categories of art house, middlebrow and popular are used here as descriptive categories as they are used by the industry. This does not carry any analytical weight in my analysis.

Vidhyadharan (Mammootty) in *Bhoothakkannadi* (The Magnifying Glass) is a watch repairer. The character of his profession, where he has to see small parts of the insides of a watch as big ones (for him an ant is like an elephant) using a magnifying glass, represents the way he sees the world. He is afraid of everything, especially snakes. Apart from the association of snakes, in popular psychology, with sexuality, his fear of snakes starts from his feeling that a female snake is carrying a grudge against him. This comes from a childhood memory in which he had killed a male snake when it was mating. Further, he is a widower and carries a secret desire for a lower caste woman, his neighbour Sarojini (Sree Laksmi), a woman who flaunts her beauty and is vocal about her desires.

Vidhyadharan's mental illness is related to his fear and his habit of blowing small issues out of proportion, much like the magnifying glass he uses for his work. This illness is not recognized as such in the early part of the film at all. It is when the film starts discussing the question of violence against women that he is foregrounded as a person who is ill. This happens when Sarojini's daughter Mini is found dead after being raped. Vidhyadharan assumes that a vagabond who is seen in the village now and then is the murderer and kills him in a duel. He is arrested and put in jail. It is at this moment that his mental state is fully narrativised by the film. Vidhyadharan imagines a world outside the jail, which he thinks he can see through a small hole in the wall. There he sees a young girl being raped by the superintendent of the jail. In a fit of rage he tries to kill the superintendent. It is important to note that it is the possibility of violence against

women that makes the hero mentally ill. Vidhyadharan's illness grows as he becomes paranoid about the fate of his own daughter who is growing up into adolescence. The fear of the snake, his desire for Sarojini and his anxiety that young/adolescent girls will be sexually violated causes his mental illness. What is important for our purpose is the fact that the film recasts violence against women- by then a matter of considerable concern in Kerala- into a male anxiety, this time about the inability to protect women.

What makes the film tragic and at the same time a success at the box office is the casting of the masculine ideal of Malayalam cinema, Mammooty, as the weak protagonist.⁶² By casting Mammooty in a role like Vidhyadharan, the director represents the anxieties of the dominant authorial male figures. It is significant to note that there was an extra-narrative referent to this story. Violence against women, usually against minors, has been a concern in Kerala from the mid-1990s onwards when the gang rape of a girl from the village of Suryanelli by more than forty men over a span of a month and a half was reported. This followed the reporting of a number of similar incidents, mostly involving people in high offices in the state and younger, mostly minor, women.

The film ingeniously breaks stereotypes about the role of men in sexual violence. The film does not in effect tell us who raped and murdered Mini. There

⁶² It has been noted by many commentators that Mammooty's status as a star is predicated upon his image as a kind of superego through his portrayal of figures of authority. See Muraleedharan 2001; Venkiteshwaran 2004.

are ample reasons to believe that it wasn't the vagabond who did it. The second rape that Vidhyadharan witnesses is an illusion, which turns the anxieties of the spectators about the involvement of authorities in these violent incidents into mere hallucinations. Inexplicable crimes with none of the characters in the narrative being responsible for them! The masculine figure of authority (outside the state, that is) feels guilty and is mentally distressed by the events but significantly does not feel implicated in them. The protagonist's concern then is that of a benevolent patriarch and not one that arises from his sense of responsibility for being a man.⁶³ It is also important to see that Sarojini, who at the end of the film is ready to move in with Vidhyadharan and his daughter, does not share this anxiety in the same way. Sarojini's responsibility is to bring up Vidhyadharan's daughter into adolescence. This bringing up happens outside the narrative (we see his daughter only at the end as a teenage girl) and is with the help of Sarojini's status as Vidhyadharan's fiancée, after her daughter's death. Thus in one stroke the narrative resolves the anxieties around the future of the girl and around the single mother. Both the minor girl and the single woman present anxieties to the man as their sexualities are beyond his control by virtue of their existence outside structures like the family.

⁶³ This film is different from some of the other narratives depicting the anxieties of the dominant in the wake of atrocities on the marginal, the most famous being John Abraham's *Cheriyachante Krurakrithyangal* where a petit bourgeois farmer goes mad as he feels responsible for the killing of agricultural labourers in his village. The difference is in the fact that Vidhyadharan's anxiety is about the violent world, not about his own implication in it. As he is one who can see the violence being done on young women, he does not represent the violent men.

At the end of the film, the lost authority is reinstated with Vidhyadharan when he becomes the head of the family. And this cures our hero who is now ready to take up his position within the newly constituted family, now presumably with no fear of snakes.⁶⁴

Manathe Vellitheru (The Silver Chariot in the Sky) was a film directed by Fazil after the huge success of his earlier psychological venture *Manichithrathazhu* (The Quaint Picturesque Lock, 1993). Both films have protagonists who suffer from mental illness, the former a man, and the latter a woman. In an uncanny similarity with the incidents and debates around the sexual harassment of PE Usha which happened years later, this film characterizes as mentally ill a man who harasses a woman by stalking her. Uncannily again, the names of both the harassers are also the same – Rameshan in the case of Usha, Ramesh (Vineeth) in the case of Marilyn (Shobhana) the pop star protagonist of the film. In this film an Oedipal drama gets mapped on to Ramesh's desire for Marilyn. Ramesh, without realizing it himself, is supposed to be looking for his mother in Marilyn. The actual mother, on the other hand, has been admitted into a mental asylum for murdering her husband. Ramesh's desire for Marilyn, the film tells us, is because Marilyn sings a remixed version of a song that Ramesh's mother used to sing.

⁶⁴ One of the articles written on the film argues that the hero's unstable masculinity is a positive representation among the many macho narratives in Malayalam cinema (Gopinathan 2002: 71); an argument shared by the feminist critic Geetha (Geetha 1999: 23-24, 48-51). The problem with this argument is that it does not pay any attention to the narrative logic for the deployment of an unstable masculinity in the film.

As we saw with the earlier film, casting is an important indicator of how notions of masculinity are worked out in the narrative. Ramesh is played by Vineeth, an actor who has done second hero roles in a number of films and is considered effeminate also because he is a classical dancer. The subordinate nature of his masculinity is thus established by a casting convention. Shobhana's position in Malayalam cinema as the epitome of dominant notions of femininity, and her role in *Manichithrathazhu* – the director's earlier film – where she played a modern woman who by the end is cured into Malayalee domesticity, adds to the structuring of power relations in the film.⁶⁵

What is of interest to us is the way the narrative is resolved at the end. The film ends when Ramesh recovers his mother. In the meanwhile, a number of changes have happened in Marilyn's life. Troubled by Ramesh's advances, she decides to stop performing and get married as her family wishes. The single woman who sings seductively (and with a name like Marilyn!) on stage (see image 18) seems to be the centre of all anxieties in the film. This is evidenced in the last sequence of the film where we see Marilyn coming back to stage, now clad in a white sari (see image 19), in the presence of the Police Commissioner, and her family, including her husband and Ramesh and his mother (see image

⁶⁵ *Manichithrathazhu* has been one of the most discussed films in the history of film studies in Kerala. See Ashaalata 2002 for a discussion on Shobhana's character in film. See also Unnikrishnan 2002.

20).⁶⁶ In the fascinatingly clichéd last sequence, we see Ramesh, his mother and Marilyn's husband (the family reunited, mother = Marilyn, Marilyn's husband = Father figure/patriarch) with two police officers on either side.

It is by restoring Marilyn to her 'real' role, that of the mother, that Ramesh finds his cure. Here again, Marilyn is recognised as the 'emancipated woman' as she is not, until Ramesh starts stalking her, ready to conform. She is a woman with a public presence, an independent woman who lives and travels alone and who runs a performing group. She has to be brought under control by making her adhere to certain demands, even pathological ones, before she can then return to the public, this time under the supervision of the state and the family. Ramesh's pathology thus becomes a taming device as far as Marilyn is concerned. The refiguring of the woman into the space of the normative roles is engendered in both these narratives with mental illness in men becoming a means by which it is done. If in the case of *Bhoothakkannadi* it is the heroine's lower caste identity that is the issue, in the second it is her status as a modern woman.

The third film under consideration, squarely foregrounds the question of modernity. *Aham* (The Self) is the story of Siddharthan (Mohanlal), who at the beginning of the film resides in an asylum run by a nun, Sister Noble (Nina

⁶⁶ Whenever Marilyn sings those four lines from Ramesh's mother's song she did wear a sari. But unlike the last sequence of the film where she wears a white sari, she used to wear bright coloured ones. Sari, in these early song sequences, helped to add to the exoticism of her show, as evidenced by the cheer she receives from the audience of her show, in those moments that she changed her attire to more regular 'modern' clothing.

Gupta) as Siddhartha Swamy, an ascetic. His background is dug up by a researcher, Marianna (Ramya Krishna), who comes to the asylum to study “Fine Aesthetics in Mentally Ill” [sic.]. Thus we realize that Swamy was a bank officer who had a traumatic childhood dominated by his father who was a judge and his mother who was a doctor. In the initial moments of the tape about the life of Siddharthan that Marianna listens to, it emerges that his trauma is narrated in terms of the problems with modern notions of justice, especially in relation to his father for whom justice is all about obtaining evidence. As an adult he marries a vibrant girl, Renjini (Urvashi) who is not willing to accept the regimes of hygiene and order put in place by Siddharthan. He succeeds in disciplining her by making her change her clothing from salwar to sari, listen to Bismillah Khan’s music and learn to play chess.

Bored with her life, she starts working in a video store without his knowledge. Siddharthan has by then begun to be suspicious of her being unfaithful to him because of the entry of her friend, Captain Mahendran, into their lives. In a fit of rage, he hits her. She falls down and is admitted to hospital in a coma. At this point, he meets Vimala, an old college mate of his, and starts an affair with her. She gets pregnant, but in the meanwhile Siddharthan understands that Renjini was not guilty. He kills Vimala and Renjini dies. He reveals this story to Marianna after he realizes that he was just a subject for her research and that she is not sexually interested in him. In a telling penultimate fantasy sequence, Siddharthan meets Renjini (we see his body hanging from the church tower in the next sequence) and accuses her of making him do everything, including killing

Vimala. He says that he had seen her in all the other women including Vimala and Marianna. Thus all the aspects of femininity that the film discusses, except significantly that of Sister Noble (a de-sexualized benevolent mother figure), gets collapsed into the one that Renjini embodies. As opposed to Siddharthan who is introverted, all the other women are represented as extroverted, promiscuous and 'emancipated'. Here, as is the case with the other films discussed in this section, mental illness in men is directly linked to a crisis in masculinity. And further, this crisis is engendered by the emancipated women in these narratives.

The above exercise was intended to point out that mental illness is deployed in these narratives, including the debate around the sexual harassment of PE Usha as well as these films, to configure a male subject that is produced vis-à-vis a woman (or many women) who are, to use the language that we began with, 'emancipated'. There are other films like *Vadakkunokkiyanthram* (The compass, dir: Sreenivasan 1989) which came before the set of films discussed and films like *Krishna, Gopalakrishna* (dir: Balachandra Menon 2001) which also have similar narratives. In the former, the masculinity crisis of the hero is structured in relation to his beautiful wife, whereas in the latter, by the othering of the emancipated woman, where sexual violence and harassment is justified by arguing against her. Thus, the pathological male subject is narrativised in 1990s Kerala, not necessarily as a man with a mental illness but as man who is driven to madness by the modern emancipated women.

Organizing Men to Face an ‘Unfair Society’

The *Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi* (Forum for the Support of Harassed Men, *Vedi* hereafter) started functioning in Kottayam in 1999. Begun with the initiative of a group of men in Kottayam, the *Vedi* describes itself as an organization to support men who are being harassed by women in Kerala. To this end, the organization has since started regional committees to function in various districts in Kerala. Such an initiative was the first of its kind in Kerala but models already existed in some other cities including Nasik and Mumbai. An organization called *Purusha Hakka Samrakshan Samithi* has been operational in Nasik for some years now. In a context such as the US on the other hand, such movements have been in existence in 1970s itself.

Around the time of the constitution of the *Vedi* in Kottayam, there seems to have developed a discourse of male victimhood in Kerala. In a seminar on 'domestic violence' organized by the People's Council for Social Justice in Kochi in 2000, there was a session on 'Violence on Husbands and Male in-laws: An Offshoot of Lopsided feminism'.⁶⁷ An organization called 'Men's Council for Social Justice' is also functional in Kochi today. Even in popular representations, the 'need' for such organizations was being raised.⁶⁸ This part of the section will

⁶⁷ *The Hindu*, 6 January 2000.

⁶⁸ In the film *Njangal Santhushtaranu* (We are Happy, dir: Rajasenan 1999), the hero Sajeevan (Jayaram), an IPS officer, contemplates about the possibility of founding an organization of men

look at the activities of the *Vedi* and the discussion about the need for such an organization in Kerala.

An article about the first meeting the *Vedi* organized in Kottayam, in a leading magazine starts by listing out some of the grievances that men had about women: “I wash even the underskirt of my wife. She still nags me”, “My daughter-in-law doesn’t even give me a cup of coffee in the morning” etc. (Adimatra 1999: 19). Though the highlighting of such complaints in the article might be part of a media strategy to attract attention, it is clear that many of the concerns were of a similar kind. The founder President of the organization, Divakaran, an advocate by profession, presents a different narrative about the objectives of the organization. He argues that it has been the case for a long time that women who need divorce for various reasons have been unfairly using the non-bailable Section 498 A of the Indian Penal Code – the clause on violence against women⁶⁹ – as a weapon against men, and that the organization’s primary objective is to help victims who have been wrongly booked.⁷⁰ An article on the *Vedi* quotes him as saying,

who are harassed by women because his wife does not take care of him and his sisters and because she is not domesticated.

⁶⁹ 498 A is a clause introduced in the Indian Penal Code in 1983. This clause deals with violence against women from husband or husband’s relatives, which could fetch a punishment of up to three years imprisonment and fine. Violence (or cruelty) has been defined in wider terms so as to include both mental and physical torture. An amendment of the Indian Evidence Act was enacted for better implementation of the Act.

⁷⁰ Interview with Divakaran conducted at his office in Kottayam, on 17 May 2005.

To deal with harassment due to dowry, it was the men in India who added 498 A to the Indian Penal Code. To make the law stronger, liberal structures were set up in the law of evidence. The police officers and other authorities were also given stricter instructions about the enforcement of the law. The practice of arresting the husband and his relatives based on just the complaint of the wife even if the truth is different, and the practice of arguing for a non-bailable warrant started in this context (Nambudiri 2004: 106).⁷¹

As for its objectives, the manifesto prepared by the *Vedi* in 2000 states the following as its immediate plans: “1) District committees to be formed wherever they do not exist with the help of already existing zonal committees, and to enroll 1000 men from each district as part of the first membership drive, 2) to make available the services of the committee at a low cost to all men who are harassed: that the heads of the committees are advocates will help this, 3) to provide financial support for filing the case for men who are in need, and 4) to put more pressure on the government to remove the sections in the Indian Penal Code that are detrimental to men”.⁷² Apart from these, the organization had also planned to organize men and to push for the constitution of a Men’s Commission on the lines

⁷¹ This argument follows a distinction that he makes between men (the ones first mentioned in the quote) and husbands. He argues: “when women reached the mainstream of public life, there emerged a number of men- not their husbands- who came forward to argue for them” (ibid: 106). More about the logic of the family that operates in the context of the *Vedi* later.

⁷² Manifesto of the *Vedi* prepared at the state committee meeting on 3 September 2000.

of the Women's Commission.⁷³ A press release brought out by the *Vedi* suggested that "1) As the laws that are passed are not discussed in the public in general, with religious leaders, in the assembly, in both the houses of the parliament, in expert committees and as they are not scrutinized properly, they cause social injustice and leads to the breakdown of the family, and that 2) the committee felt that the judicial rulings that have come out in recent times harm man-woman relationships and makes enmity between men and women and they affect the valued culture of *arshabharatha*".⁷⁴

Immediately after the news reports about the organization were published, the *Vedi* received a number of letters from men who claimed to be harassed by women, mostly their wives. The news reports stressed the fact that there was a feeling of camaraderie among the men who had assembled at the meeting and that "the gathering cut across caste-religious boundaries and political affiliations. There was no regional or political differences when it came to the misery of men" (Adimatra 1999: 21). It is interesting to note that a narrative of universal suffering is deployed here to produce the category of the oppressed.

The founding members of the organization argue that it is not the agenda of the organization to save men who are harassing women but to help the

⁷³ Divakaran, Interview, *op cit* .

⁷⁴ The press release does not mention the court rulings that it is referring to. *Purusha Peedana Parihara Vedi. Sthree Samrakshana Niyamangal Bhedagathi Cheyyanam* (Laws the Protect Women should be Amended). Press Release issued on 9 December 2000 at Kottayam

innocent, and insisted that the intention of the organization was to create harmony between men and women⁷⁵. The suggestions were clear: the law and the media were taking up sides with the women and the political parties were doing the same. In this context innocent men had to be saved. The two respondents suggested that the changes that have happened in the life of women in the recent times, like economic independence, more confidence and increased presence in the public domain were unexpected. But they were at pains to affirm that these developments did not in any way produce anxieties or a crisis for men.⁷⁶ Such an affirmation seems to be at odds with the way many of the sympathizers and enthusiasts have responded to the starting of the *Vedi*.

In a letter written to the *Vedi*, Subair NM gave the following suggestions after congratulating them on taking such a bold step.⁷⁷ What follows are some extracts from his letter:

I saw the news about your organization when I was living with troubled thoughts about what is in store for the next generation and *whether the future of boys (children) would be good in the context*

⁷⁵ Interview with Dharmarajan, founding member and first treasurer of the *Vedi* conducted at his business establishment in Kottayam on 19 May 2005. The parallels between the arguments that were presented by KP Ramanunni during the discussion of PE Usha are striking. See Chapter II.

⁷⁶ Divakaran, Interview, *op cit*.

⁷⁷ The office bearers of the *Vedi* showed me these letters and other correspondence at the time when I met them for the interviews. The names of the letter writers have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

of the anti-men laws and regulations that are being put in place for women, in view of the women vote bank. [...] Incidents that are challenging the masculinity and pride of men are increasing. [...] In no time this women-centred world will be destroyed. The political leadership, which has lost its manliness, is helping this process for the sake of power. [...] There is no one to raise the voice for a harassed man unlike the many organizations that will do so for a woman. Recently, I think it was in Angamaly, a woman cut off her husband's penis while he was sleeping. There was no one to respond to this incident. [...] It is important that men who have not lost their masculinity get together and respond to the women leaders and political leadership who does not give respect to the pride and rights of men. [...] To encourage more men to join the organization the name of the organization should be changed to say, Organization or Committee or even Army to Protect Male Pride. A cadre has to be built for the organization. For some things muscle power is the only way. [...] The forum should not be for those 'henpecked' (in English) husbands to come and weep. It should be a space to react strongly to the activities done by some women and those 'male named ones' against men with the support of the political leadership eager to win the vote of women (emphasis added).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Letter written by Subair NM (name changed) of Murikkassery, addressed to the *Vedi*, dated 30 September 1999.

Despite the claims of the founders of the organization, the desires that are being articulated to the *Vedi* seem to be the redressal of male anxieties as is evident from the above quote and from the complaints that were aired at the meeting. When it was asked how the organization would deal with complaints like the ones that appeared in the newspapers, for example, such as the daughters- in-law not giving tea, the two respondents had two different kinds of answers. Divakaran maintained that such issues are ignorable but argued that there is some value in these anxieties:

... that has been the practice here. Our society, our culture... it is our culture that in the morning grandparents, father-in-law and mother-in-law are provided with tea... that is our culture. They have all done that for their mothers-in law and fathers-in law. Therefore they expect the same from these people. It's only natural. So when the practice is broken, they will feel ill treated.⁷⁹

The clear and obvious gender blindness apart (it has only been the women who have been providing tea), this statement does validate some of the anxieties voiced by the members, in spite of their insistence that the organization is interested only in the legal aspects. Dharmarajan's response to the same query, stating that the *Vedi* does not have a constitution and that the importance given to issues depends on who is speaking at the *Vedi* at a particular point, suggests that beyond the

⁷⁹ Divakaran, Interview, *op cit*.

structures that the founders imagine, the organization is ready to address these issues with sympathy.⁸⁰

An interesting aspect of discussion on the need for the *Vedi* is the stress on mental torture as constituting an important aspect of harassment of men. This aspect of the debate foregrounds its link with the earlier part of this section on mental illness and the crisis of masculinity. In response to a question whether the harassment faced by men and women is different, Dharmarajan answered: “Ladies [the word originally in English] are more capable of mentally torturing men. Mental torture is more damaging than physical torture”. He went on to give an example of how wives nag husbands for not keeping their promise about going for a film with them. He suggested that such a torture can be mentally damaging to a man and can get really serious when it comes to things like denial of sex.⁸¹ Such a sentiment seems to be shared widely.

In an article titled ‘*Purusha peedanam*’ that was sent to Divakaran, AM Kumaran (name changed) wrote about the experience of “his son who was harassed by his wife”. His son had apparently married a woman who had higher educational qualifications than himself. This, the article tells us, led to her constantly humiliating him especially by comparing him with a well-educated neighbour – a man who she was friendly with. This was coupled with stories

⁸⁰ Dharmarajan, Interview, *op cit*.

⁸¹ Dharmarajan, Interview, *op cit*.

about her college days that were told to him. After years of suffering, one day the young man lost his temper, caught hold of her and made her write the English alphabet on the floor with her nose. She was injured badly and left the house, subsequently filing a divorce suit. The author goes on to write that the sad part is that the court will rule in her favour as she has physical evidence of violence. “But we shouldn’t forget one thing. The marks on her nose from being made to write A, B, C on the floor will disappear in time. But the wound that has been made in the mind of my son by her abuses will never heal”.⁸² In all these a clear distinction is built between physical and mental torture, which is then gendered as male and female. To go back to the discussion from Chapter II, it is evident that a similar idea was at work in the discussion of the sexual harassment of PE Usha. Both Rameshan, the man who harassed Usha in the bus, and Mohankumar, Usha's husband, were continuously foregrounded as victims, as competing with Usha for attention from the media.

Many of the people who responded to the *Vedi* as well as the founders of the organization seem to agree on the fact that the claims of sexual violence being reported in the media are baseless even when they maintain that they do not support violence. Divakaran’s argument is telling in this context. He suggests that it has been a practice in the hill ranges where he spent his childhood for women to travel around, spend some time with men and return home with money. All cases of sexual violence that have made waves in Kerala, including the Suryanelli case,

⁸² ‘*Purusha peedanam*’ – essay written and sent to Divakaran by AM Kumaran (name changed), a college lecturer, on 1 October 1999.

were explained away in this fashion.⁸³ He argues that it is the case that we are becoming more moralistic about sex and that women are unjustifiably being rewarded for prostitution.

One of the most insensitive statements in this regard suggested that the organization is important as “we will be able to stop the practice of women going around prostituting for a while and claiming on being caught that it’s harassment on the basis that she is not above sixteen. We should also resist the practice of claiming awards for experiencing ‘harassment pleasure’”.⁸⁴ In these narratives all the sexual violence and gang rape cases are represented as insignificant events that are being politicized in the interests of political parties. Divakaran maintained that all women’s groups in the state are affiliated to the Communists and work only to assure the electoral success of the CPI-M.⁸⁵ Thus a clear agency for women’s

⁸³ Just before the interviews were conducted with Divakaran and Dharmarajan, the High Court had acquitted thirty-five of the accused in the Suryanelli case stating that the girl was of ill repute and that she voluntarily participated in the sexual acts and that there was no incident of rape in the case. The women’s groups have been trying to mobilize funds and support from all over the country to fight the case at the Supreme Court. Both my respondents were in complete agreement with the court’s rulings and Divakaran quoted it extensively during the interview.

⁸⁴ Letter written by Subair NM (name changed), *op cit*. Such a sentiment is not isolated as evidenced from an episode of the daily political commentary *Munshi* in the television channel Asianet shown 20 August 2005 which discussed the proposed fund for compensation for rape victims and argued that it is certain that it will be misused, as such an allegation will fetch money for the accuser.

⁸⁵ The complex history of the women’s groups in Kerala that we discussed above is totally missed by him. It is interesting to note that the two people whom he names as being outside the communist framework, Sugathakumari and Sarah Joseph, have been accused of being soft on the left by feminists. That he is working on the basis of common sense is also clear from the fact that

groups beyond what is imagined by them for themselves is attributed to them in the discussions of male harassment.

As suggested earlier, there is a definite crisis in notions of masculinity that the *Vedi* is trying to deal with as we saw in the discussions on how women are entering the centre stage of public life in Kerala. Another discourse of masculinity that structures the history of the *Vedi* is worth mentioning. Both my respondents were of the opinion that men are after all cowards.⁸⁶ This is the reason that they cite for the gradual weakening of the activities of the *Vedi*.

The organization could not go as well as expected because the male [sic.] here are not mentally prepared to say that they are getting harassed by their wives. In the first meeting that was organized, about ninety people came from all over Kerala. The media persons came... everybody opposed because they feared that if it came on TV, their wives will see it. So... they fear their wives. [...] The people who came... they were cowards... they will not resist.⁸⁷

When asked about how the women's organizations reacted to the *Vedi*, his response was that they had predicted that it would not last long and that they were

he argued that in the case of PE Usha most women's groups and feminists were silent because the struggle was against the Left who were supporting the accused. Divakaran, Interview, *op cit*.

⁸⁶ Interviews with Divakaran and Dharmarajan, *op cit*.

⁸⁷ Interview with Divakaran, *op cit*.

proven right when these men refused to be seen on television. Here a complete reversal of what is supposed to be the attributes of men is at work for the benefit of putting together a normative masculinity. The deployment of weak men in producing the normative as constituted by an absence is at work in these narratives.⁸⁸

This story of male victimhood is attached to the idea that men are tied to their responsibility for the family, and that this is a thankless, unrewarding job. Here is an extract from an article on feminism that appeared in a popular journal:

I end this [article] with the complaint of a male friend who lives with a number of women – “I have no time for anything as I have to always escort my mother, my sister, my wife and my children. This is not violence against women, but violence against men.” What should we understand from this? That there are chains on the legs of men. Independence and freedom are realities that are important for them too. *Na Purusha Swathanthryamarhathi!*.... Are those who list out the hard realities being framed? “Male friends, beware.... What you lose is your self. You are the villainous characters who

⁸⁸ TV Chandran’s acclaimed film *Danny* (2002) participates in this discourse in very similar terms. The film has been hailed by writers on Malayalam film as presenting a notion of masculinity that is non-violent and benign and for presenting gender as a matter of performance (Sanjeev 2002: 66). See also Nandakumar 2002. Another critic goes to the extent of saying that “*Danny* attempts to foreground and put to trial the role that femininity has in making human existence and relationships anti-natural (artificial), mechanical and pornographic, by taking up the role of spokespersons and practitioners of existing moral codes and economic pride and of old and new colonialisms” (Ramachandran 2002: 36).

are seen in the newspapers, in the media, on the public road. Yes, the same men who are the guards for women” (Prameela 1998: 18).

Similar ideas are echoed in many of the letters that the *Vedi* received after its inception. The commitment of the men to the family is contrasted with the total disregard that women seem to have for the family. A letter written to the *Vedi* by the Holy Buddha Cultural Centre (Trivandrum) hoped that it would help in stabilizing the family relationships it claimed were increasingly getting destroyed in Kerala.⁸⁹ This commitment is also at the level of keeping intact the name of the family⁹⁰ and looking after the children, both interestingly hitherto understood as female bastions.⁹¹

The discourse that the *Vedi* banks heavily on is the idea that women have gained in material terms substantially in recent times, especially with the help of legal reform. The agency that is attributed to women and feminism is used to

⁸⁹ Letter written to the *Vedi* by Holy Buddha Cultural Centre, Trivandrum dated 5 September 2000 signed by Vlalil K Devarajan, President. He is also Chief Editor, *Eazhava Doothan* Magazine, State executive Committee Member, Backward Communities Liberation Front and Former State Committee member Kerala Congress- M.

⁹⁰ *Purusha Peedanam*, AM Kumaran, *op cit.*

⁹¹ The women’s harassment cell and the women’s commission have been made into instruments to take revenge on men who do not act as their pet dogs, men who block the complete freedom and pleasures of women, by some women who are not even capable of looking after their children properly, women who do not recognize the greatness of motherhood.

Letter written by M Mohan Nair (Bank employee, name changed) of Trivandrum on 6 October 1999.

produce narratives of male victimhood. These victims are victims owing to their contexts rather than because of any intrinsic failures, as is evidenced in the case of the mentally ill protagonists that we discussed.

Male victimhood in the 1990s

Once we pay attention to the ways in which the narratives of male victimhood function, they could be seen to proliferate in the media, film and popular literature of that time. Apart from the films mentioned earlier, there were a number of films that were narratives of male victimhood. Two films about the anxieties of men about being implicated in sexual harassment cases come to mind. One is *Angane Oru Avadhikkalathu* (Thus, During the Vacations, dir: Harikumar 1999) starring Sreenivasan, considered to represent subaltern men in Malayalam cinema, especially in relation to his caste status (Sanjeev and Venkiteswaran 2002; Rowena 2004b; Muraleedharan 2004b). The protagonist is implicated in a harassment case where the heroine (played by Samyuktha Varma, well known for the portrayal of respectable upper caste women, see Muraleedharan 2002), in her bid to escape, gives false evidence against him. The other film, *Ayaal Kathayezhuthukayaanu* (He is Writing a Story, dir: Kamal 1998), shows a woman who consciously stage-manages a sexual harassment incident to implicate the hero, this time played by Mohanlal.

Significantly the women characters in both these films represent the kind of the emancipated woman that the 'Kerala Model' projects – the former a school

teacher and the latter a senior government official. Examples are too numerous to mention. It is evident that the fear of the 'emancipated woman' supported by an imagined monster called feminism does produce a narrative of crisis in masculinity. This is different from the earlier narratives that were articulated in the journals that came out in the early years of the twentieth century in Kerala about the modern woman. One of the most significant differences is that the narratives that we discussed above do take into account the legal struggles and the mobility that women are supposed to have gained over the years.

Thus it is evident that both the crisis narratives, one in relation to mental illness and the other in relation to changes in the legal system, are about the new avenues which have opened up for women in the last couple of decades in India. The fear of the emancipated woman should be understood as the constitutive outside of all crisis claims vis-à-vis masculinity in contemporary Kerala. In making this visible, one will have to take the crisis claim seriously as it is within the field of this argument that masculinity gets performed.

In Conclusion

Masculinity, History, Kerala: New Beginnings

In my attempt to understand how the contemporary public domain in Kerala is structured in relation to notions of masculinity, I have had to continuously rework my methodology and to rethink some of the initial directions that I wanted the project to take. The link between masculinity and the public domain, which the project started with, enabled a reconceptualisation of both concepts. At one level, the move has been to dismantle each concept in the way it has been used in contemporary social science. Thus, it was demonstrated that masculinity is just one of the many subject positions engendered by a gender discourse, specific in its historical and cultural locations. On the other hand, 'public domain' was reconceptualised as a sphere that is performative, one that is enabled by narrativisation – the key process in its formation. The history of print in Kerala has opened up a new area of research – one that will have to take on board the various publics produced by it as its central concern. The insertion of a third term – 'history' – in the title of this concluding note, as opposed to that of the first chapter that had only 'masculinity' and 'Kerala' in it, points to an important shift in the way the project has developed. 'History' is something that needs a gloss now, unlike how it was imagined at the beginning of the thesis, where its presence was taken for granted. The project allows us to theorise afresh the historical lineages that produce our contemporary world.

Here, in conclusion, after the discussion of the texts – of the present and the past – that constitute the public domain in contemporary Kerala, I would like to submit three important arguments that the thesis has enabled me to make. These have emerged in the course of the research. I would like to propose these as my tentative conclusions: 1) That various notions of masculinity co-exist in producing a larger discourse of masculinity; 2) That we need a conjunctural understanding of contemporary social processes; and 3) That the discourse of masculinity is central to studying the history of Kerala's modernity.

Mapping the Discourse of Masculinity

In Chapter II, when the use of the term 'masculinity' in this thesis was discussed, I had suggested that I would resist using the well-known, commonly used concept of 'hegemonic' and 'non-hegemonic' masculinities. Through the analysis of materials from contemporary Kerala in this thesis, I hope that the difficulties in using that structure have been foregrounded. My argument is that there exists *a* discourse of masculinity, rather than different forms of masculinities that could be called 'hegemonic' or 'non-hegemonic'. Further, it was argued that actions, feelings, characteristics and other forms of performances get legitimised or de-legitimised in accordance with the norms set by this discourse. The discourse of masculinity, on the other hand, is produced through narratives that function by positing normative models. In other words, the discourse of

masculinity determines what comes to be termed 'masculine', 'non-masculine' or 'feminine'.

If the structure of 'hegemonic' and the 'non-hegemonic' masculinities is to be sustained, one will have to work with a conception of the 'hegemonic' as a form of masculinity that interpellates each and everyone and the 'non-hegemonic' as something that does not or indeed cannot do so. I argue that such a conception is not viable as there cannot be any notion of masculinity, which does not function as hegemonic and non-hegemonic simultaneously. The question as to whether there is a performance of masculinity that is outside the hegemonic needs to be asked. I argue that at the very least it would present the hegemonic as a lack. To focus on the micro-politics of gender and the contours of masculine performance, it is imperative to give up the conception of a structure that would render transparent the underpinnings of masculinity vis-à-vis each and every performance, and to understand the specific ways in which gender operates in everyday interactions. It is in this context that I had proposed that we stick to the usage of the 'discourse of masculinity'.

The 'discourse of masculinity' does not exist by positing a singular ideal, as we have seen in the detailed discussion of the debate around the sexual harassment of PE Usha. It functions by accommodating several normative models that co-exist and continuously modify each other. Those performances that are gendered male within this discourse are always a complex mix of these various norms. Each and every performance of masculinity refers to one or the other

normative model or at times to more than one. 'Men' or, to put it differently, 'bodies that are supposed to be gendered male' have to be understood as a series of such performances materialized over time. The notion of the 'hegemonic' and the 'non-hegemonic' are usually deployed as a short-cut when studying 'men', as the only possibility is to locate them in a structure of power determined solely by our (mis)understanding of already existing hierarchies as stable and unchanging. Thus identity markers like class, caste and sexual orientation is mobilized to produce an already existing framework within which performances of masculinity are assumed to be transparent. The starting point of our investigation needs to be repositioned in such a way that we begin with the performances themselves, so as to foreground the various identity markers that are deployed in the service of normalizing them within the discourse of masculinity. I argue that both masculinity and the various identity markers are constituted at the moment of their performance. In this case then, studies on men are not in any automatic sense about masculinity and vice versa.

Conjunctural Approach to the History of the Contemporary

One of the issues that were taken up in this project has been the link between history and the contemporary. The research has foregrounded the fact that the history of the contemporary has to be unravelled as if from a palimpsest. For this endeavour, we need an understanding of history where it functions as traces that could be seen on our everyday. Thus any incident, even when it is implicated in the larger picture in historically coexistent time, is also in dialogue

with a longer time in the past that has engendered it. Such a move allows for two different routes into the history of the contemporary. The first would be an attempt to historicise it vis-à-vis other developments that has taken place at the time of a particular incident under investigation. This allows us to understand the discursive structure within which the incident occurs and hence to enrich our understanding of it. The second route for historicising the contemporary would be to look at the ways in which the discourse itself is structured vis-à-vis the developments in the past in order to trace its antecedents. In the latter conception, historical events and discourses enter our day-to-day lives not in a linear fashion but by intermeshing with each other, producing complex historical narratives that beg for a critical engagement. The idea of a conjunctural understanding of the contemporary, where histories as various kinds of narratives enable and constrain our interactions, is proposed in such a context. New methodologies will have to be fashioned depending on the ways in which we position the contemporary in relation to its histories. This project I hope has demonstrated one such methodological possibility.

Discourse of Masculinity and Kerala's Modernity

It has been the contention of the thesis that the history of modernity in Kerala could be told in newer ways if we were to use the lens of masculinity. The discussion that has concluded, points to some of the important moments when masculinity had to be redefined in the space of a little over fifty years. The timeframe is taken for granted, as it follows from already well-known ideas about

the 'engendering of individuals' or rather the emergence of 'engendered individuals' that are already available to us from the emerging corpus of historical works on Kerala. Following the works on colonial Bengal and Kerala, one could argue that the production of the public domain in masculine terms has been one of the foundations of our modernity. The mapping out of the specific ways in which it has had an important role to play in constituting gender relations in the period starting from roughly the mid-nineteenth century, has to be high on the agenda of gender studies.

The moments that I have charted in the thesis included the moment of the revolutionary subject in the Left discourse, the negotiations with Nair modernity, the formation of intellectual subjectivities and the moment of the 'emancipated woman'. It goes without saying that each of these moments might well warrant separate research projects. At the very least, what I believe I have been able to demonstrate is the centrality of negotiations with masculinity in the way in which Kerala's modernity is put together. The selection of the debates around the sexual harassment of PE Usha has been a useful starting point to embark on this inquiry. As has been mentioned before, the attempt was not to produce a history of the public domain in Kerala, since the conception of the public domain with which the thesis took off does not allow for it to be seen as something which exists trans-historically. In contrast to the existing literature on the public that was discussed in Chapter II, I argue that the public is not to be understood as something that exists in such a way that it is transparently an object for analysis. Each attempt at understanding the link between masculinity and the public domain in Kerala will

have to undertake the job of formulating the public anew, keeping in mind the specific ways in which it was engendered at each point of time in history. Therefore, the public domain in the 1950s, for example, will have to be studied with specific reference to the developments which have enabled the production of a public, or many publics, at that time. A similar conjunctural mode of mapping its history has to be employed in its study. It is possible then that other incidents and narratives of the history of Kerala could also be looked at from the vantage point of the discourse of masculinity.

The thesis started with an attempt to configure myself as a central character in the project as a young man growing up in Kerala during the time of the debates around the sexual harassment of PE Usha. At the conclusion of the project, I also realize that the four tropes that I identified as central to the discourse of masculinity in Kerala have also been important in the constitution of my own subjectivity. This project remains a study of the dominant discourse of masculinity, which, I argue, exists as the space of enunciation from where any performance of masculinity is recognized as such and simultaneously evaluated. The non-dominant forms exist as the 'other' in this discourse of masculinity. That the only explicitly casted subject in the above analysis is Nair is not an accident, as the normative Malayalee identity has been a Nair identity, unmarked, unnamed. The unnamed existence of the Nair subject and the foregrounded 'subaltern' subject, engenders a process of normalizing the former in a universalising gesture that allows for the 'other' to remain marked until its sublimation into the norm.

This project, reversing this scenario, names and marks the Nair subject as the principle casted subject in the dominant discourse of masculinity in Kerala.

I would like to sign off with this one claim for this project: it has tried to present a new way of looking at the contemporary, as I have tried to elaborate in this conclusion. A new narrative about the functions of the gendering process in Kerala, I hope, will follow such an endeavour. Such a project will have to foreground the specific ways in which particular notions of gender have become part of a certain commonsense in Kerala and also examine the role of the discourse of caste and, perhaps more importantly, of class, in this transformation. A detailed study of the gendered language that is used in day-to-day interactions in Kerala will have to take on board the role played by the Left during its early years in normalizing gender difference and the role of feminist interventions in the late 1980s in politicising it. At a time when this politicised language of gender, challenged for its heteronormativity and its alleged upper caste/class concerns, is confronting its limits, the critical foregrounding of the discourse of gender that constitute the public/private domains in contemporary Kerala has become urgent. This thesis was one attempt in this direction. It has, I hope, provided openings for further inquiries which in time would help us contest the orthodoxies of 'progressive politics', along with the commonsense of gender difference in Kerala.

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