

**THE DISCURSIVE FORMATION OF SEXUAL  
SUBJECTS: SEXUAL MORALITY AND  
HOMOSEXUALITY IN KERALAM**

*Ph.D. Thesis submitted*

*to*

**MANIPAL UNIVERSITY**

*by*

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### **Declaration**

I, Rajeev Kumaramkandath, do hereby declare that this thesis entitled **The Discursive Formation of Sexual Subjects: Sexual Morality and Homosexuality in Keralam** 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.

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## Certificate

Certified that this thesis entitled **The Discursive Formation of Sexual Subjects: Sexual Morality and Homosexuality in Keralam** is a record of bonafide study and research carried out by Mr. Rajeev Kumaramkandath under my supervision and guidance. The report has not been submitted by him for any award of degree or diploma in this or in any other university.

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*To*  
*Vijayalakshmi K, my mother &*  
*Bindu P Verghese, my lifemate*  
*for their struggles that kept me alive*

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## Introduction

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*It seems to me that an important part of a radical postmodern project is deconstructing not only binary metaphors but also the means by which the production of the political, cultural and social is achieved, and to what effect.*

Warner 1993, 169

The thesis attempts to analyse the configuration of sexual morality as a central element of discourses of modernity in Keralam in South India. It attempts to explore multiple sites where questions of body, desire and sexual pleasure were openly debated in the modern history of Keralam. Later the thesis will combine this with a critical ethnography of clandestine same sex intimacies in the contemporary. It will show that tension about (hetero) sexual morality is a central feature of postcolonial modernities where they are very often linked with questions of national progress. Knowledge produced in history, its circulation through various networks and re-presentations of social memories reproduce this excessive focus on questions of body. The close links between notions of civilized sexual appetite and notions of social progress, foregrounded by colonial/postcolonial discourses of modernity, have been critical in framing the contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality.

The thesis will begin from reform discourses of morality and non-normative sex in the Malayali public sphere during colonial period. The significant changes in the way sexual morality was contested in the post 1940s and how the earlier debates, concerns, tensions and



even images revisit the contemporary are then analysed. Despite shifts and discontinuities in this space the thesis will attempt to show how debates about morality are also always debates about becoming modern and progressive. This frame, it will be argued, has a predominant role in rendering all other forms of sexuality as non-normative and deviant. The thesis further maps this to contemporary male to male relations and practices, and observes how subjects in subversive, albeit hidden, relations borrow from the same terminologies that are inherent constituents of this frame in the public realm.

The production of this thesis is located amidst surging narratives of liberal sexuality. In India the emergence of economic liberalism has caused radical changes in the way sex is understood and debated in the public sphere. Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam characterize this random unfolding of links between economies of desire and the shifts that mark the period from the late 1980s as “unshackling the imagination” (Menon and Nigam 2007, 85). Narratives of same sex desire and intimacies are no longer considered strange in the public realm; sexuality debates in India have taken radical turns ever since individual right became the central foci of such debates<sup>1</sup>. However this thesis will attempt to show how sexuality debates have remained the nerve centre of modernity in Kerala. Thus it is precisely the historicity and the cultural situatedness of these debates that will be analysed here. In the last chapter I will also discuss about the relevance of local discourses of sexuality especially in the context of local being predominantly understood in current academia as shaped by global and transnational discourses.

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<sup>1</sup> See Narrain and Bhan (2005) to understand the extent to which rights discourse have transformed public debates in the Indian context over issues concerning people in homosexual relations.

Whereas the local is inherently located amidst transnational networks it is also a terrain constituted by different social, historical and political processes which merit analysis of its own.

The thesis will explore different sites that are temporally scattered across the modern history of Kerala. From mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary they are scattered across temporal and spatial boundaries. The concerns around which these sites are organized resurface time and again in the Malayali public sphere. The thesis is organized around a semantic, operational definition of sexual morality or *sadacharam* as it is popularly phrased in the local vernacular Malayalam. The configuring and reconfiguring of this abstract entity in the regional public sphere helps elucidate the subtleties involved in reproducing individual self and body as a central object in discourses of progress. My use of the term sexual morality deviates from its conventional usage signifying the formal and informal regulatory apparatuses involved in the regulation of sexual desire and bodily practices. In the most generic sense discourses of sexual morality within a modern regime is understood as reducing sexual desire to merely that associated with body and as part of animal nature and appetite. Such a discourse also serves the purpose of separating sexual desire from rationality and erotic love (Scruton 1986, 12-20). Sexual morality broadly symbolizes the social norms that regulate, measure and distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of sexual desire defining deviant and normal forms of sexuality.

However sexual morality is recognized here as a highly contested field where such overwhelming ideas of modernity as nation and progress works together and produce definitions of legitimate and illegitimate forms of desire. The thesis progresses through different periods in

the modern history of Kerala when the normative foundation of this sexual morality was gathering shape in public perceptions and when those were contested in the regional public sphere with varying consequences. The invocation of this term, or its Malayalam equivalent *sadacharam*, conjures a constellation of meanings that are deeply embedded in the local histories which, albeit, have popular existence in the form of memories, beliefs and knowledge systems. Far from being an abstract configuration it provides the essential ground for contesting non normative elements in the local culture.

Sexual morality is understood here as a modern term generated from the interface between the colonizer and the colonized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; this was then usefully projected, by the colonizer and the local elites, to the local cultures in order to identify and define the non-normative elements in their customs and practices. This doesn't imply that such normativisation didn't exist in the previous, pre colonial, period. However during and post the colonial regime conceptual articulations by the local intelligentsia of notions of sexual morality not only inherited the colonizer's perceptions of civilizing through disciplining the body but also popularized it as an essential component of a progressive modern society. The ideological circuits of progress is conceived here as primary disseminating notions of body and desire. The thesis will chart the intimate relationship between these two conceptual entities, sexual morality and progress, as they are constantly figured in the public domains. I will argue that not only the rubrics governing the public understandings of unconventional, non-normative sexual practices but subjects engaged in such practices and their representations also have to draw from this complex relationship, its historical trajectories, contestations and the related cultural practices.

From the early modern times in Keralam sexual morality was configured as emblematic of language nationalism and social progress. While this was given heavy propaganda during the reformation period in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century period it became a heavily contested ground in the subsequent periods. Texts produced from early 19<sup>th</sup> century to the most recent periods will be looked upon in this thesis in order to arrive at how Keralam is perceived and imagined as a region from the early colonial period to the contemporary. These perceptions are central to the cultural practices, especially reading and writing practices, that constitute its public sphere. They are also critical in modeling the “subjective mediations” (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999; 445) in the context of subjectivities outside the heteronormative boundaries. At the heart of the perception of Keralam as a region linked through its language of nationalism lies a shared abstraction of *sadacharam* especially *lyngika sadacharam* or sexual morality. This, under connotations of progress, has massively been imparted in pedagogic and non pedagogic fashions and through governmental and other popular mediums.

I will argue that the reproduction of sexual hegemonies, resistance to the meta-narratives of sexuality, and even the specific subversive acts and subjects draw from the long and complex regional histories. In throughout the historical and cultural spaces I will attempt to look at the specific modus operandi through which voices of resistance and subversions are melted down and/or neutralized. How crucial is the discourse of rationality and progress, as also the discourse about pre modern sexual anarchy, deployed during the colonial reformation period in understanding the current regional sensibilities? How, during the colonial phase, region was predominantly conceptualized as a modern territory to prioritize normativisation above all caste and communitarian interests? How does region become an apperceived phenomenon whereby it

is consistently configured in terms of past experiences and contestations? How central these imaginations of a region are in determining subjects' negotiations with their life-worlds? Through what links does circularity of the argumentative space around the questions of body and sex become possible? My thesis is an attempt to address these questions. Before I give an overview of my thesis let me introduce the reader to how Keralam as a region is configured in academic and popular perceptions.

### **Perceptions of difference**

Keralam, commonly phrased as Kerala in languages other than Malayalam, is an Indian state located on the southwestern coastal extremes of India. It became part of the Indian union through the state reorganization act of 1956 when regions were reorganized on linguistic basis. There are multiple discourses that constitute the imagination of this terrain in both academic and popular settings; the most well known, both inside and outside of Keralam and in international settings as well, being that of the achievements and paradoxes in the context of its development experience. Nevertheless the cultural practices, particularly the matrilineal and the practices of polyandry, that prevailed among certain selected communities in the region now known as Keralam was already an interesting topic among social science scholars from the mid nineteenth century onwards. Earlier the colonial administrators, ethnographers and anthropologists were allured to this terrain to seek knowledge about these practices. Later, particularly in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the socialist and communist ideologies swept across the state making it a hot subject for discussion among international political scientists as well.

This geographical region had sufficiently captured the imagination of the colonial administrators and anthropologists from the earlier part of the colonial regime that a writer, in

mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, commented that “South India . . . is often referred to as an ethnologist's paradise, owing . . . to the striking diversity of cultures found there” (Cappannari 1953, 263). The article specifically suggested practices like matriliney, polyandry and *sambandham*<sup>2</sup> as contributing to this ‘richness’. In her book on the transformation of matriliney in Keralam Arunima observes that, “[i]n the late nineteenth century, under the growing influence of social Darwinism, early European and American ethnographers and anthropologists began to explore different kinship systems all over the world” (Arunima 2003, 2). Apart from the interests in cross cultural practices of marriage, conjugality and property inheritance, a major part of these enquiries were offshoots of understandings of the nature of social evolution (Arunima 2003, 3). This logical framing of ‘other’ cultures as occupying the status of ‘maturing’ in the order of social evolution played a predominant role in shaping the western understandings of matriliney, and various other customs those were in practice in Keralam. The presence of such discourses, apart from re-presenting the terrain as a land of sexual license, also catered to its construction as a terrain that is different from other colonized locations.

However these already constructed notions of ‘difference’ took a radical turn in the mid seventies when the development patterns that the state adopted became a hot matter of debates in international circles. At least for the last four decades representation of Keralam in both domestic and global circles has more or less completely been overshadowed by its attainments in human development sectors. A study conducted by the Centre for Development studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram and published by United Nations in 1975 (CDS 1975) triggered a series of debates on Keralam’s path towards development. For a long period of time the state has captured

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter 3 of this thesis for a detailed discussion of the implications of the 19<sup>th</sup> century interpretations of these practices as also *sambandham* practice – a hypergamous relation between Brahmin males and females from certain selected lower caste groups.

the central attention of development theorists who debated about the links between economic and social development especially in the context of third world countries (Parayil 2000; Oommen 1999; Dreze and Sen 1997; Sen 1992; Subramanian 2006).

The much improved performance of Keralam in different spheres of social development like literacy, health, low level birth rates etc., despite its poor economic background was celebrated by development theorists as signifying an alternative path towards improving the living conditions; this without compromising generously in favour of capitalistic models of development (Parayil 2000). The living conditions that continued to prevail in the state were often equated to that of the first world countries (Sen 1995; Dreze and Sen 1997, 2002; Ramankutty 2000). This discourse of development depicted Keralam as having a different existence from the rest of the country and other similar (especially third world) contexts. In fact the initial report by CDS, mentioned in the previous passage, was a response to attempts to depict dismal pictures of poverty in different regions, including Keralam, in India. The authors of this CDS study defended Keralam by highlighting the human development achievements of the state and quality of life against lower per capita income levels; thus inaugurating an era where social development was discussed as an all time resolution for the multi faceted problems that locations like Keralam often confronted.

Multiple factors were assigned as causative for what was universally considered as a unique model. The significant role played by Christian missionaries from the early periods of modernity in the educational sector, the positive roles played by the kings of Travancore and Cochin to cooperate with the colonial administration to modernize the region and shaping a

development culture that was eventually disseminated to the remaining territories when the region was unified in the post independence period, the influence of socialist/communist ideologies and the role communists played in the local politics of the region especially in the post independence period are to mention the few. These factors are individually and collectively accounted by studies about the development culture that the state retained despite its poor economic background. The famous Kerala model of development however came under severe scrutiny in the beginning of 1990s which coincided with attempts on the part of the Indian government to liberalise the local economies. The state was simultaneously argued as displaying the properties of “lopsided development” (Chakraborty 2005, 2) as its social development indicators were not a match for its economic growth. This mismatch led many development theorists to cast the development experience (or development model as the terms of reference shift from one to the other depending upon the perspectives from which the terms are applied) of Kerala under the shadows of a paradox. This development paradox was later translated into other spheres of social and cultural lives within the region and its projection as a symbol of modernization and gender equity was challenged on various grounds (Subramanian 1990; George and Kumar 1997; Tharamangalam 1998 and 2006).

Certain other paradoxes were concomitantly invoked towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century against the already popularized development paradox of Kerala. In her paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women at Tromsø (Norway) in 1999 Monica Erwer argued that a second paradox (the first being the development paradox where the economic and social development went in different, rather contrasting, directions) clearly displayed the fragility of the famous Kerala model. She referred to “gender paradox” as a



situation where the high indicators of social status associated with women in Keralam never reflected upon their participation in political and public arena in the state and in civil society (Erwer 1999; also see Erwer 2003). The growing uneasiness with Kerala's social development outcomes linked to non conventional indicators such as the rising visibility of gender based violence and so on was highlighted by scholars like Praveena Kodoth and Mridul Eapen (Kodoth and Eapen 2002 and 2005). According to Sharmila Sreekumar by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gender paradox has become the overwhelming context for imagining women in contemporary Keralam. She argued that the Utopian narratives of Keralam as having constructed itself upon principles of social justice and human development are significantly disrupted by narratives of dystopic content around questions of gender violence and AIDS. According to her paper the real paradox remained in bringing these two worlds – utopic and dystopic – together by reckoning the internal dynamics of the local cultural configurations (Sreekumar 2007).

### **Narratives of progress**

In a working paper that was later published as a book Devika argues that the concept of development has been deeply ingrained in the mindsets of Malayalis from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards. The region was fragmented into three pieces during the colonial period for administrative reasons. This was primarily required to be set aside through a unification process in the immediate post independence period in order to crystallize the imaginations of a nation. The hectic discussions that led to such unification were mainly premised upon the progressive potentials of remaining united under a single title. These “progressive” imaginations of a nation were considerably influenced by the socialist ideologies that favoured even distribution of resources and were later translated under the buzzword development. The whole cultural configurations and practices within the region had to address development as a primary goal

(Devika 2007). The contemporary cultural practices in Keralam testify this argument. The projection of the region as superior to other similar contexts has been a familiar and common enterprise in both domestic and social science circles. Writings in the newspapers and magazines, discussions in television channels and in latest technological mediums like internet blogs – spaces where the collective consciousness of Malayali identity gets articulated in much axiomatic fashion – constantly carry and reproduce this progressive image of region. The notion that Keralam signifies a region at the higher end of progress and development is consistently underlined in those public articulations.

This has persisted even in the face of harsh criticisms made on the different aspects of its social, political, economical and cultural conditions. One finds the broad brushstrokes of progress and development even in shaping the daily reading practices and speech acts. What is ritualistically repeated about Keralam, and widely celebrated as another source of its uniqueness, is the reading habit of Malayalis and the high standard of literacy rates in the state. The region has figured as almost an ineluctable instance in researches about the relationship between literacy rates and other parameters of human development<sup>3</sup>. Cultural historian and ethnographer Robin Jeffrey unveils his surprise over the uncommon sight anywhere else in India of the voracious newspaper reading habits of Malayalis (Jeffrey 1987). In another ethnographic account Jeffrey provides us with snapshots of the community reading practices in places like teashops

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance the work by Brian Street about ethnographic perspectives on literature and development (Street 2001). In an ethnographic study conducted by Dianne Jenett about practices associated with menstruation of women in Keralam draws, in the modern context, from this correlation between high levels of literacy among women in Keralam and such practices existing in the region (Jenett 2005). Plenty of development literatures have already centralized literacy (“universal literacy” as expressed in a document released by UNICEF in 1999- quoted in Street 2001, 152) as the core feature of development by instantiating the experience of Keralam. See Ramachandran 1997, Dreze and Sen 2002, Pillai 1995, and Chakraborty 2005.

and reading rooms<sup>4</sup> (Jeffrey 1992). In a book published in 2000 about newspaper revolution in India Jeffrey draws from the instance of Keralam and traces the genealogy of newspaper reading practices among Malayalis.

. . . by the mid 30s Kerala, though desperately poor, has a high level of political expectation and involvement, focused on bitter competition among the Indian National Congress, the Communist party and sectarian organizations of castes and religions. In 1960, the year of a mid-term state election which produced the highest voter turnout in Indian history (84%) and resulted in the defeat of the communists, Malayalam newspaper penetration was roughly 35 newspapers for every 1000 people; India's over all newspaper penetration was twelve to 1000 people . . . By 1996, newspaper penetration of Malayalam was more than eighty five dailies to 1000 people, twice the all India ratio, even though Kerala's per capita income stayed below the national average.

(Jeffrey 2000, 32).

It was precisely to the centre of such progressive practices that questions of gender paradox and sexual violence made its arrival. However as Rowena and Christy in their study shows that even instances of sexual and gender violence were deployed by the traditional and modern political alliances as potential venues to reproduce “the hegemonic caste and gender structures of a castiest patriarchy . . . and [use] tools of sexual morality” against victimized women (Rowena and Christy 2007, 113). In their study about an incidence of burning the auto rickshaw of a lower caste woman driver in Keralam they observed that the narratives around the incident did not sufficiently account for the caste and gender oppressive structures behind it.

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<sup>4</sup> *Vayanasalas*- mostly associated with local libraries established as part of the *granthasala* (library) movement that swept across the region and resulted in the establishment of libraries in multiple locations during the mid twentieth century even before the state was formed by merging the erstwhile Travancore, Cochin and Malabar regions. See Radhakrishnan 2006.

Instead all media representations made use of the already available discourses of progress to quibble over questions of caste and gender. The framework of progress through which Keralam has been represented since the 70s and 80s is used not only to initiate discussions about caste, gender and sexual violence but also simultaneously to cut short and regulate such discussions rather abruptly (Rowena and Christy 2007).

It is precisely at this juncture that this thesis originates with its idea of exploring the cultural sites where this link was constituted, and reproduced, in its cultural terrain with paramount significance. The materiality of progress is indeed an essential component that cherishes modernity's scope in many parts of the globe. As Walter Benjamin has argued that if it was not for the value of progress, or the (rather blind) belief that what comes next is necessarily better than what it has replaced, modernity wouldn't have thrived as it did<sup>5</sup>. Progress is not an empty container that envisages transforming the materiality of the living conditions leaving the ideological dimensions unaffected. It remains the main ground where modernity is flourished by reproducing its patriarchal nationalist ideologies. For instance in Keralam, for a substantial part in its modern history and until recently, *parishkaram* (progress) was used as a trope to reminisce the promises of colonial modernity. It also symbolized abandoning the unprogressive (*aparishkritham*) elements in the past and heading towards a bright future. As I argue in throughout this thesis this has resulted in forming mental and cultural configurations where the material – transformations in the spheres of technology and statecraft, for instance, as Partha Chatterjee defines it (Chatterjee 1989) – and the moral – the patriarchal, national values – are constantly placed in a conditional relationship with each other.

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<sup>5</sup> Discussion about Walter Benjamin and his writings in Hanssen, Beatrice 1998, 50-60.

## A concerned public

Narratives of paradoxes of progress especially instances of sexual violence and gender has been intense in the public domains of contemporary Keralam. By the end of the last century debates around the questions of sex and gender was already highly visible in Keralam through newspapers, popular magazines and journals. Sex scandals, incidents of sexual harassment<sup>6</sup> and sex workers' and sexual minorities' rights are issues that have already become part of an average Malayali's common consciousness<sup>7</sup>. This rendezvous where the public is gathered around certain definite issues in Keralam has been made possible by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century revolution in technologies of representation- both in print and electronic media, especially television. Reports of harassing women in both private and public places turned out to be a regular event in the everyday social existence. Another significant issue developed at this point was the rising number of suicides committed by lesbians in different parts of the state<sup>8</sup>. From being seen and understood as casting shades over the promises of development the situation quickly became part of the common perceptions of the region.

The objectified *vesya* (prostitute) returned as the rights activist *lyngika thozhilali* (sex worker), the female body open to sex attacks in both domestic and public spaces, the lesbian on the verge of committing suicide or migrating to metropolises outside Keralam due to the hostile surroundings are among some of the most common images that capture the public imagination.

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<sup>6</sup> Ratheesh Radhakrishnan in one of his paper attempts to make a detailed analysis of a sex scandal which was also an instance of sexual harassment of women in public places in Keralam. His paper shows the extent to which such issues capture the public imaginations and are vulgarized by the popular media. Apart from surveying practices that were commonplace in Malayalam media in the representation of these issues the paper also traces the historical legacies of this argumentative space. See Radhakrishnan 2005.

<sup>7</sup> In his doctoral thesis Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observes that “the existence of such a commonsense was evident from the responses, in most cases skeptical, 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” (Radhakrishnan 2006, 6-7).

<sup>8</sup> In chapter 4 of this thesis I have discussed the contemporary popular forms of addressing these issues.

Although initially foregrounded in a language doused in rights discourse the local intelligentsia writing in such elite Malayalam magazines as *Mathrubhumi*, *Pacchakuthira* turned the table to assay the local structures of gender and family. At the centre of this terrain were questions of sexuality that were by and large indubitably categorized under the popular expression *sadacharam*. Contestations around these issues have been an integral part of Malayali public sphere in throughout the modern history of region.

The hyper visibility of these issues and the uproar in the public sphere is a familiar event in the history of Keralam ever since print was introduced and popularized as an effective tool for mass communications. In his analysis of masculinity and its different configurations in the public domain of Keralam Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observes that print in the region “at once made possible a spatially organized public and a narratively constituted one” (Radhakrishnan 2006, 190)<sup>9</sup>. In a formal exposition of the emerging literary and political venues in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Keralam Uday Kumar observes that the transformation of common people (*janam*) into public (*pothujanam*) was a characteristic phenomenon of late 19<sup>th</sup> century; that this transformation was made possible “through a process of address and education” (Kumar 2007: 417- 418). Maruthur, in her study about the cultural practices and sexuality politics in Keralam, observes that “the public is often created through an interpellative hail by being addressed as the ‘people’ of Kerala in governmental campaigns or by the media” (Maruthur 2010, 6).

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<sup>9</sup> See Praslithil (2006) for an exhaustive survey of the historical events that preceded the massive public library movement in Keralam during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. This movement combined with certain other factors as the popularization of print as a medium that could be used to address the public at large, growing literacy rates, leftists’ interventions in the various social spheres and so on produced the necessary environment to constitute a reading public that simultaneously intervened actively in issues those were presented as having high social significance.

According to Warner an idea of public remains at the centre of modern life and it consistently informs our literature, politics and culture; that the public is a formation mediated through different cultural forms and in different periods of time. “Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be” (Warner 2002: 51). Elaborating further from these theoretical propositions one also identifies what is implicit in the Habermasian models of normative public sphere<sup>10</sup>; that the public sphere and public discourse are also mediums for the state and legal establishment to conduct a test run of their own legitimacy before the eyes of the public<sup>11</sup>. In the context of Keralam the earlier literary public sphere attempted to amass and transform public opinion to embrace a new rational order that defied in clear terms the earlier *jati* specific sexual systems and conjugal arrangements. Instead a modern sexual moral order was prescribed and presented under the promises of modernization and a progressive future.

The thesis will look at the various discursive spaces through which modern sexual morality gathered hegemonic potentials in the society and how this hegemony is recast through the multiple contestations in the public sphere of Keralam. A regional history of the organization of public sphere and its central concerns should caution the recent euphoria that accompanies most of the literature about sexual identity politics in India. This also helps one to reconsider the implicit binary between a sexually conservative past embedded in the colonial genesis of regulation and a contemporary that denotes sexual freedom. At the centre of those public imaginations remains the human subject announced as the vehicle towards progress. I will argue

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<sup>10</sup> In the first chapter I have discussed the problems associated with the Habermasian claims regarding public sphere.

<sup>11</sup> See Pollock 2009, where he argues that the widely acclaimed egalitarian and inclusive nature of the early English public sphere was in fact forming public opinions to favour the state ideologies.

that the contestations in the contemporary and the formation of sexual subjects – both clandestine and outside the territories of normativity – draw from the previous episodes of contestations around questions of body, desire, sex and so on.

Dillon argues that the public sphere models and produces subjectivity through what she calls “an epistemology of desire” rather than reason; that the “public sphere produces subjectivity not by way of . . . a blunt imposition of values or norms . . . but by way of desire and identification” (Dillon 2004, 35). While it is obvious that public sphere predominantly produces notions of a bourgeoisie subjectivity which in turn functions as a precondition for participating in that very public sphere, the very constitution of this public sphere deserves a thorough examination. From a postcolonial perspective two things emerge importantly in this respect. First, caste, class and gender emerge as categories that determine one’s entry into the public sphere and second, their value-centeredness. Both these dimensions operate in a mutual and reciprocal manner to the extent ‘public’ as a category came into existence, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Keralam, under the influence of such modern ideas as nation and progress. These were consistently extrapolated to the local context to give shape to, and laid the ground for, the multiple cultural contestations.

### **Postcolonial significances**

As many historians have already shown Indian attitudes towards sex, gender and male-female relationships have undergone radical transformations during the colonial period. This thesis engages in considerable length with the historical transformations during colonialism in Keralam. This, in order to see how this history could usefully be extrapolated to make sense of the post independent commotion in public sphere over questions pertaining to gender, sexuality



and non-normative subjectivities. A vast array of academic enterprises produced in the post “Orientalism” (Said 1978) period have already addressed the inoculation of “gender” in colonies as a troublesome issue embedded in the colonial politics. In the context of India studies have attempted to examine, and consolidate, the deployment of gender and gendered practices within the interface of the colonizer and the colonized in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Cooper and Stoler 1997; Lewis 1996; Stoler 1991, 1995 and 2002) and in the subsequent periods (Altman 1999 and 2001; Enloe 1993). The meta narrative of the ‘decadent, degenerated and uncivilized conditions’ that prevailed in the colonies provided the colonizer with necessary justification to intervene in the indigenous people’s lives (Latamani 1998; Chatterjee 1989; Bacchetta 1999).

Production of new social histories and reading, and vulgarizing, the locally embedded caste and gender relations from a modern perspective was part and parcel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial projects. Disciplining the individuals and bringing in place new social demarcations and status systems that ordered the society on the basis of ‘secular’ values as opposed to the religious and caste based ones went in tandem with the reformist agendas during this period. Nationalist thoughts and provincial politics were combined in this reformist agenda and the inculcation of a new value order, both by the British and the nationalist elites, was justified through narratives of decadence, revival and progress. David Washbrook in his analysis of provincial politics in the Madras Presidency during the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century period observes that the 19<sup>th</sup> century political society was divided along the lines of caste and community politics. He further elaborates that the colonial administrative mechanisms like Census and the European social

sciences' orientalist attitudes sanctioned the view that Indian society is structured by a series of interlocking blocks of caste and religious groups (Washbrook 2008).

The new normative order intended to serve the needs of modernity homogenized the living patterns of people across the caste and religious divisions. Constructing new knowledge about social order and engendering modern subjects were two important part of this colonial episode (John and Nair 1998; Jeffrey 1992; Prakash 1995; Doy 1996; Grewal 1996; Yegenoglu 1998; Menon 2007). In his account of the postcolonial historiography in India, Gyan Prakash remarks that orientalism was operating towards reconstructing "knowledge of India; it was a completely European enterprise embedded in the colonial relations of power" (Prakash 1995, 355). In the context of Keralam studies have already shown how the legal and structural apparatuses of colonial modernity have drastically changed the cultural terrains in the world of the colonized (Devika 2002, 2005, 2005a; Kodoth 2001, 2002; Arunima 2003). The interventions during the colonial period have not only produced new dichotomies, like tradition/modernity, but also new histories and knowledge those have survived through popular memories. I have discussed, especially with regard to the picture emerging from Keralam, about the significance of using these collective memories and historical episodes in a later section of this introduction.

Research on gender and sexuality has increasingly become intersectional over the last two or three decades, especially in contexts like India where various lines converge in the process of consolidating the sexual. According to Flavia Agnes the 'second wave' of feminism in India in the 1980s has made sexuality an open topic in the public albeit as an arena for discussing patriarchal violence upon women and seeking (with or without success) refuge in the legal

apparatuses (Agnes 1992). The focus of research in this area remained for yet a longish period of time on questions of violence inflicted on the feminine bodies but nevertheless still expanding its scope by attempting to theorise sexuality in various terms; this at large included, to borrow from Nivedita Menon's brief arcade of research enterprises in this area, reproductive health, rape and domestic violence, caste and communal conflict worked out on the bodies of women, state violence that takes the form of sexual assaults by army and police, and about the more quotidian forms of gender violence as manifested in sexual harassment, especially in the workplace (Menon 2007, xiii). However this was also a period when sexuality was redefined, in the larger academic context of India, to include within its scope questions of desire and the hegemony of heteronormativity.

Nineties, especially its second half, was a period when terminologies like gay, lesbian and queer, considered unconventional until then, started becoming a common part of feminist projects intended to openly address, if not change, the cultural and material landscapes of gender and sexuality in India. The commonsensical assumption about the goodness of transformations during the colonial period was continuously questioned by these projects. These projects foregrounded gender and sexual subjectification as central concerns of the colonial and nationalist projects in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century periods. For instance the colonial framework of building an 'Indian tradition' on the basis of selected scriptures in the different regional contexts, to project their 'sexually uncivilised and reprehensive' moral systems was one relevant theme that dominated this trend (Latamani 1998; Bacchetta 1999; Chatterjee 1989; Sangari and Vaid 1989).

Projects about how different sexual systems, that deviated from the modern norms, existed in the pre-modern Indian contexts also started appearing during this period (Thadani 1996; Vanitha and Kidwai 1996). In their postcolonial archaeology of sexuality John and Nair, however, discount feminist projects where colonial practices are identified as homogenising a rich array of familial and sexual practices as “yearning for a golden age” or as “narratives of decline” (1998, 11-12). Nivedita Menon counters this claim by suggesting that such works should be read in the light of the “realisation that the values of modernity have not been unambiguously emancipatory, have often eradicated spaces of relative autonomy, and produced new spaces of subjection” (Menon 2007, x-xi). Following the lines opened by this stream of academics this thesis attempts to identify how the early discourses of morality, liberalism and progress exert a crucial influence on, and provide new significances of understanding, the contemporary forms of local body politics.

The production of new forms of subjectivities during the colonial interface and the translation of power to the sites of newly produced indigenous texts – and thus to a newly constituted public domain with its own caste, class and gender configurations – constitute the main theme in the first section of this thesis. Individualisation, normativisation and the production of a value centered platform to make interpellation of the subject a constant and continuous process of modernity are core themes discussed in this section. The inauguration of sexuality as an open category available for contestations in the public domain under what could be labelled as a second phase of reformation process around the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century is discussed in the second section. A new set of writings emerged around this period mediate the contemporary forms of subjectivisation and the previous, colonial, structures of sexual morality. While the thesis has

basically relied upon texts produced during different time periods its last chapter contains an ethnographic analysis of clandestine male homosexual subjectivities in the contemporary Kerala. Representation, the ruptures in the meta-narratives of progress and reformation in the regional public sphere, the extent to which such registries impinge on subversive actions of non-heteronormative subjects are the core themes discussed in the second section.

In this thesis I have refrained from using the term “queer” for its diverging political connotations in the postmodern age of academics. I have adopted more of a “scavenger methodology”, identified by Judith Halberstam as a queer methodology for the purposes of this study than a well defined and a disciplined set of methodological tools. According to Halberstam this methodology helps one to focus on “what has been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies” (Halberstam 1998, 13). Halberstam further notes that such a method of studying sexual sites and subjectivities “attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses . . . to work towards disciplinary cohesion” (*Ibid*). The methods I have adopted and the nature of materials I have used are discussed in detail at the beginning of each chapter in the thesis. I have provided a detailed overview of my thesis towards the end of this introduction.

John and Nair in their study refuse the idea that sexuality is a question of silence. Following Foucault they argue that this focus on the “conspiracy of silence”, both within activism and academism, has turned us blind “to the multiple sites where “sexuality” has long been embedded” (John and Nair 1998, 1). However this shouldn’t lead one directly to sites where sexuality has a massive presence and where it is constricted to imply biological genitality-

spheres of law and medicine for instance. Only through a reconceptualisation of sexuality in the Indian context can this parochialism be done away with. They suggest that we think of sexuality rather as “a way of addressing sexual relations, their spheres of legitimacy and illegitimacy, through the institutes and practices, as well as discourses and forms of representation, that have long been producing, framing, distributing and controlling the subject of “sex” ” (John and Nair 1998, 1-2). The authors suggest three sources which operated to consolidate the field of knowledge about sex and the body in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century India: demography, social reform discourse, and the anthropology of family and kinship. In contrast to the metropolitan counterpart, in modern India:

It was not . . . the confessional couch or the hystericised women that generated knowledge and anxieties about sexuality . . . so much as, on the one hand, the administrative urgency of the colonial power to make sense of and thereby govern a baffling array of ‘types and classes’ and their family systems, and on the other, the nationalist need to define the dutiful place of the citizen/subjects of the incipient nation.

(John and Nair 1998: 8-9).

A number of studies in the different linguistic and cultural contexts of India have already addressed colonial transformations and the meticulousness with which body was assigned new meanings by the reform discourse. Reform movements in colonial and post colonial periods involved conspicuous attempts to reform the indigenous culture from its supposedly ‘degenerated’ conditions. Several authors have analysed the formation of a new gender order and sexual moralities during the colonial reform period in the region of Keralam (Devika 2002, 2005 and 2005a; Kodoth 2002; Arunima 2003; Kumaramkandath 2011), as well as in the rest of India and other Third world situations (Jayawardena 1986; Chatterjee 1989; Bacchetta 1999). The colonial transformations have indeed critically remapped the sexual and gender topographies in

the colonies; this apart from introducing new bodies of ideas about sociality, self-discipline, nation, and so on which remained at the heart of constituting new subjectivities. This was also a period when newly emerged interests of caste and class conjoined the Victorian patriarchal moral notions to constitute modern gender forms.

Partha Chatterjee, for instance, in his well known inner-outer (*ghar-bahar*) argument shows how the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalists in Bengal resolved the ‘women’s question’ – an issue that remained at the heart of the earlier reform movements in Bengal. He suggests that the nationalist elite resolved the issue through a rather clear demarcation between the inner and outer realms of culture. While the outer (*bahar*), the public sphere, was defined in terms of Indians’ equality with the other, that is the British, the inner (*ghar*) realm was defined in terms of what made this cultural context different from the colonisers, that is spirituality. According to this definition women were the bearers of this spirituality and any policy decision affecting their status was a matter to be resolved within this inner realm. A logical extension of this was to postpone any discussion of the women’s question in the public sphere to a time when this outer realm exclusively belonged to the Indian nationalists alone. Thus this new patriarchal nationalist discourse not only distinguished itself from the West but also from the mass of the indigenous population since the spirituality posited by this discourse carried relevance only to the few sections of an emerging elite, upper caste section of the population (Chatterjee 1989).

Sharmila rege in her work on *lavani* performance in Maharashtra in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, shows how the upper caste interests in urban theatre worked both to neutralize and assail the “licentious and immoral folk forms of the natives” within the framework of Victorian theatre

(Rege 1995). The lower caste *kolhati* women who not only performed *lavani* but also earned the daily bread for their families and even managed the financial activities of the troupes they were performing, were gradually alienated from the roles they were performing. By the 1940s the process of reforms ended up in the banning of all forms of entertainment those were categorised as ‘obscene’ and the ex-female *lavani* performers had to turn towards prostitution as a sole source of livelihood. Although, as Rege analyses, the early *lavani* performance involved the customary bidding for the sexual services of the performers where the upper caste, elite interests still held an upper hand, the very prevalence of *lavani* performance as such gave the women artists to remain in exclusive control of their material resources and their sexuality. Thus beyond the questions of subversion and/or empowerment Rege observes how the “modern Victorian values” were deployed to alter the rationale behind the *lavani* performance and to abolish such performances (Rege 1995, 23-26)

Similar case has recurred in the context of the debate over the abolition of *devadasis* – a tradition in which young women from certain specific lower caste groups were dedicated to the local Hindu temples – in Tamil Nadu, another South Indian state, in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Kannabiran investigates about the different positions assumed in this debate and observes that the non-monogamous nature of *devadasis* predominantly controlled the common and wider perceptions about them and led to the belief that “they could contract sexual diseases”. While this remained so on the other hand a few *devadasis* who were also “performing artists of repute” were heralded as exemptions from the rest whose identity were configured solely on the basis of their sexuality. Kannabiran observes that this selection was simultaneously rooted within the caste, class formulas that were dominant during the period (Kannabiran 1995, 58-59).



Kannabiran shows how three different discourses of the period 1860-1935 in the Madras Presidency – the social reform movement, the nationalist movement and the non- Brahmin movement – had overlapped with each other to arrive on shared suppositions and perceptions about the *devadasi* tradition (Kannabiran 1995).

The emergence of a new body politics during colonialism was essentially an offshoot of the colonial and nationalist enterprises' attempt to open new vistas of knowledge about Indian tradition and society that would help build a nation rooted on the progressive liberal principles of modernity. It becomes important to note here that the colonizer was very selective in choosing the texts to redefine Indian tradition. Bacchetta notes that the orientalist discourse and the colonial legal practices in India selectively divided the (particularly Hindu) texts as belonging to “little” and “great” traditions. The great tradition comprised texts of Brahminical elite who constituted three percent of the Hindu population. “Orientalists selectively translated this great tradition works and left little tradition works (that comprised works of the rest of the Hindu population) by the wayside” (Bacchetta 1999, 146). Uma Chakravarty has previously argued that such selectivity “centred on texts where male subjectivities could be understood in conformity with British notions of masculine virility, and where femininity and women could be marginalized” (Chakravarty 1989). Similarly around the debates on *Sati* in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Latamani highlights that “the privileging of Brahminic scripture and the equation of tradition with scriptures is a colonial discourse on India” (Latamani 1998, 122-123).

Earlier Ashish Nandy has argued that “[m]odern colonialism won its great victories not so much through its military and technological prowess as through its ability to create secular

hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order” (Nandy 1983, ix). He further observed that “the drive for mastery over men is not merely a by-product of a faulty political economy but also of a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over the non human and the sub human, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical, and the modern or the progressive over the traditional or the savage” (1983, x). The transformations and the larger logical framework of progress and reformation has left lasting impressions in the deeper and varying cultural registries of the Indian context where body is necessarily implicated upon as the primary target of all reform enterprises. Further, as I will argue during the course of this thesis, reformation and progress have become everlasting processes that constantly regulate the cultural consciousness in these contexts. Thus this logical framework inherently functions through invoking questions of progress and by constantly reproducing the oppressive power structures.

### **Keralam in the grid of transitions**

The movement to revive the society was equally strong in Keralam during the 19<sup>th</sup>- early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Dilip Menon argues that reformation movement in Keralam, especially during its initial phases in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, was marked by a stark absence of nationalism (Menon 2002). Drawing from the experiences of other locales within the subcontinent he claims that this was a unique phenomenon. Reform enterprises in Keralam rather implied caste reform movements through such initiatives as Sree Narayana Darma Paripalana Yogam movement (SNDP), Nair Service Society (NSS) as also similar initiatives from other lower and upper castes. He proposes caste reform movements in Keralam in the late nineteenth century as exerting a contemporaneous influence as nationalism did elsewhere in India. This was also a

period when the modern technologies of representation, especially print media, was deployed to enhance loud contemplations about the changing definitions of self.

According to Dilip Menon the upper caste and lower caste representations', especially novels', use of the newly emerged social histories and interpretations made available by European social sciences varied from each other to greater degrees. Irrespective of such variations, he argued, "they addressed a troubled present in which questions of self, community and society had to be posed afresh" (Menon 2002, 42-43). Thus measurements were invoked to construct a new self in the face of colonial modernity and a new rationalism. However this was not restricted to instilling new identity consciousness in terms of caste locations; rather new standards were set off to embark on modern social lives. At the centre of this project were questions pertaining to sex and gender. Devika argues "that the formation of modern gender identities in late 19th and early 20th Century Keralam was deeply implicated in the project of shaping governable subjects who were, at the one and same time, 'free' and already inserted into modern institutions" (Devika 2005, 461).

Another interesting paradigm, attended to by a rich array of scholarship, in the context of Keralam is in relation to the matrilineal system of family units that several communities in the region have followed. Recasting matrilineality in order to construct patrilineal family as the base unit for the society of Keralam to enter into modernity is considered as a milestone in its modern history. It is by now widely accounted that nearly 50 percent of the Malayali population belonging to different castes and communities followed matrilineality in, and in the period before, the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Arunima in her study about Nair matrilineality in Keralam testifies that the matrilineal

kinship system in Keralam has so far been the only kinship system in the world that was abolished through legal measurements (Arunima 2003). The enactment of the Malabar Marriage Act in 1896 – considered to be the first and most important step in the direction of abolishing all non-monogamous, non-normative conjugal relationships in the region now known as Keralam – was an event that occurred amidst a liberal discourse of progress, freedom and individual identity.

Through this Act the institution of monogamous patrilineal marriage was produced as the historically progressive form over the “trammels of the joint family system”; through this the youngsters from upper class Nair families who were behind the movement managed to gain control over the matrilineal family properties as well as the sexuality and fertility of Nair women (Arunima 2003, 128). The reason for demanding for the promulgation of this Act was that it enabled the newly emerging conjugal unities within Nair caste to be considered as “respectable” as opposed to “concubinage” – as per the observations made in some of the previous High Court judgments. It also helped those Nair men who have entered into new occupations under colonial administration with the help of English education to divert their income to the husband-wife conjugal units instead of channeling it into the joint family pool (128-130). Arunima draws our attention to the emergence and usage of a new set of terms around these incidents since using terms like “concubinage” to signify traditional forms of marriage where divorce and remarriage were rather easy was a 19<sup>th</sup> century development (2003, 129).

While this specific history of Keralam opens a rich treasure for conducting analytical investigations it also becomes problematic for the extent to which it guides the researcher to

unproblematically stress upon matriliney, or at least this episode in its history, either as a source of Keralam's exception to other similar locales or as testifying its liberatory history. This often results in what could be easily recognised as a stereotypical reproduction of the region of Keralam as always and already different. In the context of her discussion about *Sancharam*, the Malayalam short film that depicts the story of a lesbian relationship between two young girls in Keralam, Gopinath argues that Keralam exists as a digressive "other" in relation to the Indian nation. Thus a film like *Sancharam* can draw from the obliterated histories of a matrilineal past that "stubbornly refuse to reconcile themselves within a national present" (Gopinath 2007: 352). In her Ph D thesis Navaneetha specifically draws our attention to the risks involved in returning to this past which in itself is "memory of an upper caste pre-colonial past" and "results in an erasure of the challenges faced by sexuality politics in the present" (Navaneetha 2010, 50).

This form of critique has special relevance since it addresses the complexities involved in dealing with the contemporary politics of sexuality and queer movements. There are two significant dimensions of this generic criticism, one which posits that the concerned history of matriliney helps invoke only the upper caste memories of a past and, two which views resorting to this past as unduly shifting the focus from the contemporary regulatory mechanisms of sexuality. However the very proposition that matriliney and the associated history – of its origin and existence in pre colonial period and its transition towards a complete disappearance during and after colonial times – is just a reflection of upper caste memory itself is a colonial construction. That matriliney is always remembered as an offshoot of the hegemony of the Nambutiri community (Brahmins of Keralam) was an essential part of the colonial propaganda. According to this knowledge the traditional land relations, systems of conjugality followed by different

communities and property relations were all located, in what was predominantly interpreted as, a pre colonial power hierarchy of which Nambutiris were undisputedly placed at the top rank. I have discussed at length this part in the history of Keralam which still exerts critical influence in the current technologies of sexual subjectification in the second chapter. For instance the context of *smarthavicharam* and the image of Thathrikkutty were productions of this colonial history. This has become, over a period of time, part of the popular memory which consistently reproduce those images to remind an uncivilized, non-progressive pre modern regime of sexual anarchy.

The propaganda was especially strong around ‘non normative’ systems like matriliney, polyandry and *sambandham* and occupied a central place in the civilizing mission initiated by colonizer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the current moral perceptions and the organization of public sphere in Keralam this past holds particular significance to the extent it critically boosts the progressive politics of modern sexuality. In the thesis, in the second chapter especially, I will argue that the early construction of this past as sexually anarchic is constantly reproduced in throughout its modern history through different forms of representation. The cultural context of progress in Keralam has consistently subscribed from those early transitions and the thick narratives that filled those spaces and substantiated such transitions. The two forms of sexuality that re-invoke perceptions of sexual anarchy in a responsive fashion in the contemporary cultural context of Keralam are, one, the pre colonial conjugal practices that existed through a peculiar inter caste dynamics and, two, non-heterosexual/heteronormative practices. Their entry as social issues in the public sphere of Keralam have occurred in albeit two different time periods. Nevertheless all the major concerns, questions and elements of thoughts those have played

critical role during the occurrence of the former seem to be playing an equally crucial role in the construction of the latter.

In his introduction to “History and the Present” Chatterjee (2002) observes how early social histories in different regional contexts in India continued to survive by drawing upon popular memories in the subsequent periods. The changing practices of historiography in the international academic context as well as in the context of Indian academia have, by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, countered the scientificity of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century social histories. He argues that the old social history was deeply meshed in the contentious sectarian, caste, linguistic and other forms of cultural politics which was an inherent component of the colonial period. “The . . . [new history] established itself by breaking away from the old social history which, however, did not die. Rather it lived on outside the academy, sustaining itself by drawing upon the memories and passions of the popular” (Chatterjee 2002, 7). It is precisely this existence outside the mainstream intellectual circles that living memories of early images becomes a possible feat to be attained in the realm of culture with the help of the technologies of representation.

Leavy (2005) quotes from Sturken (1997) that popular memory is a site where culture and social power coalesces to produce dominant historical narratives of the past. In her analysis of the texture of the film “Pearl Harbor” and the role of the hyper modern mechanisms of history-memory in the making of this film Leavy observes that “[m]emory-representations are the material emblems of historically situated processes of knowledge construction” (Leavy 2005)<sup>12</sup>. According to her social historical memory gets re constituted through memory products situated within definite social contexts that embody elements of the social environment in which the

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<sup>12</sup> Internet copy. Page number not available.

particular historical event was originally occurred. Popular culture becomes an important element in the reproduction of the various imageries of the past and knowledge about it arrived at through historically specific processes deeply rooted in power relations. According to Rosenweig and Thelen popular culture in contemporary societies forms an important source for learning history and in constituting collective memories (1999, 15-16).

In the context of Keralam the memories of sexual anarchy constitute the immediate background in the contemporary perceptions of non-normative, especially non-heteronormative, forms of sexuality. Post Foucault (1975) collective memories are presumed as possible sites of cultural resistance. De Certeau has argued that forms of memory undergo vehement contestations and that various strategies are deployed in their acceptance and denial in the specific cultural contexts (De Certeau 1984). The historical episode surrounding colonial transformations and matriliney in Keralam have definite impact upon the structuring of those memory practices and the contestations around them. Representations, especially through the print media, and the various contentions in the modern cultural history of Keralam have significantly influenced the ways in which those memory practices structure and are structured in the public sphere. Print has especially been important in this context since it has enabled the public sphere in Keralam to gather itself around questions of body and desire at different periods of time with definite orientations. Those orientations in turn have been rooted in concerns of progress and pre conceived knowledge systems.

By now it is part of an academic common sense that representation being a political act is deeply embedded within the production of knowledge and exercise of power within a social



context; that representational practices in print and other forms do invariably serve the ideological interests of those in the dominating positions and help in the popular perceptions of social relations to the advantage of the dominant groups. The more familiar instance in this context would be the depiction of the colonized as “barbaric and degenerated” by the colonizer (Chatterjee 1989: 622). In the same vein generations of such representational strategies and the resultant stereotypes have rendered, for instance, women as inferior to men in all capacities except reproduction and in maintaining family cycles and homosexuals as ‘perverts’ or as inverting the ‘natural’ categories. Representations and the cultural contests around what is represented reflect upon the selective appropriation and denial of previous knowledge systems. It is precisely the various episodes of progress in the modern history of Keralam and the extent to which these were centralized upon the question of a normative sexuality that the thesis is attempting to explore.

This also, as I will argue in this thesis, helps one to address how the subject is interpellated and through what structures do such interpellation and regulatory mechanisms attain the status of being progressive. The thesis interrogates the claims initiated by the processes of globalization and economic liberalization about liberal, post modern sexualities in the various Indian contexts. While globalization is indisputably a cultural force bringing in with it radical transformations in the people’s living conditions, cultural perceptions and politics of sexuality these transformations are also inevitably embedded within the local social, cultural, political and economic conditions. Ritty Lukose in an article on consumption practices among youth in the contemporary Keralam argues that “such conditions are profoundly shaped by colonial and nationalist categories such as “tradition/modernity” and “public/private”” (Lukose 2005, 915).

Thus beyond the understanding of globalization as “homogenizing” the local, the spaces and practices of consumption “are structured by specifically postcolonial preoccupations about tradition and modernity” (Lukose 2005, 930-931).

The historical specificities of the cultural conditions can usefully be deployed to understand popular notions of homosexuality and sexual subjectivities in the contemporary society. In the last chapter of this thesis I attempt to initiate a discussion about the elusive and fluid nature of non-heteronormative sexual subjectivities in Third world locales. The popular perceptions of homosexuality and the constitution of the male homosexual subjectivity constantly seek recourse to the cultural history which is not sufficiently accounted for in studies about contemporary sexualities. I will argue how this postcolonial historiography opens new avenues where investigations about these topics could effectively be carried over. This also enables one to circumvent the two pre-given analytic modes within which sexuality studies are more or less predominantly or fashionably situated. On the one hand the need to account for the influence of the transnational identity discourse and gay, lesbian, transgender movements have very often ignored the material and historical conditions that mediate subjective contemplations of sex and desire. Studies about the local specificities, on the other hand, have more often than not led to dehistoricized and exoticized depictions of the non-Western other.

The cultural context of progressive modernity with its own specific historical configurations helps one to recognize the nuances involved in the reorganization of the politics of desire. The critical and reflexive ethnography of *flute* – a derogatory metonym for male homosexuals in Keralam – in the social and cruising spaces and popular perceptions of

homoeroticism show how individual subjectivities and meanings of sex and desire are devolved on the continuing, habitual and inveterate subscription of the popular knowledge about the past. The subscription of this progressive modern history, performed predominantly in the Malayali public sphere, assumes the form of local resistance against a constructed notion of sexualities imported from elsewhere, mainly the West, under the aegis of globalization. In the thesis I observe this as an offshoot of multiple discourses all of which work incessantly towards disciplining the body, perpetuating ideas and engendering a cultural context that are congenial to progress. The discourse of reformation, as I discuss in the first and second chapters, commonly understood as triggered off during the colonial regime in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has multiple stages in the modern history of Kerala. Definitions of sex, gender and public and private continue to occupy central place in the anxieties and preoccupations about reforming the society.

### **Regarding the time-frame covered in this thesis**

Although it is not uncommon nowadays to find academic enterprises refuting the rigid chronology of history, as Kamala Ganesh observes in her introduction to an edited volume on culture and identity in contemporary India, “a demarcation is generally kept between the three phases, colonial, nationalist and post-independent” (Ganesh 2005, 15). The current project, to a certain extent, surpasses such demarcations and shows how things – events, narratives, debates – played out in the past revisit the regional public culture and critically reshape its contemporary forms; the passage from the colonial to the postcolonial fails to produce any critical impact on the larger process of consolidating the normative and cultural grounds – this in order to rationalize the existence of body and to keep it within the circuits of progressive ideologies. I have attempted to focus on how the different contestations about values, norms, representational practices and non-heteronormative subjects have borrowed from previous debates and writings in

the past, especially those produced during the colonial and post colonial periods. Even though the arrangement of this thesis has followed the chronology of the contestations it analyses, each of these sites are foregrounded with regard to the multiple discourses that have produced them and those they have caused to be in place. Thus the definition of time in this project is at the same time a problematic one and opening up new possibilities.

It is problematic for the fact that it, by arranging the sites in the order of their formation in history, still adheres to the conventional pattern of continuity or evolution of morals and principles as they are identified in the present. While this remains so the thesis, at the same time, takes into account the larger transformations, albeit through a conditioning process taking into account the significance of those shifts in reshaping the cultural configurations, occurring within the region which were crucial in producing new discourses. Thus it isn't what Walter Benjamin has termed as "antiquarian historicism . . . a discipline that reduced history to a mere chronicle" (quoted in Hanssen 1998, 59)<sup>13</sup>. Rather the thesis explores through the continuities and discontinuities within these discursive spaces where the formation of culture takes place. In other words all the sites referred to in this analysis are eternal to the extent their contents have a perennial existence, ever since their registration took place in the cultural zones, and which do not cease to exist after crossing the particular time periods of their 'actual' existence. They are generated from previous discourses of sex and body and are important registries in the popular memories of the region; usefully projected by the Malayali public sphere those sites function like repositories of public sexual morality and heteronormativity.

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<sup>13</sup> Hanssen observes how such a chronological concept of time upholds the ideologies of progress against which Benjamin would hold the radical temporality and discontinuity of the shock and the dialectical image (Hanssen 1998, 49-60).

For instance the site of *smarthavicharam*, a pre modern practice the modern interpretations of which are analysed in the second chapter, clubs the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial discourses, the paradigm of progress inculcated into popular imaginations through the reformation enterprises in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century period, and the contemporary writings that goes back to this practice and its constructed history in an attempt to caution about a possible context of sexual anarchy that non-heteronormativity, and any deviance from the progressive moral structure, might call forth. The ethnography in the last chapter of clandestine same sex intimacies and subjectivities returns their formation as deeply implicated within the progressive narratives of family and reproduction. Similarly all the sites under analysis here surpass their immediate time periods of formativity. What accompanies them in throughout these shifts is a material definition of progress combined with cultural constructions of body and desire, East and West and an uncivilized, sexually anarchic past and a progressive present. Rather than imagining time as frozen within a mess of ideologies this helps to re-map the local terrains as embedded within a constellation of such constructions that keeps coming back and forth in those cultural terrains.

### **Thesis overview**

For the purposes of the thesis I have chosen sites from different time periods that have been crucial in consolidating the sexual moral framework within this regional context. By exploring these sites I try to understand the common (popular) perceptions of subjectivity and the (un)contested grounds of heteronormativity. The thesis is structured into four chapters apart from this introduction and a conclusion. The remaining four chapters are discussed under two broad sections. The first section, titled “Shaping Desire in the Modern Way: Registers in History”, is intended to bring to light the intensity of the earlier propagandas in Keralam. I undertake a

discussion of how a logical framework was set by the earlier reformers in order to promote a rational basis for a modern progressive society. This was crucial in the intense normativisation process undertaken during the early periods through which pre-modern and community/caste specific practices of conjugality and property relations were totally eradicated.

The proposed rational order inaugurated direct links between the body and the social by meticulously working on formulas on material and moral progress. The first chapter – titled “Blueprints of Progress: Body and Self in Early Malayalam Magazines” – will try to look at how sexual morality as a central concern appeared in the early Malayalam magazines during the reformation period. It will discuss how body was made a central focus in narratives around progress and reformation during this period. Theoretical anxieties concerning the formation of a new moral order during the colonizer/colonized interface and the new registers of transformation that it eventually culminated in will also be discussed during the course of this chapter. During the course of the thesis I will argue that this historical context is crucial to understand the contemporary cultural terrains and to map its regional context against the prevailing hetero-patriarchal structures. An understanding of this moment in history is crucial in order to capture the circularity of anxieties and arguments that has surfaced time and again in Kerala about practices concerning its moral order.

In the second chapter, titled “The Making of Thathrikkutty: *smarthavicharam*, sexual morality and more”, I undertake an elaborate discussion of *smarthavicharam*, the pre-modern practice of trialing women charged with adultery, a practice that existed among Nambutiris in Kerala: the practice was abolished in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. I take up for analysis an

incident of *smarthavicharam* that took place in the first decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century; a first time incident in the history of Keralam where individuals trialed for sexual offenses were targeted in public. State administration had to directly intervene into the proceedings due to the unprecedented public interest accumulated around this incident and the modern ideological apparatuses including newspapers and magazines had a key stake in the issue. I will also draw from various narratives produced on this practice in the preceding and subsequent periods, including contemporary narratives, of this incident. This incident, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, brought *smarthavicharam* to the centre of the ongoing contestations around matriliney and *sambandham*. It also functioned as a major factor in transforming the nature of intercommunity relationships in Keralam, especially those existed between Nambutiris and the other communities. The narratives of, and contestations around, *smarthavicharam* was critical in resolving the intricate links between caste, gender, sex and conjugality and hegemonised heterosexual monogamy as the only valid form of sexual union.

*Smarthavicharam* was a useful site for the reformist enterprise to address the ‘public’ as a homogeneous body related through language nationalism as opposed to the erstwhile caste oriented locations. I will argue that *smarthavicharam* and Thathrikkutty – the woman who was trialed in this particular incident – function as the crucial link between the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial descriptions of the indigenous culture as degenerated and the thriving modern moral regime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the help of materials drawn from archives I will attempt to show how the incident under discussion was manipulated to construct models of a past that was sexually anarchic. These models are significant to the extent they are constantly reinvoked and used as tropes in the current contentions. The past editions of contestations and images of aberrant

sexuality have been critical in the subsequent periods as well. The hegemonic language of morality has consistently maintained the overwhelming ambitions for progress as an uncontested area in the social and cultural spheres by foregrounding images of a 'dark past'. These images and models and a constructed history are consistently deployed in the public domains to characterize progress as an inherent offshoot of the modern public morality. The chapter also examines how *smarthavicharam* as a site mediates between early 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial and anthropological writing practices and the 21<sup>st</sup> century local moralists' writings. This 'postcolonial blindness', a factor that I will argue is the key behind the unmediated appropriation of earlier narratives in order to recast sexual subversions into those earlier constructed models, is the other side of the obsession with the progressive moral structures.

The second section, titled "Re-forming the Hegemonies: Postcoloniality, Sexual Morality and Homosexuality", will deal with narratives emerging from the dawn of social realism in Malayalam literature from 1930s onwards to the contemporary in addition to an ethnographic account of the male homosexual figure within the cultural spaces of Kerala. The third chapter, the first in this section and titled "(Hetero) sexual excesses: social realism in mid twentieth century", will map the emergence of social realism and the contentious space around the question of representing non-normative sexual practices, especially homoerotic intimacies and practices, in literature. In conventional academic spaces social realism is understood as being crucial in democratizing the representation of life experiences in literature and other art forms. However I will argue that the various contestations around social realism during its emergence and thereafter transformed it into a space where the cultural politics of sex assumed candid forms under the guise of wider participation of the public. Social realism in Malayalam effectively



mediated between the earlier progressive/reformist writing practices and shifts in representation towards exposing the differential levels of vulnerabilities under capitalism. There were multiple publics actively participating in the much heated contests and each claimed to produce the region through their set of moral perceptions.

The term public, as it is deployed in this thesis in general, does not exhaust the possibilities of having a larger public or even publics outside the domains of representation. This is especially true considering the various limitations imposed in accessing these spaces in the form of caste, class and gender. However there is a constant widening of the public sphere engendered through technologies of representation and the various cultural contestations that those technologies mediated. The possible existence of publics outside the visibilities of public sphere doesn't necessarily imply an alternative existence of moral norms or even sexual practices. However there definitely exist spaces of subversion that is simultaneously configured as normal and abnormal elements of sexual culture in Keralam.

In the fourth chapter, titled “Canons of Desire: Homosexuality in 21<sup>st</sup> century Keralam”, I draw both from writings produced on the topic of homosexuality and sexual morality in the contemporary society and from my ethnography of *flute* – a common metaphor for male homosexuals in Keralam. It is here that I will be revisiting theories of transnational identities and the intricacies involved in reading the local non-normative sexual subjectivities as inherent offshoots of the influences made by global sexual cultures. Studies that have taken the other route, however, have nearly romanticized and exoticized the local sexual cultures by overtly stressing upon their regional specificities and through a near total negation of external influences.

However I will argue that the distinctness of the 'local' remains in the dynamics of social and historical interactions which in turn produce models of subjective mediations.

It is against this context that I will attempt to understand the configuration of subversive spaces and homosexual subjectivities in Keralam against the meta-narratives of family and progress. The inside/outside paradigm in their existence throws light upon the infinite pores in the social structure allowing more fluid relationships in the society. Their clandestine existence invariably challenge the dominant moral scripts imposed upon social bodies in Keralam. Nevertheless, as I will argue in the chapter, the existence of these subjectivities in the externalities of homoeroticism meticulously draws from the same super scripts that it often violates. The practical existence of male homosexual subjects in this context becomes a direct offshoot of their clever manipulation of markers or symbols assigned to subjects perceived as 'normal' and 'deviant'. The politics of sexuality is topsy turveyed and inverted by adhering to the same discourses of marriage, family and reproduction, the most common and accepted symbols of 'normal' subjectivity, in an attempt to hide their otherness. This complicates our current understandings of subversion as standing radically outside of, or as directly countering, the mainstream discourses. Between the alternative sexual practices and exculpatory statements, the two edges that determine the everyday reality of clandestine homosexual subjects, lies the sedimented links between progress and sexual morality.

Finally the concluding part will reflect on how this thesis has re explored historical and sexual sites in order to point towards new horizons of knowledge about modernity in Keralam. Rather than looking at agency and resistance I have focused upon how the discourse on

*sadacharam* was brought in as a cultural nostrum and survived, and still held in the local cultural negotiations, with the same significance. The regional public sphere is a dialectical constitution where questions of body and cultural practices are repeatedly overshadowed under concerns of morality and progress. This overarching concern not only helps heteronormative structures to survive in the society but also critically regulates the conditioning of subjective consciousness. It also renders contemporary in a state of apperception that consistently picks from previous narratives.

## **Section I**

### **Shaping Desire in the Modern Way: Registers in History**

## Chapter I

### Blueprints of Progress, Prescriptions for ‘Revival’: Body and Self in Early Malayalam Magazines

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#### Introduction

The colonial criticism of the indigenous tradition of Indians as “degenerate and barbaric” (Chatterjee 1989, 622) had, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the erstwhile Malayalam speaking territories, become a self-evident and an uncontested fact for the emerging modern educated local population. Responding to these perceived decadent conditions this relatively small section of population commenced an exercise in exhortation especially through the print media. The attempts to revive the local tradition and culture categorically maintained, above all, a rational prerogative for western centric values. This was primarily reflected in the propaganda around issues concerning women, body, sex, desire, erotic pleasure, propriety and respectability and so on. Rather than simply translating the Victorian values, this body of writings, appearing mainly in Malayalam magazines in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Keralam, addressed even the most fundamental practices associated with the local life. It basically consisted of attempts to support reform enterprises by justifying and rationalizing its engagements to build a modern and progressive society. However the rationalization simultaneously involved a derationalization of many local practices, customs and traditions. The bifurcation into rational and irrational mainly drew on concerns regarding strengthening ‘the ‘material and moral’ base of the society. The following account from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century illustrates this:

Mental progress [*manasika parishkaram*], physical progress [*kayika parishkaram*] and moral progress [*sanmargika parishkaram*] are pre-conditions for self progress [*swayam parishkaram*]. Mental progress has enabled the invention of such amazing and useful things as the steam engine, electricity etc., by the Europeans. Physical progress is related to the use of body [*sareeram*] for purposes that are directly related to the progress of the society as a whole. Moral progress is essential and fundamental for the other two pre-conditions for the overall progress of the individual self. It [moral progress] should be attained by following the moral values [*sadhachara moolyangal*] of a society of which the lines are drawn according to levels that would, in a long run, benefit both the society as a whole and the individuals living in it. Moral progress requires the individuals to abandon all immoral calls [*asanmargika chitha vrithikal*] rooted in the evil desires of mind. Anything that is motivated by and is oriented towards excessive desire for material things and pleasures is bound to bring unhappiness in life and will meet with ill fate. Such desires and attempts to seek pleasures will not only spoil the life of the individuals concerned but would also bring total anarchy for the society<sup>1</sup>.

The rational ground of this envisaged morality remained precisely in the animated relationships between individual body and social progress. A new rationality was being constituted as an ideational ground for embarking and settling on a journey towards progress.

This section purports to analyse in detail two important registers from Keralam's early modern history in a length of two chapters – the first one is the reform literature –especially covering those appeared in early magazines – produced in Malayalam during the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century period and the second one the contentious space around *smarthavicharam*. These narrative spaces remain as repositories wherefrom its preoccupations with reformation and tropes of body, self, desire and progress, produced and widely circulated therein, are consistently

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown author in *Vidyavinodini*, 1899/Malayalam Era 1074 (here onwards M. E). Vol. 7 No. 2: 4-9.

borrowed by the Malayali public sphere in the subsequent periods. Patrick Hutton argues that accounts about the present-moment explicitly refer to the past and contain implicit references of the future. This helps those accounts to retain the relationality of the present (Hutton 1993). According to him print technology and its culture have not only allowed high speed dissemination of knowledge but have also opened space for a constant repetition and reproduction of that knowledge (19). Past incidents, events, tensions and contentions revisit the present-moment through their availability in the form of print. In his analysis of contemporary notions of masculinity in Keralam Ratheesh Radhakrishnan argues that the “various events and moments in history are replayed [in the present] through narrativisation and popular memory” (Radhakrishnan 2006, 1).

The early narrative spaces in colonial Keralam have a central significance in shaping discourses of sexuality in the subsequent periods. The visions in the past about the past, present and future still shape the contemporary discourses of sexuality and deviance through a set of value added formulations and a chief preoccupation with reformation and progress. This need not indicate a clean hegemony of ideas produced in the past or a smooth continuum of those ideas to the present. In his commentary about collective memory Schudson points towards their shared nature – that it is a repository of shared cultural images and narratives – and argues that this never imply consensus or an absence of challenge towards its hegemony (Schudson 1992). On the other hand these sites are filled with tensions, anxieties and, sometimes, stark differences at the same time as producing dominant versions that are reproduced via modern technologies of media and through which this past is remembered. These commemorative practices have a

substantial role in reconfiguring the multiple positions assumed by the public sphere in the later periods (Irwin-Zarecka 1994; Schudson 1992) and in the technologies of subjectivisation.

In an article Uma Chakravarty observes that “[w]hat was gradually and carefully constituted, brick by brick, in the interaction between colonialism and nationalism is now so deeply embedded in the consciousness of the middle classes that ideas about the past have assumed the status of revealed truths (Chakravarty 1989, 28). Whereas this thesis as a whole draws from the continuities and discontinuities in those discursive spaces this section examines how knowledge about sex, desire and normativity was produced and to what effect. As opposed to regarding the colonial state as the context and conduit of regulatory power this section considers a huge array of indigenously produced texts as translating that power. Those spaces require independent analysis for the extent to which they were producing knowledge about local sexualities and reordering them from their location within the power hierarchies that characterized the colonial situation. The subsequent chapters in this thesis shall draw considerably from this chapter for contentions in the public sphere in the subsequent periods in Keralam return to this past. Through such revisits a reproduction of the sedimented networks of morality and progress in the region is attained by the public sphere.

This chapter seeks to specifically explore how a newly emerging public sphere – represented in the narrative space of those early magazines – during early modern history in Keralam was intensely engaged in working out new formulas for regulating what was commonly termed as ‘carnal desires’. Situated in the mid of the colonial discourse of decadence and a newly inherited rationality and promises of modernity this narrative space borrowed from various



resources including modern science, literature, especially Western literature, and tradition to support its formulations. The discursive construction of normative sexualities during this period simultaneously involved the production of an image of the other side of it – that is sexual forms and practices those were inherently framed as non-normative and deviant. The vivid descriptions of a ‘desirable’ moral order surpassed even anxieties about female sexuality and women’s status which were placed at the superficial level in order to project descriptions of new normativity. A whole set of canons, popularized through the magazines, produced during this period captures the new modes of subjecting individual desire to public scrutiny.

The narrative space I am referring to here was not part of the popular media which too was in its beginning stages during this point of time. The production of those magazines was mainly intended to bridge the gap that existed between traditional modes of organizing social and individual lives and modern norms. These magazines were situated at the centre of reform enterprises although large level movement at the level of pragmatic politics under the leadership of specific caste organizations was a later event in Keralam at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless the narratives in those magazines were crucial in determining the discursive framework of reformation that, more than anything, stressed on the urgency with which the moral weakness of ‘tradition’ and impediments of subjection required to be overcome. This was *prima facie* a prerequisite for entering the age of modernity and for embarking on a journey towards progress.

### **Public sphere in early modern Keralam**

The second half, especially the last quarter, of 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period when assumptions about local degeneracy, perceived in the earlier colonial versions of local culture,

had driven an emerging public sphere in Keralam to engage in open discussions about raising/transforming the moral standards of indigenous population. A primary location where a feverish discussion about morality and its modern forms took place was the magazines circulated during this period. This was made possible mainly through the combination of two factors – English education and print technology – both of which were crucial in organizing a new public sphere that was both spatially connected and rich in its resources. In a paper published by the Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, Devika contends that an “undisputedly significant development of the late nineteenth century in Keralam was the emergence of an English-educated class which began to review the existent social order, ideas and institutions in sharply critical terms” (Devika 2002, 7). An equally important phenomenon in this connection was the emerging significance of print that remained at the disposal of this new class which not only used it to protect their interests but also clubbed it with questions of reformation.

This was a period when a reading public was gradually emerging in Keralam, a fact apparent from the increase in the circulation of Malayalam newspapers and magazines (Raghavan 1985; Priyadarshsan 1972, 1974). The period was also marked by the dynamics associated with the formation and opening of new spaces and venues for the modern English-educated men to come together and discuss “topics of general interest” (Devika 2002, 8). Instances of the opening ceremonies of new reading clubs and associations, debating clubs, literary clubs and so on were more or less regular events during the period. Devika quotes from an author in 1911 as to how the “Puthanchandai Reading Association” and “Chalai Reading Club” – both in the Thiruvithamkoor province under British rule – started functioning to celebrate Nagam Aiya’s appointment as the officiating Dewan in the 1890s (2002, 9-10). The

availability of spaces to read and to discuss found its utmost expression in the unprecedented boom in the production of magazines and literature that dealt with issues those were, by then, defined as matters of common interest.

The notion public sphere requires considerable amount of elucidation for it has always been a contested space attracting various claims from different segments of population. The Habermasian concept of “public sphere” defines it as a sphere that mediates between society and state where the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion; a place between private individuals and government authorities in which people can meet and have rational-critical debates about public matters<sup>2</sup>. However this conception of public sphere by Habermas has been “increasingly dismissed as idealistic, Eurocentric and unwittingly patriarchal ... [although] it continues to be routinely invoked in debates around democracy, citizenship and communication” (Goode 2005, 1). The claims of Habermas regarding the universal access principle of (European) modernity have been dismissed by critics by pointing towards the evolution and existence of public sphere precisely “through the exclusion of many groups including the poor, women and so

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<sup>2</sup> These discussions, according to Habermas, serve as a counterbalance to the political authorities, and imply physical meetings in such places as coffee houses and public squares as also in the media in letters, books, drama, and art (Habermas 1962). Habermas identified this sphere, which emerged in liberal Britain around the 1700s and then spread to other parts of Europe, powerful enough to maintain a positive check on the functioning of authorities. It thus described a space of institutions and practices between private interests and the realm of state power. According to one author “here occurred a public space outside of the control by the state, where individuals exchanged views and knowledge (Blanning 1987, 27). In the Habermasian theory, the bourgeois public sphere was preceded by a literary public sphere whose “favored genres revealed the interiority of the self and emphasized an audience-oriented subjectivity” (Randall 2008, 224). Habermas situated its emergence within “the principle of universal access” and argued that if it were to exclude specific groups it “was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all” (Habermas 1962, 85).

on” (Cubitt 2005, 93). This sphere was “an arena of contested meanings” where “different and opposing public manoeuvred for space” (Eley 1992, 293).

The notion of public sphere as conceived of by Habermas does not allow one to capture the politics of hegemony and the cultural/gender differences which have played critical roles in its very constitution. In the context of his discussion of public sphere in colonial Indian settings Bhattacharya cautions about the use of this concept (2005). Its conceptual power can lead one to understand its fragmented nature rather than concluding it as a homogenous and consensual sphere (2005, 154-156). According to him the conversations in the public sphere often resulted in reaffirming the differences that characterized its very constitution (2005, 156). In the context of Keralam this sphere evidently excluded segments of population that had little or no access to modern English education and/or modern values. The public sphere in such a context catered mainly to the aspirations of those few who had had the privilege of gaining familiarity with western values and modern ideas basically through English education. This was added by the colonial interpretations of pre modern caste differences exclusively in vertical terms of social hierarchy. The narrative space of the early magazines was a clear reflection of the concerns and preoccupations that permeated the public sphere. It was not uncommon during those days for magazines to include transcriptions of speeches delivered by people who held important positions in administration or who held higher statuses in the society both with respect to their caste and education. Basically structured in the fashion of moral sermons such transcripts were

generally meant to foreground the significance of reformation as a precondition to enter modernity<sup>3</sup>.

The access to early public sphere was, by default, regulated strictly through the peculiar caste and class combination that had already gained entrance to modern education, government jobs and, sometimes, to higher ranks in colonial administration. According to Devika (2002) this smaller section of the population that constituted the public sphere was made up of “Tamil Brahmans and Nairs” whereas a major part of the population remained outside the purview of its definition (31). The upper caste, male dominance over the early public sphere which was a result of this situation had remained successful in keeping questions about caste hierarchy outside of its purview. On the other hand the discourse of reformation specifically dealt with issues concerning the inauguration of a new moral regime. The heterogeneous practices of conjugality and property inheritance systems followed by different caste groups in Keralam, which were not sufficiently integrated to modernity or were non-modern by definition, were brought to the centre of reform discourse. The practice of scrutinizing the prevailing practices was a critical factor through which a systematic definition of morality and normativity was arrived at. As I would show in the following sections this involved a huge array of interpretations of everyday lives and practices followed by individuals beyond their caste identities and differences.

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<sup>3</sup> These were generally transcriptions of speeches delivered during local conventions connected with, on most occasions, community gatherings. However community reform programmes primarily targeted reforming the daily practices of individuals thus establishing a connection between individual self and the social environment. Transcriptions of speeches often surpassed the caste divides and were rather framed in a language of public reason with perceptions of a disciplined subject occupying the central space. Most editions of *Vidyavinodini*, *Lakshmi*, *Mangalodayam*, and several other magazines published around this period, opened with such transcriptions which reveal how the local was configured as an active space that converged reformation and caste interests in an emerging public-local network mediated mainly through print magazines.

The early deliberations in the public sphere were crucial to the extent its expansion in the subsequent periods, through expansion in the technologies of representation, had to mediate the sedimented ideas of the region as connected through progressive networks of morality. In her paper on the Family Planning Programme in Keralam, Devika takes note of some of the preoccupations of the stream of writings in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. She argues that the “main reason for the acceptance of the Family Planning Programme in Keralam was that it did not clash with the *sexual morality* of the emerging educated middle class groups of Malayali society” (2005, 348; emphasis mine). That this middle class sexual morality had attained considerable amount of acceptance and popularity in society by the 1950s has opened ample space to negotiate the fundamental logic of Family Planning Programme. The idea that body needs to be subjected to modern heterosexual monogamous principles was already a given frame which allowed sufficient room to accommodate discussions about the different controls on sexual desire within the space of domestic family.

### **Reformation, the subject and a language of desire**

While there definitely were debates and contentions on the question of social reform this space nevertheless was crucial in producing a conceptual terrain that delimited the scope and potentials of contesting these issues in the public sphere. The emergence of print in Keralam during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century was crucial in evincing imaginations of linguistic nationalism<sup>4</sup>; the magazines produced during these periods addressed the readers as a homogenous category

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<sup>4</sup> This definitely goes alongside Benedict Anderson’s much discussed theory on the emergence of print technology, the dissemination of print literature and their impact on nationalism especially in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Anderson 1983). Reform enterprise, which was invariably a response to the pressures of colonial capitalism and the discourse of decadence in 19<sup>th</sup> century Keralam, and its use of vernacular print, was the first ever space where Malayali as a linguistic and a cultural category gradually unfolded.

inhabiting Malayalam – the region. This enabled them to obliterate the heterogeneous identities and locations embedded within the local caste divisions and to foreground moral concerns as embodiments of common interests. For instance, highlighting hygienic and disciplined body as the irremissible quality of a modern subject was a common theme that captured a substantial space of these magazines. These columns, which I have discussed in detail in a later section in this chapter, translated the language of public rationality and universal moral standards deployed by the colonizer during the earlier civilizing mission. Such deployment while enabling a reconfiguration of the subject in the public sphere simultaneously maintained west as a legitimate resource for modeling this process upon.

Although as Dilip Menon has argued elsewhere (Menon 1994) that caste reformation movements had to fill the vacuum that was left due to the absence of the movement of nationalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Keralam a consciousness with regard to the cultural specificities of this linguistic terrain and a sense of belonging was simultaneously developing<sup>5</sup>. A number of magazines were produced in Malayalam during the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century those basically were engaged in conceptualizing issues in the public sphere that transcended the caste lines in the process of reforming the local cultural terrain. Thus reformation in Keralam was rather a hub where various elements including caste interests, mainly upper castiest, and linguistic identity were coalesced to produce new formulas of desire.

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<sup>5</sup> K. N. Panikkar also takes up cudgels against the theory that the 19th Century Renaissance in Keralam was the prelude to modern nationalism. “The Cultural-Intellectual 'renaissance' [in Keralam] did not necessarily merge with nationalism, nor was the latter a logical outcome of the former. Yet, the social consciousness generated by intellectual-cultural endeavours was integral to the process of the nation in the making” (Panikkar 2001, 32).

Although any explicit reference to Indian nationalism or even linguistic differentiations was still in the waiting room, print literature in Malayalam was eagerly and intensely framing public opinions about reforming the cultural terrains of this linguistic region which itself was commonly addressed to as “Malayalam” – after the local vernacular used there<sup>6</sup>. In fact the main feature of materials in print produced during this period was their engagement with questions regarding old and new languages of body and forms of desire. This narrative space was struggling to bring this whole scenario under the canvass of a new moral regime which was equally projected onto the individual subject. Thus individual subject remained at the centre of this discourse even while it addressed questions at larger levels. This was attained primarily by addressing cultural practices situated around the issues of sex and gender which were thus centralized and identified as the key element through which individuals could be subjected to a different – albeit modern – set of norms and regulatory apparatuses. I have already discussed postcolonial academic literature on this issue that explicate the complexities of these transformations in early modern Keralam, and several other contexts within the subcontinent, in the introduction to this thesis. The desiring subject occupied a central space in this discourse and was made the target of the whole reformation programme. The early interpellative exercises

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<sup>6</sup> Beyond signifying the local language or even the geographical region Malayalam was mainly used to refer to the ‘uniqueness’ of this region in terms of distinct sets of social arrangements, hierarchies, and practices that stood in complete difference from other regions within the subcontinent (Logan 1887, 129-130). Logan’s account basically constricts those specificities to the *jati* (caste) specific observances. For a detailed analysis of the changes that colonialism had caused in the *jati* and land specific relations, rituals and ceremonies see Menon 2007, 210-230 and Menon 2008. For a detailed account of rules governing the interaction between different *jati* groups, especially between Brahmins and other *jatis*, see Nambutiripad 1965. *Malayalam* was given as the title of the second magazine produced in this language by Herman Gundert, a German missionary, who was the main person behind the publication of the first magazine ever produced in Malayalam namely *Rajyasamacharam* (Priyadarshan 1974).



started through print media were simultaneously setting the limits and possibilities of contesting the issues of sex and desire in public with any significance.

The context of reformation and its tensions with regard to mapping ‘a course of desire’ was very well reflected in the popular literature as well. In her compendium of Malayalam novels published during the period, Hema Joseph (2008) articulates some of the anxieties and concerns that charted the space of those novels. While concern about visualizing a sexual order was *prima facie* something that preoccupied those authors, they were primarily engaged in re-ordering life according to the modern interpretations of heterosexual, monogamous families. This was very often contradicted with practices, especially the traditional ones, which privileged “immoral relationships and sexual intercourses in society” (Joseph 2008, 187). The novels contained exhaustive discussions about the need to regulate children’s sexuality and the means of doing so, a constructed notion of the contrast between the chaste wife (*kulasthree/ utthamayaya bharya*) and the prostitute (*vesya/ kulata*) and about practices like *marumakkathayam*<sup>7</sup>, *sambandham*<sup>8</sup> and the Nair Marriage Act (Joseph 2008, 188-195). “A dichotomous division between the non-modern and the modern constantly guided the negotiations that took place in the

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<sup>7</sup> *Marumakkatayam* refers to the practice of tracing the lineage through one's sister's children. Here 'ego' is necessarily male. However, the andro-centricity that this suggests needs to be considered in the context of the understandings of *marumakkatayam* in opposition to *makkatayam* (patriliny) the practice of the more dominant community (Kodoth 2001, 350). Although widely followed the practice of *marumakkathayam* differed among different communities and in different regions of Kerala. For a thorough investigation into the cultural politics during the colonial periods leading to a total eradication of this practice please see Arunima 2003; Saradmani 1999; Kodoth 2001 and 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Although the term *sambandham* is a very general term used to denote marriage in the context of *marumakkathayam*, the term had a definite connotation indicating the alliances established between younger males in a Nambutiri family and women from lower castes, especially Nayars.

space of those novels . . . [where] the non-modern and the modern were represented as barbarian and progressive respectively” (2008, 196). While systems like polyandry, polygyny and *sambandham* represented the non-modern/barbarian a system based upon one man-one wife schema represented the latter; “the novels clearly desired for a change in this direction” (196).

In an article on the discourse of body and desire in early Malayalam popular literature Uday Kumar argues that this discourse “sought to make it possible for the subject to recognize itself as the desiring subject and to act upon this recognition through various modes of agency” (Kumar 2002, 126); that this discourse targeted the inner realm of the human mind as the locus of desire and sought to redraw it in accordance with the changing formulas (Kumar 2002). Evolving a language of desire that implicitly and explicitly contained references to legitimate and illegitimate practices and objects of sexual desire was *prima facie* an exercise undertaken during this period. This language was also consistently marked by the several impossibilities and issues of ethics. The narrative space of the early Malayalam magazines was evidently a primary spot where elaborate discussion about evolving the basic etiquettes to navigate gender relations and sexual desire occurred. This had fundamental reference to the discourse of cultural degeneracy and was instinctively directed towards a discourse of progress. This narrative space in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century period presented, in a cunning fashion, the art and technique of situating social and individual progress in one’s body and soul.

### **The formative stages**

Prescribing a value base for human activities and definitions around, and transposing the social networks of, desire and sex was at the centre of the assortment of writings published during the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century period. This narrative space contained, what seemed to be

essential, formulations regarding what constituted good and bad in all spheres of individual and social lives. This was also the period when matrilineal systems, joint families and other local traditional systems were brought under legislation and were undergoing the random process of transition or were completely collapsing (Bhaskaranunni 1978; Kodoth 2002; Menon 1979; Joseph 2008). Hema Joseph in her thesis observes the centrality of these issues in the novels produced in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. She argues that apart from reforming both male and female sexuality those novels hosted and conducted long discussions on such issues as *thali kettu kalyanam* (pre-pubertal marital engagement), *sambandham*, Malabar Marriage Act, *marumakkathayam* (matriliny) and so on (Joseph 2008, 188).

However a major ground of forging those anxieties and framing in a language that is both descriptive and coherent was the writings that appeared in Malayalam magazines. By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century these magazines had already captured recognition, in the general mindsets of Malayalis, as authentic spaces for expressing both expert and public opinions regarding issues of social relevance. The narrative space in the magazines was a critical factor in synthesizing a language of desire and discipline, sex and hygiene that permeated child and adult, and male and female sexuality as also normative and non normative sexual practices. The writers in these magazines were mostly blind consumers of the narratives of decadence that emerged from the British officials, colonial missionaries and anthropologists alike. This rather remained the predominant trend even from the early stages when print was only beginning to be popularized in Keralam.

The initiative to conceptualise the region and its subjects through a moral framework came in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century when Herman Gundart (1814-1893), a German missionary, started *Rajyasamacharam*, a journal in newspaper format, from Thalassery, in the North Malabar of the erstwhile Madras presidency. A renowned figure for his contributions to Malayalam language Gundart introduced the art of creative journalistic writing in Malayalam<sup>9</sup>. This was primarily attained by simultaneously depicting experiences of unknown territories, for instance African countries, undergoing social and political transformations as well as by foregrounding the significance of news items, commentaries and editorials to bring changes in people's mindsets (Manalil 2004)<sup>10</sup>. The familiarity with print Journals in Europe was translated into making *Rajyasamacharam* a commonly readable journal even outside the evangelical and religious interests (Manalil 2004; Priyadarshan 1972, 1974). Gundart who published *Malayala Panchangam* in a newspaper format before *Rajyasamacharam* very soon concentrated on the latter at the expense of the former as "Rajyasamacharam got a better reception than Malayala Panchangam mainly because Gundert could understand and reflect the tastes and viewpoints of common readers" (Manalil 2004, 32).

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<sup>9</sup> My discussion of Gundart and his journal *Rajyasamacharam* basically draws, apart from my own work in the archives, from an article written by Paul Manalil and published by *Kerala Calling*, a journal published by the Government of Kerala, autobiography of Herman Gundart written by Moorkoth Kumaran, "History of Press in Kerala" published by Public Relations Department of Government of Kerala (PRD 2002) and a study of early magazines conducted and published in two volumes by Priyadarshan in 1972 and 1974.

<sup>10</sup> According to Paul Manalil it was through *Rajyasamacharam* that information regarding international events like French revolution, change of government in Germany and so on reached the common readers in Kerala. It was also not rare to find in the 42 issues of *Rajyasamacharam* published between June 1847 and December 1850 reports containing the details of both evangelical activities and observations from studies conducted among different tribes located mainly in African and Latin American countries, particularly with regard to the 'amoral' and 'strange' practices in those communities (Manalil 2004, 33-34).

Gundart [through his journalistic attempts] introduced common people and drew the attention of his readers during a period when the newspapers were full of kings and Lords. This . . . helped very much to ensure the participation of common people in newspaper and magazine reading . . . and became a beacon light to print media which were started later on.

Manalil 2004, 34

Gundart subsequently started two more journals namely *Malayalam* in 1850 and *Keralapanini* in 1854. Priyadarshan (1974) observes that these magazines were primarily theological in nature though almost all the writings in them referred explicitly to reformation as a social enterprise requiring urgent attention and as a prerequisite to modernize the local conditions. Most of them addressed the moral base of society as a predominant issue and the need for a radical shift towards a new base that would eventually help in the building of a new society. These magazines “mainly included articles about *sanmarga bodhakangal* (advice about good moral values), *duracharithinte vipathukal* (admonition about the dangers of immorality) and what constituted *sadhacharam and duracharam* (good and bad morals) in the society” (Priyadarshan 1974, 17-19). The early magazines functioned as the precursors for texts and magazines produced in the subsequent periods although the later productions were much improvised versions and contained articles that addressed almost all spheres of daily lives.

The early magazines started under the initiative of Gundart were apparently the first venue where a discussion of the ‘causes and remedies for the fallen state’ of Malayali culture occurred so explicitly and with such reach to a larger section of audience. This larger section however still implies a smaller segment of the indigenous population for it contained only a section of elites who both had access to education and were largely placed at the top layers of

local caste hierarchy. Priyadarshan's analysis (1974) of the early magazines helps us elucidate the fundamental importance which they accredited to questions of morality. The idea of availing standard moral principles in order to lead a religious and civilized life was constantly instantiated through stories of individual transformations/conversions to embrace a different moral and religious order<sup>11</sup>. This also determined the general frame of the commentaries included in the early magazines. This framework had significant impact in the subsequent stages when questions of desire were centered upon and problematised and sexual discipline was concluded as the first and most important element in the process of becoming modern. Books were published in the subsequent period – in both Malayalam and English – that inherited the tradition of evaluating the local culture from a modern moral perspective.

“Principles of morality”<sup>12</sup> written by Raja Sir Tanjore Madhav Rao (1828 -1891), was one such expression which exclusively depended upon the observations made by his erstwhile colonial officials<sup>13</sup>. Commonly known in Keralam as Madhavarayar, Madhava Rao had served as

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<sup>11</sup> The very first edition of *Rajyasamacharam* contained narration of two such instances. In both the instances, about a Brahmin from Telugu region in the first one and, in the second one, about a foreign lady who was an ‘adulteress’, shifts in their life-worlds are solely depicted in terms of the ‘sins’ they had committed in their life before they changed to embrace a different moral setup (see Manalil 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Translated into Malayalam as “Sadhachara Nidhanam”. A hardcopy of the original text was never found. The title of the Malayalam text was given as ‘Sadhachara Nidhanam: Madhavarayar avarkaalude “Sadhachara Moolyangal” enna krithiyude Malayala Paribhasha’ (Base of Morality: A Malayalam Translation of Sir T. Madhavarayar’s book “Principles of Morality”) Pettayil 1881.

<sup>13</sup> Even the hardcopy of the Malayalam translation of this book was found, after a great deal of search, at the Sahitya Academy Library at Thrissur. However the copy was beyond recognition and except the forward written by the translator nothing was decipherable. My observations are restricted to what is available from the commentary offered in this foreword. A passing reference to this book, its contents and some remarks about Madhav Rao’s life are included in a study of the Social, Political, and Religious Developments in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century conducted by Rev. John Morrison (Morrison 1907).

the Diwan of Travancore during 1857 to 1872 and his book was translated into Malayalam in the year 1881. Velu P. Pettayil, the translator, in his foreword to the translated version states that “the observations made by the enlightened Gundart, expressed through his magazines, with regard to our value systems are so significant to understand the reason why we continue to live in a state of anarchy. It is equally significant to understand why we need a moral system to ensure self discipline in our society which is very much essential for any modern society” (Pettayil 1881, 1). Velu further draws from Gundart and other writers in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century editions<sup>14</sup> in order to articulate the new moral system and its value oriented framework.

Even the brief list of practices that he proposes foreground body and mind as the locus of cultural degeneracy. These included *dhehasudhi* (cleanliness of body), *manasika parishkaram* (mental development), *mitha seelam* (moderate habits) and *maanasasrishti/manodharmam* (ability to distinguish between good and bad) (Pettayil 1881, 6-7). The author simultaneously draws on instances of characters from Shakespearean classics and Indian mythologies namely Ramayanam and Mahabharatham to support his observations. The making of these observations is clearly grounded on a complicated mixture of European discourses of science, ethics and colonial discourse of decadence and reformation. The selective appropriation of texts and events that the author follows in this book had largely become a common trend in the period. As Uma Chakravarty has observed in the colonial context of Bengal that such selectivity “centred on texts

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<sup>14</sup> According to the author Velu Pettayil those who contributed to the early journals included many local officials in the colonial administration who, despite their “official burdens and preoccupations”, still found time to address issues which required the “attention of experts” (Pettayil 1881, 1-2).

where male subjectivities could be understood in conformity with British notions of masculine virility, and where femininity and women could be marginalized” (Chakravarty 1989, 32)<sup>15</sup>.

### **Sexuality and propriety**

The early magazines were *prima facie* attempting to produce and foreground an ideological framework that would be self-explanatory within the progressive, nationalistic circuits of modernity. Body, gender, and desire were accorded central significance in the emerging social world and social realities. This evidently stood in contrast with, or so as it was widely represented, the previous modes of dealing with these questions ‘rather loosely’ or with complete disregard for the larger ‘social interests of Malayalis’ (*Malayalikalute thalpanyangal*). The recurrence of this term, Malayali, in throughout this narrative space was a signification of the emergence of a new identity consciousness defined in linguistic terms that would further encourage in the rearrangement of the cultural and mental world by directly translating this consciousness to new forms and themes of desire. An instance in this context would be the discussions and debates in magazines around passing a marriage act mainly for communities those followed *marumakkathayam*. The magazines played an important role in expressing the diverging concerns around the forthcoming act even before it finally came into effect as Malabar Marriage Act in 1896. The forthcoming act was predominantly addressed as a brave and valid attempt to systematize “the marital relationships of Malayalis”<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Bacchetta also raises a similar argument in the context of the colonial construction of homophobia in the Indian context. See my discussion in the introduction.

<sup>16</sup> From the article titled “Malayala Vivaha Bill” [Marriage Bill for “Malayalam”] published in *Vidyavinodini*, 1891 (1066 *M. E*). Vol. 2 No. 8: pp 201-206. author unspecified.



*Vidyavinodini*, a magazine published from Thrisur, published articles about the forthcoming act and invited readers to actively take part in the discussions. This was especially after Sir. C. Sankaran Nair, a prominent lawyer of the Madras High Court, introduced in the Madras Legislative Council a bill to provide for marriage and Malabar Marriage Commission was formed by the Government in Madras to inquire into matrilineal customs among the Hindus and explore the desirability of introducing changes in marriage, inheritance and family organization through legislation<sup>17</sup>. While the bill was generalized, even while it specifically addressed those communities which followed matriliney in the Malabar area, it was deployed by the public sphere as an opportunity to address and rectify the non-modern systems of marriage that prevailed among different communities and in different parts of this geographical region. For instance in the aforementioned article published in *Vidyavinodini*, which was part of a serialized discussion, the problems with the bill was pointed out in terms of the practical difficulties it produced for “the newlywed couples to visit a public office [office of registrar] in order to register the marriage and thus to legalise it immediately after the marriage”<sup>18</sup>.

While there was a general agreement with the changes proposed in the bill the disagreements were mainly around the practical difficulties involved in implementing the recommendations of the bill. This space provided the magazines an opportunity to demonstrate the necessity of a ‘Malayali’ moral code that could further sanction marital relationships, provide legitimacy for the proposed shift from *marumakkathayam* to *makkathayam* (patriliney) and to

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<sup>17</sup> See Kodoth (2001) for a ground breaking analysis of the different positions assumed by the colonial jurists, administrators and local elites that eventually played a critical role in defining local matrilineal systems in pre-defined ways. According to her the Malabar Marriage Act was a result of colonial interpretations that identified *marumakkathayam* and *aliyasanthana law* solely in terms of non-conformed sexual practices.

<sup>18</sup> *Vidyavinodini* op.cit. 16. P No: 202.

foreground modern nuclear family as the only suitable form for a progressive society. In throughout the discussions this was reflected and the differences with the bill were mainly over such insignificant issues as conditions for divorce<sup>19</sup>, criteria for measuring the intensity of blood relationship between the proposed bride and groom<sup>20</sup>, conditions for registering the marriage<sup>21</sup> and so on. While the whole discussion was conducted under the generalized title “marriage bill for Malayalam” it was heralded as potential enough to end all unrestrained courtships, freewheeling of desires and other amoral practices like prostitution. It was marked as the beginning of a “decent and progressive existence”<sup>22</sup>.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century debates around the proposed marriage act also invite our attention to the ‘differences’ in methods adopted to effect reform in different contexts of colonialism. The very fact that the local elites considered it fully acceptable for the colonial administration to intervene into the local marriage customs with the help of law shows how contradictory understandings about colonialism and the responses it yielded are possible through a close reading of these narrative spaces. For instance this goes against the understanding of the “characteristically nationalistic response to proposals for effecting reform through legal enactments of the colonial state” (Chatterjee 1989, 631). Chatterjee shows how, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal context, the nationalistic reformer attempted to preserve the sovereignty of the inner – cultural – realm of the nation by opposing to such proposals. However this is completely reversed in the context of

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<sup>19</sup> “Malayala Vivaha Bill” [Marriage Bill for Malayalam] published in *Vidyavinodini*, 1891 (1066 M. E); Vol. 2 No. 8: 181-186. author unspecified.

<sup>20</sup> “Malayala Vivaha Bill” [Marriage Bill for Malayalam] published in *Vidyavinodini*, 1891 (1066 M. E); Vol. 2 No. 7: 159- 163. author unspecified.

<sup>21</sup> “Malayala Vivaha Bill” [Marriage Bill for Malayalam] published in *Vidyavinodini*, 1891 (1066 M. E); Vol. 2. No. 6: 130-133. author unspecified.

<sup>22</sup> Op. cit. FN No. 19: p. No. 187-191.

debates around Malabar Marriage Act in colonial Keralam where there was a common jubilation shared by the local elites over the opportunity they received to participate in the state initiated reform processes. Thus legal enactments were not only unopposed but was also a participatory process. This was primarily because by this time the discourse of decadence of previous decades was by and large accepted in the public domain as authentic explanations for the degenerate conditions. The eagerness to participate and contribute to legal enactment processes was just an expression of the intensity with which demands to ‘normativise’ the local customs and practices were made.

Additionally this narrative space, in its role as the backbone of reform enterprises, remained successful in presenting reformation as a process that should take place at the level of everyday practices which together constituted the cultural world. It was here that the propaganda through magazines started addressing questions concerning the moral as well as the hygienic standards of individual subjects as a central issue in a progressive society. Symbols of gentle existence were generated in this space that embodied modern values and ideals, and were built upon the gendered and disciplined models of subjectivities. Such symbols very soon captured the central space in the magazine literature where the models and themes of desire that they represented were discussed and debated in terms of the methods to be deployed in order to arrive at them. The nonfigurative image of *yogyatha* is one instance in this context. Roughly translated as virtue this was directly and indirectly projected as the most – if not the only – significant model of subjectivity in columns which dealt exhaustively with qualities that each individual should embody. *Yogyatha* was the sum total of qualities that endorsed one’s modern existence.

Whereas *yogyatha* has a thoroughly practical connotation in the current context – implying conditions, and the extent to which one fulfills them, to qualify for different occupations in government and private sector – its early usage implied conditions of subjectivity in a modern society. There is a shift from value centered qualities that once constituted *yogyatha* to qualifications that now define it. The early reform propaganda had specifically ordered a defined collection of qualities around this subjective disposition. While this was projected differently to female and male bodies what remained as a self-explanatory and an undefined paradigm of *yogyatha* was its base on monogamous, heterosexual, nuclear families. Thus the qualities for *yogyatha* could have been discussed only in the context of one's belonging to a proper family. Before a specific discussion of what subjective elements together constituted *yogyatha* it is worthwhile to notice that its very usage in reform discourse defined the feminine as objects of this discourse and the masculine as agents. Although literally gender neutral an initial description of *yogyatha* in fact eliminates women's presence in it because one whose self is shaped accordingly can only be called a *yogyān* – implying a noble, virtuous man. The feminine sound, which is *yogini*, literally implied a woman who practices *yoga* or a saintly woman and signified an exceptional disposition outside the subject centered discussions in the public domain.

Whereas *yogyān* was implicit in those discussions women were made the primary targets even though a feminine equivalent was absent in the nomenclature. *Yogya*, another feminine equivalent of *yogyān*, was also not in common use in those days. Thus there were apparent displays of power that further conditioned discussions of subjectivity. Two things emerge importantly in this context. One, that reforming conditions of subjectivity was centered upon a

pre-defined set of masculine and feminine qualities; and two, that both these sets were assigned clear cut meanings with respect to their situation inside and outside the heterosexual framework of family. Outside these specific zones the qualities of *yogyatha* didn't carry any implication. Both feminine and masculine were defined in terms of the duties, obligations and the inherent qualities that subjects should possess outside their caste and class locations. While this remained so a common thread of sexual, moral discipline connected the various links in the different subjective dispositions.

One of the main themes that had a direct bearing upon *yogyana* was *mithabhogam*. Literally meaning moderate desire or a balanced appetite for sexual pleasure *mithabhogam* had wide ranging connotations that directly pertained to regulating one's sexual instincts. According to an author writing in 1886 in the magazine *Vidyavinodini*, *mithabhogam* was an essential quality for an individual "to fulfill his obligations and to remain honest to his material aspirations"<sup>23</sup>. Dealing with the question of desire (*kamam*) and to channel this energy into other more productive activities was one of the primary tasks, according to the author, that needed to be undertaken in order to build a modern society. "In order for one to be a *mithabhogi* unnecessary (*anavasyam*) and unnatural (*prakrithiviruddham*) desire for sex should be avoided"<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> From the article "Aranu Yogyana?" [who is a *yogyana*?], written by Kerala Varma Valiya Koi Thampuran (1845-1914) and published in *Vidyavinodini*, 1894 (1069 M. E), No. 2. The article was a reprint of a small book written by Valiya Koi Thampuran and published in 1889 that briefly described the moral values considered desirable for a progressive modern society (Thampuran 1889).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p no. 14.

A plethora of writings produced by this narrative space valorized and romanticized the disciplined, and a morally binding, existence of subjects as directly contributing to the construction of a progressive modern society. For instance the pre-conditions put forward by columns on *yogyatha* (propriety) in these magazines included *susheelam* (good habits), *subuddhi* (good thinking), *arivu* (knowledge) and *karyasthatha* (ability to manage/supervise things). *Susheelam* (good habits) implied the ability to maintain a balance between the impulses, desires, and instincts at the desired level<sup>25</sup>. This was essential because freewheeling of desire was always highly problematic in fulfilling the duties and obligations. Liberating the mind from ‘evil thoughts and evil desires’ was the only possible source for body and mind to possess good habits and good thoughts. *Arivu* (knowledge) and *karyasthatha* (ability to manage things) emerge as particularly important amongst qualities of good habits and good thoughts<sup>26</sup>. The spaces of these magazines, evidently preoccupied with questions of progress, constantly evaluated mental and bodily dispositions from within the regulatory framework of modernity. Ranging from cleanliness of households, discipline in life, respect for elders, clothing, food to marital life and career, they touched upon literally everything that was considered essential for a modern subject. As an invariable outcome of this discourse the image of an impeccable body and mind gradually emerged as a necessary prerequisite for embarking on the journey towards progress. These were

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<sup>25</sup> From the articles written by C. Narayana Menon in *Vidyavinodini*, 1893 (1068 M. E), Vol. 3 No. 2. pp 3-6; and Paramupillai, K, in *Rasikaranjini*, 1904 (1079 M. E), Vol. 2, No. 4. pp 200-205; Also worth mentioning are articles those directly referred to such qualities of a *yogyana* appeared in *Laksmibhai*, (1906 1081), Vol.2, No.5. pp 10-15, Vol. 2, No. 6. pp 10-14, and Vol. 2, No. 7, pp 11-17.

<sup>26</sup> Menon 1893: 5; Paramupillai 1904: 204-205. Op. cit. FN No. 25. The same or similar propositions could be seen as recurring in throughout these episodes of writings implicitly and explicitly. The columns on food (*bhakshanam*), clothing (*vastram*), marriage (*vivaham*), education etc., in the magazine *Vidya Vinodini* (1891 to 1895), extensively wrote on the urgency to change bodily practices in line with the “changing times” (*Vidya Vinodini*, 1066 (1891), Vol. 1 No. 3: 129).

not isolated or sporadic reflections, but they constituted the unremitting currents in the ongoing trend, that preoccupied this time period and these narrative spaces, of questioning the self and making things better.

### **Gender, Domesticity and Sexuality**

A huge constellation of ideas of practices and values was consistently foregrounded by the reformation literature in order to subject the body to new regulatory practices. The early magazines were a key vehicle in transporting these ideas to the different parts of the region, in inciting local discussions and inviting responses and public action in this regard. They constantly shuffled questions of progress and degeneracy as primary points to be surveyed at the same time as combining them to raise albeit newer questions of self. One of the important tasks undertaken in this respect was to construct ideal models of gender as inherent, natural and universal. In his compendium of early Malayalam magazines Priyadarshan notes about the importance with which those magazines looked seriously into matters associated with women and their status and dignity both within the family and the society (1972, 12-13). The author, while providing a brief summary of *Keraleeya Suguna Bhodini*, a well known Malayalam magazine of the period which started publishing from 1887 in the Malabar region, quotes from the magazine's first edition that it was meant for the "overall progress and development of women and the society as a whole" (1972, 14).

The question of women was not a separate issue to the extent it was widely considered as an inherent part of the whole reformation project. The 'new woman' was at the centre of the emerging middle class' conception of a modern and progressive society. She was focused as an easy target on whose body the new science and morals could be easily projected. *Keraleeya*

*Suguna Bhodini*, the 19<sup>th</sup> century magazine *Priyadarshan* had referred, mainly contained, among other things, philosophy, science of body (*sareera sasthram*), advice about moral values (*sanmarga bodhakangal*), duty of women (*sthree dharmam*), science of cooking, history of noble (English) women and so on (Priyadarshan 1972, 14-15). The whole philosophizing of body and desire took gender as a natural category and continuously emphasized on the importance of performing its roles accordingly. They assigned this issue great importance that it was almost a customary practice for the magazines to allocate a substantial space for dealing with the question of women. *Rasikaranjini*, *Sukhasamsi*, *Vidyavinodini*, *Unni Nampoodiri* and *Gurunathan* were some of the prominent magazines where a discussion of women and their well being constituted an important part of discussions pertaining to reformation.

This has, again, important similarities and differences from Chatterjee's and others' observations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century politics in the larger Indian colonial context; for instance the well known conceptualization of the *ghar/bahar* – home and outside – division by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1989). The reform literature in Malayalam magazines displayed clear eagerness to define women's roles in terms of domestic spaces and home making skills. This was very much similar to Chatterjee's observations in the Bengal context where women were considered guardians of the inner – the moral, spiritual and domestic – realm. On the other hand, as I mentioned already, this space did not hesitate in availing colonial state's assistance to deal with traditional, what was already defined as, non-normative practices. This was probably because women's reform question was rather carried out at an informal level whereas policy interventions were necessary to eradicate practices like *marumakkathayam*, *sambandham* and polyandry. Even though the latter practices were organized around women's status in the pre



modern social setups it was completely subsided in the reform agenda. The new agenda rather restricted women's role to that of a home maker.

All the magazines named above including some which took women's reformation as a central issue contained articles that addressed questions concerning Malayalis' imaginations of self and caste specific marital practices and women's role in arranging the domestic spaces. A common perception of modern family consisting of husband, wife and children had become, around this period of time, the base for building a modern and progressive society. The titles of some of the articles those were commonly found in the space of these magazines were *Suchitwam* (cleanliness), *Souseelyam* (about qualities for women), *Sthreekal ariyentava* (that which women should know) *Shakespeare Mahakaviyude Nayikamar* (Heroines of the Great Poet Shakespeare), *European Sthreekalude Soundarya Bhramam* (Beauty Consciousness among European Ladies), *Vivahadambaram English Kudumpangalil* (Wedding Excess among European Families), *Garbha Samrakshaneeyam* (Care required during Pregnancy) etc<sup>27</sup>. The politics of appropriating selectively from lifestyles, practices and models those suited the demands of a heterosexual, monogamous, domestic framework was clearly guiding these narrative spaces.

Two strong structural concerns that permeated the late 19<sup>th</sup> century narrative space were those of caste and gender. The upper caste politics involved in this whole presentation

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<sup>27</sup> All these titles are exclusively taken from *Lakshmiibhai*, a women's magazine published during this period, editions published between 1903-1905 (Malayalam Era (M. E) 1078-1080). However this was a common layout, and similar sequences were, followed by most of the magazines to present their prescriptions to overcome the degenerate conditions. It was not uncommon for the early magazines to represent, through fictions and short stories, male and female characters those embodied the aforementioned modern qualities. The serialized story appeared in the magazine *Rasikaranjini* under the title "Kutti Maya" (1078/1903 Vol 3 Nos. 4-9) would be an apt example.

programme was observable from the fact that the question of compartmentalization of the native population caused by the caste divisions as it was commonly interpreted by the colonizer was never taken as a core concern. One needs to remember that caste identities were being ascribed with new and enhanced meanings during this period of time. The question of caste, in the context of reforming patterns of desire, was raised only in terms of changing and transforming the practices rather than challenging its structural existence as such. Through such transmutations the operational coherence of caste was sustained while simultaneously shifting the discursive domain of progressive modernity to concerns around engendering morally disciplined subjects. The question of gender, on the other hand, enabled these writers to transcend the shadows of elitism and upper-casteism that could have considerably damaged the reception of these writings. This was precisely because the concerns that surrounded gender and morality enabled these magazines to address the indigenous people as a single edifice cutting across caste divisions.

As I stated earlier this narrative space was making use of the new common sense that was a mixture of modern science, the knowledge constructed by the coloniser about tradition and the degeneration of the local. Although still contested within these same narrative space Western Europe, as it was represented through English literature and translated into Malayalam, was looked upon as a model. Thus it was not the Brahminic texts that primarily catered to building this space. This was primarily because the important cultural contentions in the Malayali public sphere during this period were all around practices those were widely supposed to have emerged from the Brahminic hegemony over this land. In the next chapter I will discuss in detail about this aspect and its role in defining Malayalis' sexuality in typical ways. All the local customs and practices, those were predominantly criticized as irrational and emblematic and causative of the

local cultural degeneracy, were commonly supposed as the byproducts Brahminic customs, practices and their dictates.

Challenging the hegemony of Brahmins – Nambutiris, their practices, especially the custom of establishing marital relations with females from other caste groups and Brahminic texts were part and parcel of the agenda of the reformation literature<sup>28</sup>. This was in a sense an important element considering that defining sexuality in the new regime required to break radically from the old texts and practices. This continued to be the case even while the same narrative space borrowed heavily from the early Brahmin centered texts, especially fictions, and poems to romanticize and valorize the past<sup>29</sup>. This had actually resulted in a situation where the Nambutiri scripts were very often rendered legitimacy for the knowledge about the pre modern history of Keralam it provided<sup>30</sup>. While this was very often subscribed without any contestation

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<sup>28</sup> Most categories of Nambutiris, including some of the sub sections, in Keralam used to follow *Shankarasmrithi* as the base text. This was unique because in most other Indian contexts Brahmins used to follow *Manusmrithi*. Challenging the authenticity of *Shankarasmrithi* and ridiculing its rational ground was a general exercise undertaken by this narrative space. For a thorough analysis of how this text played an important role in regulating the sexualities of Nambutiri males and females simultaneously affecting the sexualities of members of several other lower castes see Bhaskaranunni 1965. The emerging language of public morality situated such customary practices at the centre of common interpretations of inter caste relationships. In the next chapter I have included elaborate commentary on how this text was brought to the centre of the decadence arguments by the colonial administrators, western anthropologists and judiciary system in 19<sup>th</sup> century and how the knowledge produced and disseminated thus critically influenced the debates in the public sphere in the subsequent periods.

<sup>29</sup> It was a common practice during this period for all the magazines to reproduce *slogas* (hymns) written in Sanskrit and/ or Manipravalam (a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam) and stories from the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Such reproductions in serialized formats were part and parcel of this space. In most cases they were mere reprints of the original text without any commentary being added. Such reprints critically maintained the upper caste, Hindu orientation of reform literature printed in these magazines.

<sup>30</sup> See the serialized reproduction of *Adhi Kerala Charithram* (Mal: History of Ancient Keralam) in the magazine *Vidyavinodini*, in all the issues in the year 1890 (M. E. 1065), Vol. 1.

those texts, mainly including *Shankarasmrithy*, were ridiculed by the authors who held them as responsible for the non-normative, amoral practices followed by several communities including Nambutiris of the region.

The earlier discourse of decadence was a space where colonial administrators and western anthropologists borrowed heavily from the specific inter caste relations and Nambutiri texts which validated such relations to produce and disseminate knowledge about the region. In other words definitions of tradition and pre modern sexuality heavily drew from these texts, especially *Shankarasmrithi*. For instance Samuel Mateer, a 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary and a colonial anthropologist, who had written extensively on social and cultural life in the region borrowed from this historical background of the region to support his observations about the local practices, especially those around conjugal relations. These at large included the indigenous customs of marriage, cohabitation, property inheritance systems and women's role in society (Mateer 1870). Through illustrations borrowed from local instances of "easy divorce and easy re-marriage" he criticized the local customs and mores for their "negative role in the path towards a modern progressive society" (1870, 44). He studied about systems followed by Nairs, Izhavas, and certain sub castes in specialist occupations as carpentry, blacksmith and so on. He observed that the women in such marital alliances, established according to the customs of those caste groups, "were at liberty to dismiss the man or the man to dismiss the woman, on very easy terms . . . [F]ormerly too, it was common for Nair females, residing at their brother's house, to receive more than one visitor of the male sex" (1870, 36-37). He characterized those systems of marriage as "most singular and licentious" (1870, 38).

The centrality of practices like *marumakkathayam* (matriliny), *sambandham* and polyandry – all connected with each other and projected as the ill effects of the Nambutiri hegemony – in the decadence discourse produced a counter narrative that attempted to define sexuality based upon the western models. The common prejudice against Nambutiri tradition went alongside important derivations that these counter narratives drew in the context of engendering definitions of male and female subjectivity. Thus the opposition against the Nambutiri traditions also took the form of opposing traditional inter caste marital relations. This movement assumed huge proportions later in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when reform movement became strong among the Nambutiris. I have discussed this in the next chapter. Henceforth subjectivity was not only heterosexual but was also caste centered although it displayed the same characteristic features across the caste differences.

This again shows the subtle and significant differences between experiences of modernity in its early phases. For instance Latamani has already observed how Brahminic scriptures were interpreted as authentic sources of knowledge about tradition by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century colonizer (1998). In the context of colonial Keralam the trend manifested a different complex where initiatives to reform were an inherent part of non Brahmin caste groups' projects to establish independent identities. Even though a political manifestation of this came out in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the undercurrents were very much triggered by the earlier colonial discourse of decadence. It became quite live and active especially in the last quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century when the narrative space excessively borrowed from western literature and lifestyles. This eventually culminated in the discourse of a new sexuality where femininities and masculinities were commonly defined in terms of gender roles inside (femininity) and outside (masculine) the

modern 'home' and as heterosexual and monogamous. This was also critical in defining women's sexuality and patterns of desire as they could be articulated within 'descent circles' and in the public domains.

The late 19<sup>th</sup> century local intelligentsia was evidently deluged by the multiplicity of 'revival' processes at their immediate disposal and they needed to give a fresh beginning to the same by combining their caste-related interests with the modern preoccupations with a healthy sexual morality. For instance most of these magazines never addressed caste in any negative sense; rather it was implicitly and explicitly deployed to address the various practices that members of different castes followed. The primary concern was around homogenizing the local corporeal practices around an already given set of principles and values shared commonly by the modern educated individuals. Apart from the caste preoccupations their class backgrounds were also clearly visible in these writings. Construction of the female and male sexual self involved the construction of ideal models with defined tasks to be performed in the private and public spaces. One such model, constantly reproduced by these magazines, was that of the ideal wife.

What is the true job [*vela*] of a wife? to serve her husband. Or else why would have Sita devi and Damayanthi had to struggle inside the jungle with their husbands. Was there any need for Seelavathi to have stayed with her husband who was a leper? To follow those magnanimous [*manaswini*] models is the duty of Kerala women . . . [W]hat is required for such absolute service for their husbands? Wives should take care of cooking rice and other curries, making tea and coffee etc. Cutting firewood and gathering water could be entrusted on the servants . . . Wives are trustable since they wouldn't mix water, like many servants do, in the coffee if its quantity is less. It is really a mistake to not to allow

them to do the kitchen tasks. Mainly officers commit this mistake. They do not even allow their mistress [*kochamma/ammacchi*] to bend down and collect a single waste.<sup>31</sup>

Class and gender were central in such depictions of modern monogamous nuclear family. The quote above reflects how body was homogenized within patterns of domestic lives by addressing the duties of “Kerala women”. Gender was being accepted as constituting the new identity which was further translated in terms of duties and tasks to be performed within and outside the domestic space of family. The clear cut differentiations made between the [dis]loyalty of servants, the allegiance and dedication of the wife and the generosity, lavishness and care of the husband, are idealized within the highlife of a modern middle class monogamous family background where the husband was invariably supposed to perform the outside job (here officer) and the wife to take care of the household (inside) activities. The ‘outsidedness’ of the servant both from the domestic space – as depicted – and from the narrative space show the new class and patriarchal interests merged in this sphere.

It is noteworthy here that the space of these magazines was making gender and family as inherently determining the contexts within which only discussions of sexuality had a meaningful presence. Naturalized depictions of this formula were part and parcel of this huge propaganda. The re-definition of ‘woman’ in her new roles was one such prominent area where the questions of family and a new value regime, the questions of male and female desire and of a new moral consciousness were constantly deliberated.

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<sup>31</sup> From the article “Bhrithyanmar” [Mal: Servants], written by Madhavadas and published in *Lakshmi* in 1906 (1081 M. E). Vol.1 No. 8: pp 312-315.

*Sthreedharmam* (duty of woman), *sthree swathanthryam* (freedom of woman), *sthree samathwam* (equality for women) and *sthree vidyabhyasam* (woman's education) were columns that were continuously present in these magazines. This was the same in both women's and other magazines. Articles published in magazines like *Vidyavinodhini*, *Lakshmibhai* and *Sukhasamsi* emphasized women's personae in strengthening the moral values of a society, the different roles expected of her in taking care of the children and husband and in preserving the honor and dignity of the entire household<sup>32</sup>. The attempts to reform women invoked classical examples from the Victorian context of women who cherished and cared for modern (albeit Victorian) values.

Although putting more stress on women related issues, these narratives had already set conditions at the same time as contextualising the (perceived) current decadence so that it was always contrasted with a glorified past and an exalted West. This was done by drawing soothingly and incessantly from models of women from epics, English classics and other real life instances from, especially, the Victorian context. Classical examples were used to demonstrate the commitment and dedication required especially on the part of women to preserve the moral values and to retain the honor and pride of their culture. Reforming women was rather recognized as one viable topic where the patriarchal interests of this narrative space introduced new practices of constituting domesticity instead of directly addressing sexual practices as such. In an article published in the magazine *Lakshmibhai* Malayali women were criticized for their lethargic nature, for their unsystematic life style and the exorbitant spending habits in terms of

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<sup>32</sup> *Vidyavinodini*, 1893(1068 M. E) -Vol. 1. No. 1, 2 & 3 and 1894 (1069 M. E) - Vol. 2, No. 2, 3, 4 &5 (1893/1068-1894/1069); *Lakshmibhai*, 1906 (1081 M. E) Vol. 2 (1906/1081); *Sukhasamsi* 1912 (1098 M. E) Vol. 1.



both money and time. The classical instance drawn in this article as a case of contradiction was of the Queen Victoria of England. The article praised Queen Victoria for the way she made use of the available time for official, personal and noble purposes and pointed at her independent life style as opposed to Malayali women who depended on their husbands for everything. The same article contained another instance from Queen Victoria's life during her wedding occasion when the priest was puzzled about

how to ask the bride [the queen] to take oath that she will accept her husband as her master for the remaining part of her life. Confused on the illogicality in asking the queen to accept her subordination to another person the priest asked the queen whether to avoid this custom from the occasion. But the queen replied that she is marrying in her role as a woman and not as a queen and that she is all willing to take the oath<sup>33</sup>.

In yet another edition of *Lakshmibhai* two articles appeared with drastically contrasting views on woman's autonomy – one on the significance of allowing enough autonomy for women in all walks of life including education, employment and so on and the other emphasizing the difficulties associated with women joining the workforce. The second article explicitly demanded that women should not take up any sort of employment as it could pose difficulties for them in looking after the family and, particularly, in taking care of their children<sup>34</sup>. In the emerging modern space these were all questions that seemed significant. However such paradoxes served to naturalize gender roles and the newly emerging modern form of monogamous family.

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<sup>33</sup> From the article *Sthree Swathanthryam* [Women's Freedom], published in *Lakshmibhai*, 1906 (1081 M. E). Vol. 2. No. 6. p 83.

<sup>34</sup> *Lakshmibhai*, 1905 (1080 M. E). Vol. 1. No. 2.

## Unnatural desires and gender non-conformity

The rigor with the redefinition and reinterpretation of gender, woman, sex, desire, and the morals was carried out led this space to draw support from science as well. It also involved the definition of what would constitute natural and unnatural in terms of desire. Conceptions of gender categories as water-tight compartments were always accompanied by notions of an impure and a contaminated category of gender. The progressive-reform narrations were keen to engender social spaces to mark the feminine and masculine as completely dissociable from each other as part of the project of modernity (Kodoth 2001: 21-24; Devika 2005: 12-13). As I mentioned earlier the making of the new women involved, as an inevitable other side of the same narrative enterprise, the making of the new man as well. Striking a balance between desire and progress, a new regulatory framework within which the body and self was to be inherently constituted, had always identified the problematic of defining bodies, habits and practices that remained invariably outside of this model. Apart from local practices that resembled sexual anarchy, a stark exemplar of deviance from the monogamous heterosexual Victorian model of dealing with the question of desire was gender non-conformity.

Drawing heavily upon 19<sup>th</sup> century European science this narrative space accredited everything that did not adhere well to either the feminine or masculine models of self as unnatural. The making of this 'unnatural' self was a complicated task involving a great amount of conditioning process of the modern progressive ideals by redefining the natural/cultural differentiations.

If the *kshethram* (temple/cultivable land) - that is the woman, and the *kshethranhnan* (priest/farmer) - that is the man, can't mix with each other then both will enter into unnatural activities and thus shall be susceptible to nature's penalties. It has been sometime since humans

have started working against nature . . . Ever since the origin of this universe humans have been involved in the process of studying and making records of what, and what do not, suit the nature. All that our ancestors have decided to be the moral principles for us to follow are suitable for the nature as well. Since there are many areas where progress and moral laws are not compatible with each other it is for sure that unnatural activities are on the rise<sup>35</sup>.

These narrative spaces contained exhaustive elaborations of the constitution of, and differentiations between, the natural and the unnatural. In this particular context the author, beginning from observations of plants, animals and unanimated objects, refers to medical science demonstrating the drastic consequences of the emerging trend amongst the young to indulge in unnatural practices. Quoting substantially from an article written by Elener Glen, an English author, in an English magazine called 'Peer Sense', MRKC shows how unnatural practices like smoking and drinking among women in Europe have resulted in jeopardizing their marital relationships and thus leading them to further indulge in other unnatural practices closely linked to sexual desire. "The female body, structured to suit reproductive functions, and her physical charm, essential in order to attract men, both would be ruined if she were to indulge even in physical exercises, forget about other habits like smoking and drinking". The inability to attract men towards them results in attempts to derive pleasure from other unnatural means. The article spoke about unnatural desires and relations as a result of these "modern ways of life" which in turn "affects family life first and then reproduction in society"<sup>36</sup>.

Although the patriarchal interests never allowed the male subject to be an object of discussions in this regard, the implicit message gathered wider recognition – a fact to be seen in

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<sup>35</sup> From the article written by M.R.K.C. and published in *Unni Nampoothiri*, 1923 (1098 M. E), Vol: 5, No. 4. 258-270.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* pp 260-264

popular expressions prevailed until recently that characterized sexuality outside the heterosexual boundaries as ‘unnatural’. A conscious opposition between the East and the West was also being shaped within this whole process. Progress or transformation towards modernity (*parishkaaram*) was not an unconditional exercise to be undertaken; nor would a blind imitation of the West in this context be in any way justified<sup>37</sup>. However this narrative space never challenged the very concept of progress or modernity as such; hence the concern was around the issue of conditioning the ‘local modern paradigm’ which was conceived of as a central project in the process of building a modern society. Immense care was to be implemented in this context because as one potential danger, as it was commonly identified, was in allowing the unnatural tendencies that has enveloped the West to influence the local as well. While West was identified as a model even in discussions concerning reforming the local moral paradigm such unnaturalisms were commonly acknowledged as the other side of its acute liberal forms and was demarcated as requiring heavy and conscious opposition.

The idea of unnatural with a heavy bearing upon the realm of sexual subjectivity was an early phenomenon. Even as early as in 1902 we find articles written in magazines where the dangers of the female body indulging in unnatural practices were singled out as a potential threat to the prevailing moral structures<sup>38</sup>. Women and children had been the primary sites chosen to project the natural/unnatural divides, the deviant selfhoods and practices, and the dangers of

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* P 268.

<sup>38</sup> See for instance the article in *Vidyavinodini* on the topic *Prakruthi Thathwangal* (Rules of Nature). The trend continued implicitly and explicitly in several other articles appeared in the space of these magazines. In almost all the cases the discussion had surrounded the question of women and children; the latter in terms of the values that they should invariably be taught and activities that they should indulge in and keep away from in order to lead a healthy moral life.

transgression. However the question of same sex desire or same sex practice was never a central concern in these writings. On the contrary the attempt was precisely to make it practically 'unthinkable' by writing extensively on unnatural orders and disorders and their social consequences. I said orders and disorders because the 'unnatural' was considered to be an order in the West whereas it would still be a disorder in the local cultural terrains. The term *prakruthi viruddham* (against the nature) was part of a regular usage to signify a range of specific activities including smoking, drinking and unconventional masculine or feminine habits, orientations and practices. Simultaneously this narrative space also attempted to catalogue what was labeled as *prakruthi viruddha aacharangal* or *pravarthikal* (customs, practices, activities against nature)<sup>39</sup>. While 'unnatural' as a term by default conveyed strong implications for a heterosexual-reproductive ordering of sexuality such questions were deliberately kept out of the purview of its discussions. This in fact was the beginning of an era where discussions of sexualities outside the conventional heterosexual parameters were only permitted to happen by referring to their moral and ethical implications. In the third and fourth chapter of this thesis I have discussed how references of homoeroticism in fictions and stories, as also in real life experiences, were often interpreted and debated in the subsequent periods as phenomena which are outside the standard questions of representation, aesthetics and even sexual desire.

In an article on *garbha samrakshaneeyam* (care during pregnancy) in the magazine *Laksmibhai* the author narrated how the mother's physical health and mental balance during her pregnancy and the health of the child are correlated.

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<sup>39</sup> From the article written by CEDD, in *Vidyavinodini* 1898, Vol. 8 No: 10. 35-38.

Not only her [mother's] health is important for the child but more important [during pregnancy] is the extent to which she is willing to forsake her own physical desires and devotes herself to god's worship. Most of the women withdraw from their regular daily activities in the final phase of pregnancy. However it is very important to remain reclused from the normal material life even from the beginning of this period [pregnancy] itself. This is because the formation of embryo in the uterus occurs in the beginning stage itself . . . In a normal intercourse when a woman becomes pregnant the embryo would become hard or soft (like contractile organs in human body) or cancer (mamsa pintam) [a hard, flesh like thing] within the first seven months of pregnancy. These transformations are subject to the following rule: the hard embryo is male and the soft one is female, and the cancer one indicates that the infant is a napumsakam [androgyny] . . . While no explanation can suggest, other than the divine intervention of god, why an embryo would become hard or soft the Western experts have already proved that the third one, that is the cancer one, is a necessary outcome of mother's negligence. . . It has to live an unnatural life<sup>40 41</sup>.

The above quote illustrates how female body was targeted in the reform discourse as part of its larger project to introduce new practices with the help of Western science. It not only naturalized sex as an activity to take place between the opposite sexes within the modern 'home' but also expunges gender non conformity from the social order. Such essentialisations, with the help of Western knowledge and illustrations from both Western and local texts, effectively isolated and excluded bodies and practices outside the heteronormative expectations of society from any consideration in mainstream social thinking. In fact essentialising and unnaturalising practices that did not conform to the heterosexual, monogamous model of sexual morality and

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<sup>40</sup> Unknown author in Laksmibhai 1905, Vol: 2, No: 5, p 232-238.

<sup>41</sup> *Napumsakam* (*Napumsak* in Sanskrit) literally explains one who is neither man nor women. The term has originated from ancient Sanskrit literatures (for instance Kamasutra, Mahabharata etc.) and depicts an effeminate male character. According to Das Wilhelm the term Napumsa or Napumsak can refer to any non-productive person of third sex. "Sometimes it specifically implies people born with ambiguous genitalia (the intersexed)" (Wilhelm 2003, 13).

treating them as exceptional cases was a moral practice, by and large part of the local common sense, of this early narrative space. In other words the melting pot of unnatural, while comprising both sexual and asexual practices, had a strong resonance for subjecting bodies to adhere to the conventional, heterosexual standards of morality.

## **Conclusion**

The narrative space of early magazines was consistently engaged in articulating Malayali as a progressive category. The foregrounding of a new form of subjectivity was attained with the assistance of this language of progress. It was precisely here that the language of progress was being institutionalized and made an inherent part of the local culture where every practice had to address this question if it is progressive or not. Sexually disciplined subjects and questions of normativity were at the heart of these new narratives. The production of a print culture with moral anxieties situated at its centre stage resulted in a blind endorsement of heterosexual institutions like marriage and family as the only legitimate forms of desire. In the third chapter of this thesis I make an attempt to see how this language of progress, where everything is seen as part of an evolution towards better social conditions, was deployed in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to counter the emergence of subversive narratives in Malayalam literature.

The current research project takes its cue from the Foucauldian argument that deviancy does not derive from any one category of sexuality. Rather it is a function of regulatory power in general. A project seeking to explore the specific genealogies of how this regulatory power and discourses of sexuality was translated into daily practices cannot overlook the different registries that have made this translation a possible event. The making of the subject and the self in the colonial interface was clearly preoccupied with drawing an indiscrete relationship between the

social and the self. The deployment of a new value realm and a modern progressive rationality, emerging from within the power relations that defined and informed the colonizer/colonized paradigm, had enabled the public sphere to engage, in a rather straight forward manner, in a process that defined not only a new self but also the abject. The spaces of these progressive magazines contained the blueprints for carrying out the civilizing mission and for embracing a new rational order. They strictly remained within the discursive paradigm of the decadence of the local and debated about the methods through which this could be resolved and overcome. Strictly speaking they were the direct outcomes of the earlier colonial politics that was guided under the “belief that in the end Indians themselves must come to believe in the unworthiness of their traditional customs” (Chatterjee 1989, 623).

Nonetheless these magazines were astutely specific with regard to defining a new subject; in purporting corporeal practices and in rationalizing a new order of desire. On the other hand the complexities of the task they undertook were determined by the incongruities that still prevailed in abundance between the local tradition and practices, and this new realm of values. Precisely for the same reason the bifurcation into rational and irrational was a carefully executed task albeit still managing to display black and white illustrations. This incisiveness was as much a result of the larger discursive paradigm as it was an obsession with the question of progress and a new moral order. The early subject provides us with insights for some of the major shifts in paradigm the subsequent periods in Keralam. The edifice of modern, progressive morality has been critical in regulating spaces of contention in the 20<sup>th</sup> century around questions of sex and desire, and body and the subject.



## Chapter 2

### The Making of Thathrikkutty: *Smarthavicharam*, Sexual Morality and More

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*I have never been able to discover any name that the Brahmans have for the country over which their doctrine has extended.* (Buchanan 1807, 306)

#### Introduction

*Smarthavicharam* – the pre-modern practice of trialing Nambutiri women (*antharjanam*) charged with adultery and sexual infidelity – has remained a potential site for discourses of sexual morality from early modern Keralam to the present. An instance of *smarthavicharam* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the huge controversy that erupted following this incident quickly captured the centre stage in the ongoing reformation enterprises in Keralam. The event and its central character Thathrikkutty – the woman who was trialed – have ever since remained familiar in its cultural terrains owing mainly to the moral anxieties it unleashed at the time of its occurrence. In the history of sexuality in Keralam this common presence has a critical significance for its construction in the public pronouncements cement ideas of pre modern sexual anarchy and the progressive turn brought in by the modern moral paradigm. The construction and reconstruction of this event in popular memories throughout the modern history have most effectively borrowed from knowledge produced during the early colonial regime about the ‘uncivilized conditions’ that characterized the local culture.

The living memories of *smarthavicharam* and Thathrikkutty provide with some of the most powerful imageries through which discourses of progressive sexual morality are regenerated time and again. In fact Thathrikkutty's was the first ever incident in the modern history of Keralam that was discussed widely within the Malayali public sphere from the vantage of a modern moral perspective. The moral fermentation that Thathrikkutty's incident caused had deep and wider significance that it continues to be a live presence in discussions of *sadacharam* in the contemporary society. Embedded within the larger discourse of sexual morality the narratives around *smarthavicharam* and Thathrikkutty had shifting and complicated trajectories where Thathrikkutty, initially identified as inciting shame for the whole Malayali society, especially the Nambutiri community, was later reassigned as an icon of vengeance. Within this common reading Thathrikkutty emerge as the first ever woman who deployed her sexual prowess to fight against the patriarchal sexual anarchy that prevailed among Nambutiris- a community whose scriptures and customs (doctrines, to borrow from Buchanan's account given as epigraph of this chapter) were privileged in the early knowledge production undertaken by the western anthropologists and colonial administrators.

The iconic capacity of Thathrikkutty's image was substantially a product of narratives produced in the preceding periods, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, about local practices and a strong dissemination of this knowledge undertaken by the print, and later electronic, media in the subsequent periods. As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter the discourse of decadence had considerably drawn from practices like *marumakkathayam*, *sambandham*, and polyandry. Apart from the common factors that established the 'immoral' universe of these practices what marked their existence was a point of common origin – the Brahminical scriptures

– and the inherent power relations between Nambutiris and other communities.

*Smarthavicharam* was situated at the centre of this knowledge that was inherited and popularized as bona fide and authentic in the later periods. Thus the construction of Thathrikkutty's image is deeply implicated in structures of power and knowledge and the politics of representation scattered across a time span of more than two hundred years.

This chapter discusses the hidden implications of the colonial inventions of local practices as immoral and degenerate that still rules the roost in debates around questions of sexual morality, 'deviant' desires and subjectivities. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century contestations around Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam* are analysed here in order to understand the nuances of contestations that occurred around questions of sex, desire, chastity, promiscuity and deviance during this time period. Within the contemporary popular knowledge *smarthavicharam* and Thathrikkutty are synonymous existences where memories of one cannot live without the other. The division between practice and subject ceases to exist within this space. However *smarthavicharam* was already a site of knowledge production much before Thathrikkutty's incident occurred. Print and, later, literary production in the post Thathrikkutty period was deploying and reproducing this knowledge where her instance was effectively used for filling the gaps. The sudden transformation of *smarthavicharam* from a communitarian practice to a public spectacle in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century raises a huge array of questions concerning the foregrounding of caste specific practices as an effective site to generate knowledge about civilized sexual appetites.

What initially seemed to be a communitarian practice gradually spilled out to become a major site of contestations around these issues as well as interrogating the very dynamics of the relationships that existed between different caste groups. Whereas at the centre of these contestations remained questions concerning accessibility to the body of women, and reproduction and bloodline the volatile public sphere around the issue stretched it to convolute issues of caste and gender producing hegemonic narratives of progressive, monogamous morality. Thus the chapter also discusses how questions of caste were conflated with questions of sex and desire; this amalgam was deployed by the proponents of progress to forward their propositions and prescriptions to the society at large under nationalistic imaginations and beyond the caste and communitarian divisions. The chapter engages with narratives and descriptions of this practice emerging from different time periods ranging from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I take an instance of this practice that occurred in 1904-05 to problematise the unilinear assumptions that have always driven, and still drive, hegemonic descriptions about this practice as such and the discursive exemplars of victimhood and retribution into which the trialed women are always inserted.

## **Section I**

### **Exoticising the ‘local’: *Smarthavicharam* in late 19<sup>th</sup> century descriptions**

By late 19<sup>th</sup> century *Smarthavicharam* had already become an integral part of the anthropologists’ descriptions about the local customs and practices. The exhaustive elaborations made available by the local and western anthropologists both treated the issue from an already consolidated definition of sex, chastity and communal (Nambutiris’) preoccupations with purity.

As I have already mentioned in the introduction this is not meant to be an exhaustive survey of literature produced on the topic. I have rather restricted myself to two texts. The first one covers a very significant position in producing and reinterpreting local customs. The meanings assigned in this text became so popular that cultural production around *smarthavicharam* in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century Kerala could be seen as substantially grounded on its observations. The second text, written by a local author, anchored its positions in a similar fashion. The former was written by William Logan and the latter by a local author called Shungunny Menon. I borrow elaborately from these texts in this section in order to present a summarized version of oriental knowledge of *smarthavicharam*. The observations made in these texts are critical for they provided ‘legitimate’ explanations of this practice, under theories of caste, gender and science of morals, that was later transformed into a popular knowledge in the post *Thathrikkutty* era. The generous use of early anthropological writings shall also enable the reader to understand better the fundamental premises of the intersectionality between caste groups and their permutation into definite theories which I deal in the next section.

William Logan, a Scottish officer of the Madras Civil Service under the British Government with a considerable amount of experience working in different capacities before he was appointed collector of Malabar, wrote about the practice of *smarthavicharam* in considerable length. In his book “Malabar Manual” (1887), known as the first authentic guide to Malabar District under the Presidency of Madras in British India, he writes thus

The episodes in the trial of a caste offence among the Nambutiris are so curious, and throw light on their ways of thinking and acting . . . [W]hen a woman is suspected by her

own kinsmen or by neighbouring Brahmins of having been guilty of light conduct, she is under pain of ex-communication of all her kinsmen, placed under restraint. The maid servant (Dasi or Vrishali), who is indispensable to every Nambutiri family, if not to every individual female thereof, is then interrogated, and if she should criminate her mistress the latter is forthwith segregated and a watch set upon her. When the family can find a suitable house (*Ancham Pura*) for the purpose, the *sadhanam* (the thing or article or subject, as the suspected person is called) is removed to it; otherwise she is kept in the family house, the other members finding temporary accommodation elsewhere (Logan 1887, 122).

According to Logan, *smarthans*, who were the presidents of the Nambutiri villages or neighbourhoods (*gramams*), presided over the assemblies constituted for this purpose. These assemblies required the sanction of the ruling chieftain, who, on representation made that a caste offence had been committed, issued orders to the local *smarthan* to hold an enquiry. “There seems to have been in former days no appeal from the decision of the gramam [village] assembly to any other authority, but within the last few years the decision of such an assembly was called in question, and the attempt that was subsequently made to overrule its decision greatly exercised the minds of the “twice born” in all the Malayali countries” (122).

Logan’s text combines prevailing theories of Anthropology with western centric notions of sex and chastity. He sets the practice of *smarthavicharam* within a pre-defined context of systems of marriage followed by Nambutiris. “As the eldest son only of a family may marry into his own caste the younger brothers cohabit with Nayar females, and many Nambutiri women never get a chance of *marriage*. It is on this account that the caste rules against adultery are so stringent. But to make tardy retribution – if it deserves such a name – to women who die

unmarried, the corpse, it is said, cannot be burnt till a *tali* string (the Hindu equivalent of the wedding ring of Europe) is tied round the neck of the corpse while lying on the funeral pile by a competent relative. . . In order to get his daughters married at all, a Nambutiri must be rich, for with each of them he has to pay the bridegroom a heavy dowry and many an *illam's* resources have been drained in this way. ”. (128). Logan’s observations are substantially embedded within the colonial economics of power that existed through a stark ignorance or a complete rejection of the locally specific land and community relations. It is precisely through these ignorance/rejection episodes that Brahmins were assigned the status of the local custodians who then were equally held responsible for what was commonly agreed as degenerate conditions of the local.

The text considerably evokes the cultural geographies of the region while romanticizing the local. Arranged in a dramatic language the narrative offered inside the text generates realistic impression mainly through its descriptions of the proceedings related to *smarthavicharam*. A considerable amount of space is allotted to describe the power hierarchies within the community that subjected the women under trial with different methods of interrogation and observation. A dramatic unfolding of the whole event subsequent to the initial sprouting of doubts is arranged in the text. After the initial examination of the servant-maid, the Nambutiris of the *gramam*, in the event of the servant accusing her mistress, proceeded without delay to the local king who had the power to order a trial. After the king issued the order in writing the local *smarthan* calls together the usual number of *Mimamsakas* (persons skilled in the law). “They assemble at some convenient spot, generally in a temple not far from the place where the accused may be. All who are interested in the proceedings are permitted to be present. Order is preserved by an officer

deputed by the chief [king] for the purpose, and he stands sword in hand near the *Smartha* and members of the tribunal. The only other member of the court is a Nambutiri called *Agakkoyma*. When all is ready the chief's warrant is first read out and the accused's whereabouts ascertained" (123).

The *smartha*, accompanied by the officer on guard and the *Agakkoyma Nambutiri*, then proceed towards the house of the accused: the officer on guard was supposed to remain outside while the others enter. At the entrance, however, they were met by the maid servant, "who up to this time has never lost sight of the accused and who prevents the men from entering. In feigned ignorance of the cause for thus being stopped, the *smartha* demands an explanation, and is told that a certain person is in the room. The *smartha* demands more information, and is told that the person is no other than such and such a lady, the daughter or sister or mother (as the case may be) of such and such Nambutiri of such and such *illam*. The *smartha* professes profound surprise at the idea of the lady being where she is and again demands explanation".

Here begins the trial proper. The accused, who is still strictly *gosha*<sup>1</sup>, is questioned through the medium of the maid, and she is made to admit that there is a charge against her. This is the first point to be gained, for nothing further can be done in the matter until the accused herself has made this admission . . . [T]his point, however, is not very easily gained at times, and the *smartha* has often to appeal to her own feelings and knowledge of the world and asks her to recollect how unlikely it would be that a Nambutiri female of her position should be turned out of her parent's house and placed where she then was unless there was cause for it (123-124).

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<sup>1</sup> *Gosha* refers to both the long cloth and the practice of wearing this to cover the whole body from head to toe by Nambutiri women whenever they were out of their households.



On most occasions this preliminary stage was relatively “easy” and was “considered a fair day’s work for the first day”. The *smartha* and his colleagues then return to the assembly and the former relates in minute detail all that has happened since he left the conclave. The *Agakkoyma*’s task is to see that the version is faithful. He is not at liberty to speak, but whenever he thinks that the *smartha* has made a mistake as to what happened, he removes from his shoulders and lays on the ground a piece of cloth as a sign for the *smartha* to brush up his memory. The latter takes the hint and tries to correct himself. If he succeeds, the *Agakkoyma*’s cloth is replaced on his shoulders, but if not the *smartha* is obliged to go back to the accused and obtain what information is required” (124).

When the day’s proceedings were finished, the members of the tribunal were sumptuously entertained by the kinsmen of the accused, and this continued to be done as long as the enquiry lasted.

A trial sometimes lasts several years, the tribunal meeting occasionally and the accused kinsmen being obliged to entertain the members and any other Nambutiris present on each occasion, while the kinsmen themselves are temporarily cut off from intercourse with other Brahmins pending the result of the trial, and all *sraddhas* (sacrifices to benefit the souls of the deceased ancestors) are stopped. The reason for this is that, until the woman is found guilty or not, and until it is ascertained, when the sin was committed, they cannot, owing to the probability that they have unwittingly associated with her after her disgrace, be admitted into society until they have performed the expiatory ceremony (*prayaschittam*). The tribunal continues its sittings as long as may be necessary, that is, until either the accused confesses and convicted, or her innocence is established. No

verdict of guilty can be given against her except on her own confession. No amount of evidence is sufficient.

Logan states that, when the accused woman did not confess, “various modes of torture were had recourse to in order to extort a confession, such as rolling up the accused in a piece of matting and letting the bundle fall from the roof to the court-yard below. This was done by women . . . [A]t other times live rat-snakes and other vermin were turned into the room beside her, and even in certain cases cobras, and it is said that if after having been with the cobra a certain length of time and unhurt, the fact was accepted as conclusive evidence of her innocence” (126). On occasions when the accused woman offered to confess she was “examined, cross-examined and re-examined very minutely as to time, place, person, circumstances etc., but the name of the adulterer is withheld (though it may be known to all) to the very last”. Sometimes a long list of persons is given and similarly treated.

The tribunal meets at the accused’s temporary house in the *pumukham* (drawing room) after the accused has admitted that she is where because there is a charge against her. She remains in a room, or behind an umbrella, unseen by the members of the tribunal and other inhabitants of the *desam* who are present, and the examination is conducted by the *smartha*. A profound silence is observed by all present except by the *smartha*, and he alone puts such questions as have been arranged beforehand by the members of the tribunal. The solemnity of the proceedings is enhanced by to the utmost degree by the demeanour of those present. If the accused is present in the room, she stands behind her maid servant and whispers her replies into her ear to be repeated to the assembly (127).

According to Logan the greatest difficulty was experienced in getting her to confess,

. . . but this is usually brought about by the novelty of the situation, the scanty food, the protracted and fatiguing examination, and the entreaties of her relatives, who are being ruined, and the by the expostulations and promises of the *smartha*, who tells her it is best to confess and repent, and promises to get the chief to take care of her and comfortably house her on the bank of some sacred stream where she may end her days in prayer and repentance. The solemnity of the proceedings too has its effect. And the family often comes forward, offering her a large share of the family property if she will only confess and allow the trial to end . . . [W]hen by these means the woman has once been induced to make a confession of her weakness everything becomes easy. Hitherto strictly *gosha*, she is now asked to come out of her room or lay aside her umbrella and to be seated before the *smartha* and the tribunal. She sometimes even takes betel and nut in their presence (128).

When the trial was finished, a night (night-time seems to be essential for this part of the trial) was set apart for pronouncing sentence, or, as it called, for “declaring the true figure, frame, or aspect” of the matter. “It takes place in the presence of the local chieftain who ordered the trial. A faithful and most minutely detailed account of all the circumstances and of the trial is given by the *smartha*, who winds up with the statement that “child” or “boy” (a term applied by Nambutiris to their east coast east-coast? *pattar* servants) will name the adulterer or adulterers. Thereupon the servant comes forward, steps on to a low stool, and proclaims the name or names.”

The next proceeding, which formally deprived the accused woman of all her caste privileges, was called the *Keikottal* or handclapping ceremony.

The large palmyra leaf umbrella with which all Nambutiri females conceal themselves from prying eyes in their walks abroad is usually styled the “mask umbrella” and is with them the outward sign of chastity. The sentence of excommunication is passed by the

*smartha* in the woman's presence, and thereupon the accused's umbrella is formally taken from her hands by a Nayar of a certain caste, the pollution remover of the desam. With much clapping of hands from the assembly the woman is then instantly driven forth from her temporary quarters and all her family ties are broken. Her kinsmen perform certain rites and formally cut her off from relationship. She becomes in future to them even less than if she had died. Indeed, if she happens to die in the course of the enquiry, the proceedings go on as if she were still alive. And they are formally brought to a conclusion in the usual manner by a verdict of guilty or of acquittal against the men implicated . . . [T]he woman thus driven out goes where she likes. Some are recognized by their seducers; some become prostitutes; not a few are taken as wives by the chetties of Calicut. A few find homes in institutions especially endowed to receive them.

Perhaps the first text that dealt with the issue of *smarthavicharam* with its procedural details was that authored by Shungoonny Menon and published in 1878 AD. He provided a vivid description of the practice, as it was followed by the Nambutiris of Keralam, which was an example of the "rigorous and severe" rules laid down "for protecting chastity amongst [Nambutiri] females" (76). According to him when a female member of a family was suspected of having violated the laws of chastity, the head of the household communicated the information to his kinsmen. They then constituted an assembly along with some of the headsmen of the neighbouring village. This assembly conducted a preliminary enquiry through the maid servants in the house including the one attached to the suspected female. This was a very minute enquiry searching for evidence and, if the suspicion was found to be groundless, the enquiry was stopped and the matter dropped altogether then and there. On the other hand, if grounds for suspicion were found to be accurate, the suspected female was ordered to be located in a separate place called by the technical name *Anjampura*, where she was kept in isolation from others. The owner of the house and his kinsmen, together with the elders, then proceeded to the king to represent

the matter in a particular form.

The king, his family priest and other pundits of his court assemble and the sovereign himself puts several questions to the complainant and his kinsmen as to the nature and grounds of the suspicion and their own knowledge of the matter, their opinion etc., and the courtiers also follow the same course, and then the king issues a writ to the *smarthan* and deposes the king's agent or deputy in the person of a learned man and a Vedic scholar of the court. The prosecutor, together with certain men of the committee, goes to the *smarthan*, lays down a certain sum of money as a complimentary present to the *smarthan*, and apprises him of the affair and of the king's order; the *meemamsakans* [Vedic experts or scholars] are now assembled and all now proceed to the house of the suspected female, and the *smarthan*, with all the respect due to a Nambutiri woman, standing at a good distance without being seen by the female, makes a maid servant his intermediary and commences asking a series of questions (76-77).

If the woman's answers satisfied the *smarthan* as revealing the accusations to be groundless, then he would communicate the same to the *meemamsakans* and the king's agent present. They conduct a mutual consultation about the questions asked and the answers given and "should they agree with the *smarthan* that the accused is innocent, the enquiry is discontinued and a ceremony known as *kshama namaskaram* is gone through, i. e., lying prostrate before the suspected female and asking her pardon for the vexatious procedure to which she was subjected, and thus the female is honorably exonerated" (77). On the other hand if the suspicion was confirmed by her answers, and good reasons were found for believing the charge, the *smarthan*, abandoning the service of the intermediary maid-servant, "shows him before the accused female, and confronting her, begins questioning her. From this stage onwards the female is addressed and called a *sadhanam* (thing)" (78). This examination continues about three days,

and by that time the guilt is likely to be completely established, mostly by confession strengthened by evidence, and then the case is summed up and considered by the *smarthan*, *meemamsakans* and others in the presence of the king's agent. At this stage, the female is closely watched not only to prevent any outside advise from reaching her but also to frustrate any intentions of committing suicide which she may entertain. The result of the enquiry is reported to the king, who, after hearing all the facts sanctions the excommunication of the female and allows her a small pittance of rice and provisions to be issued from one of the *Oottupuras* (feeding houses). The sentence of excommunication is pronounced by a foreign Brahmin called a? *Pattar*. This person, standing on a platform erected for the purpose, declares in a loud voice the names of the adulteress and the adulterer; he next announces that the crime has been proved against them and that they both have been excommunicated. For this service, the *Pattar* gets a prescribed fee.

The cost of this enquiry . . . is somewhat considerable, and the whole is borne by the head of the family who is bound to go through certain ceremonies after performing the mock funeral ceremonies of the female, who is now considered as dead and severed from the family. This concluding ceremony is called *sudhabhojanam* (messing after purification) . . . During the enquiry the assembled committee is sumptuously fed by the head of the family . . . [S]uch an enquiry is essential to the Brahmins for preserving the purity of their race (Menon 1985 (1878), 76-79).

These texts both were built exclusively on the colonial politics of power and knowledge where the local practices were wholly translated, with the help of theories already available, to discover the immoral elements in the local traditions. As we shall see in the later sections of this chapter these texts were rendering new colours to the practice by attributing undue significance to questions those were never central to it. However they were immensely successful in making

*smarthavicharam* a symbolic representation of the local culture that testified its uncivilized character. This was attained on several grounds. The proposition, as evident from the epigraph in this chapter, that Brahminic scriptures determined the local customs gave sufficient room for these writers to focus upon practices followed by that community despite its small size in the demographic composition of the local population<sup>2</sup>. This was a major factor considering that it enabled the colonial administration to bypass the dynamics of the various local cultural practices by focusing on selected scriptures and customs followed both by Brahmins and non- Brahmins.

As we shall see in the next section this also helped considerably in connecting all the major practices followed by other lower castes with the Brahminic scriptures and customs. Thus *marumakkathayam* (matriliny), *sambandham* and polyandry – practices followed by different caste groups including Nambutiris and targets of reformation enterprises in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century period – were all projected as part and parcel of the same network. *Smarthavicharam* occupied central significance in this knowledge field precisely because it was an ‘easy example’ at the hands of the colonizer for the noncivilised nature of the local people. However its reinterpretation into western knowledge was achieved by substantially altering the fundamental premises of its practice. These textual frames resurface in the post *Thathrikkutty* timeline in the modern history of Keralam. The projection of *smarthavicharam* in the 20<sup>th</sup>- early 21<sup>st</sup> century public spheres in Keralam invokes complex genealogies of knowledge production undertaken in

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<sup>2</sup> According to the 1891 census Nambutiris in Travancore were less than .25% of the total population. Including all other categories of Brahmins in the region their size was less than 2% of the total population. In the case of Cochin their total size was less than 4% and in Malabar region it was less than 2.5% of the total population (Census of India, 1891, Madras, Vol. 13. report Madras 1893. Table XVI-A; retrieved from <http://archive.org/details/cu31924023177268> on February, 2011).

the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the incorporation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century episode of *Thathrikkutty* into it. However in the contemporary social situation *Thathrikkutty* reminds a whole context of sexualities, translated under a compounded version of sexual anarchy, embedded within pre modern relations of power. It is precisely this constructed version of a whole context that travels along with *Thathrikkutty* in the contemporary popular memories. An understanding of this context shall also help us reflect upon the situatedness of the aforementioned texts.

### **The context: combination of caste and sex in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Keralam**

*. . . no stronger argument could be adduced of the existence of polyandry among the Nayars in ancient times than the fact that to this day the term Son of ten fathers is used as a term of abuse among them. (Wigram 1882, III).*

This section is intended to briefly analyse the complex backdrop where discussions about the need to transform the locally embedded notions and practices around sex and morality were coalesced with caste relations and communitarian practices. The controversy around the site of *smarthavicharam* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had coincided with the emerging discourse that surrounded the larger questions around the diverse practices followed by different communities across the region. These include *marumakkathayam* (Matriliny), polyandry and the system of *sambandham*. A deeply loaded criticism of these practices was an inherent component of writings that emerged during this period on local customs and practices. A great many of these were with regard to the systems of marriage followed by different communities which were largely framed within the above-mentioned triad of *marumakkathayam*, polyandry and *sambandham*. With regard to matriliny Arunima argues that this institution in Malabar, as



elsewhere within the region, had undergone “several kinds of mutations through the nineteenth century” (Arunima 2003, 4).

She observes that the theorization of matriliney, an enterprise undertaken within the discipline of anthropology in the post 1950s, had resulted in rather simplified versions of its causative factors because “most scholars have not engaged directly with the analytical problems with their material”<sup>3</sup> (2003, 3). Another implication of this overwhelming interest in matriliney was that it sidelined the practice of *sambandham*, a hypergamous relationship established between the Nambutiris and the Nairs, which equally captured the early colonial writers’ imaginations as the main factor in the origin of matrilineal system of inheritance. The theoretical enterprises undertaken by the colonial writers and jurists during the period framed these practices from the vantage of a thoroughly western-centric perspective. In fact a reference to the diverse, especially marital, practices followed by the different communities was part and parcel of almost all the texts produced on the region during this period, a point well reflected in the commentary offered by a writer in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century that “South India . . . is often referred to as an *ethnologist's paradise*, owing . . . to the striking diversity of cultures found there” (Cappannari 1953, 263: emphasis mine). *Marumakkathayam*, *sambandham* and polyandry were often projected by the early colonial writers as instances that contrasted with the European model of monogamy. This field of theorization was indeed successful in situating these practices within the local caste hierarchy and inter-caste relations particularly those that existed between Nambutiris and Nairs and Nambutiris and other castes.

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<sup>3</sup>Her survey of the scholarly assumptions leads Arunima to argue that “[i]t is evident from these assumptions that the evolution of matriliney . . . is viewed as an unnatural system, and the result of Brahmin power (Arunima 2003, 5).

On the one hand these attempts drew a direct relationship between *marumakkathayam* – followed mainly by the Nairs and certain other non-Nambutiri communities in different parts of Kerala – and Nambutiris by contextualizing its emergence within the property related interests of the latter. The ordinance among the Nambutiris allowing only the eldest male member in a family<sup>4</sup> to enter into a “lawful wedlock with a woman from his own caste” had made it necessary for the younger brothers to seek “asylum in the Nair families which settled round about them and began to enter into *illegitimate unions of the nature of concubinage*” (Panikkar 1900, 36: emphasis mine). This followed the constant threat of dividing the property outside the community among children born out of such alliances; to avoid this, *marumakkathayam* was administered among those other communities with whom such alliances were established. Thus these children never had any claims over their father’s property whereas they inherited from their mother’s line (Logan 1887).

*Sambandham* referred to these ‘illegitimate’ unions, bringing them directly into a cause and effect relationship with the marital practices followed by the Nambutiris and their exclusive control over the realm of laws. The capacity to regulate laws and practices according to their fancies was located within the land relations. Kodoth (2001) while investigating the larger political context within which the question of *marumakkathayam* was debated and contested in Kerala during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century argues that “the mutually non-exclusive hierarchical interests in land” was interpreted by the colonial civil courts in terms of absolute proprietorship

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<sup>4</sup> Almost all authors who had written about these practices have referred to this point. William Logan wrote that “[a]s the eldest son only of a family may marry into his own caste the younger brothers cohabit with Nayar females,” (Logan 1887, 128)

by the Nambutiris; a position which enabled them “to ensure access to women of Nair tenant taravads (matrilineal joint families)” (350).

A similar situation existed in relation to polyandry as well<sup>5</sup>. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the

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<sup>5</sup> A number of studies emerged in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century claiming that polyandry was widely followed by different communities in Keralam, especially Nairs and Ezhavas. Although it had been a topic that obsessed the colonial writers a structural study of the same was initiated by Mandelbaum (1938) where he notes that "in South India polyandry is of especially frequent occurrence" (581); in Cochin, he identified six polyandrous *tribes* including the Nairs (Nayars) of Travancore and the Ezhavas (Irava) of British Malabar. In fact polyandry, its existence and its spread among the different communities, in Keralam was a central point of academic debates among socio-anthropologists as well as local community leaders. In an article published in 1931 K.M. Panikkar, while writing about Nair polyandry in Keralam, contested the versions provided by British anthropologists. His main argument was that Nairs practiced only fraternal polyandry (as opposed to the European writers' claim that they followed both fraternal and non-fraternal polyandry) in certain areas of Travancore and Malabar where “the Nambutiris tyrannized over the Nairs” (Panikkar K. M. 1931, 231). While responding to Panikkar’s arguments A. Aiyappan, a well-known anthropologist from Keralam, indicated that Nairs and Ezhavas practiced both fraternal and non-fraternal polyandry (1935). According to him both these versions of polyandry especially among these two communities had emerged because of the “Nambutiri ordinance that there should be no enforced chastity among the women of these castes”.

That

. . . even to this day Nair women retain some of their ancient prerogatives. Within her private apartments she is absolutely free from the control of her male relatives. The brother-sister tabu operates against the brother's interference, and the uncle's control over the feminine section of his household is also limited. The absence of definite relationship terms for relatives on the father's side shows the subordinate position of the father; he was not an equal partner in marriage. At funeral ceremonies a person's own children have a secondary role, while sister's children act as chief mourners. Disregard of the father factor goes to such an extent among them as to tolerate marriage of parallel cousins on the father's side—a thing uncommon among the Hindus. The relatively insignificant position of the father is a natural consequence of polyandry; matriliney is not wholly responsible for it (Aiyappan 1935, 78).

Aiyappan adds that Panikkar’s refusal to accept the evidences left by the European travelers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and what was observed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century writers was due to “caste-pride clouding his vision” (79).

colonial authors had established that polyandry was an offshoot of *marumakkathayam*. Polyandry had already started losing its popularity around this period and its significance mainly remained in reminding a past where “promiscuity was the rule of the day” (Wigram 1882, 76). These narratives of the past were very often coloured by the predominant control that Nambutiris had over other communities and *marumakkathayam* was a clear reflection of this; it was also a direct link that connected this past with the present. An author in 1880s observed that “there is evidence to show that polyandry still lingers in the Ponnany and Walluvanad Taluques especially on the Cochin frontier of the former Taluque. It is a fair inference from this that polyandry was once universal in Malabar, and that out of it sprang the institution of Marumakkathayam” (Moore 1882, 346). The Malabar Marriage Commission, constituted in the early 1890s to enquire into the various customs and practices in the Malabar and South Canara districts of the erstwhile Madras presidency, observed that “if by polyandry we simply mean a usage which permits a female to cohabit with a plurality of lovers without loss of caste, social degradation, or disgrace, then we apprehend that this usage is *distinctly sanctioned by Marumakkathayam* and that there are localities where, and classes amongst whom, *this license is still availed of*” (Report of the Malabar Marriage Commission 1891, 102. emphasis mine). The constitution of this commission was a culmination of attempts in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to effect change through legal interventions and bring the local marriage customs and practices under a codified law.

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Between the “caste-pride” of Panikkar and Aiyappan’s brief overview of polyandry remains the underlying politics of the civilization mission that was constantly involved in the production of knowledge about local practices, traditions and customs. The lack of male control over woman within the household, its translation in terms of her sexual freedom, the insignificant role of fatherhood etc., all of which considered as immoral from a Euro centric perspective were deployed to provide a value judgment of this practice. By this time, that is the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relation between Nambutiris and polyandry followed by other communities had become quite an obvious connection both in the commonsensical and academic imaginations (Mandelbaum 1938; Prince 1955; Aiyappan 1935 & 1937).

*Sambandham* and *marumakkathayam* related practices were the main targets of these efforts. The existence of polyandry was assigned meaning in direct relation to the institution of matriliney. The idea that polyandry among Nairs was a result of vested interests of Nambutiris had gathered wider acceptance around this period.

Kodoth in her paper articulates that “signs of discontent with *marumakkathayam* were becoming apparent prominently in the newspaper reports” by the 1880s in Keralam (Kodoth 2001, 351; also see Panikkar 1995 for a detailed consideration of such reports). By this period a common understanding of *marumakkathayam*, in terms of the sexual access it gave for Nambutiri men to the women of other communities, was already arrived at in public discourses in the region. An author while addressing the inaugural meeting of the Thiruvithamkur Vidyabhivardhinee Mahasabha – a forum constituted to work around the issue of education and progress – observed that “a common reason for the consideration that chastity is not compulsory for *Malayali women* is because of the existence of *marumakkathayam* . . . [B]ut in *marumakkathayam* a woman can have marital relationship only with one man at a particular time. Only if she approaches another man during the period of a relationship could she be thought of as unchaste” (Varma 1898, 21-23: emphasis mine). He further situates this issue amidst interpretations that maintained that all non-Brahmin women should be accessible to Nambutiris. He adds that “chastity is the best ideal for any Malayali women rather than remaining a celestial princess meant to serve the Brahmins” (29-30).

The late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period when a clearly defined distinction between

what could be considered as moral and immoral was emerging. The concerns were unique to this context to the extent they were invoked against the complex background of a fabricated history of communitarian practices and relationships. References were often made to this historical backdrop to justify the movement towards a monogamous system with clear-cut lines drawn in terms of defining sexual desire. The key issues that regulated these narratives with a crucial impact on the common imaginations were those around the questions of control over women's sexuality, paternity or a shared imagination of fatherhood and the male's control over the family. Thus this discourse not only made patriarchy a desirable objective of any practice but also subjected women's sexuality to regulations within the communities. Previously women's, as well as men's, sexuality was a subject matter of inter-community relationships between Nambutiris and other – mostly non-Brahmin – castes. This had enabled members of different caste groups to enter into conjugal relations with each other. The 19<sup>th</sup> century reinterpretations of caste relations led to the questioning of this whole system and sexuality became an issue over which each caste had their own stake. This coincided with the reformation discourse of sexual morality, discussed in the previous chapter, and attempts had already begun to transform each caste into endogamous units strictly following monogamy<sup>6</sup>.

Access to the female body and its monopolization, and the complexities that surrounded the question of property inheritance had become the main concerns for the leaders of the

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<sup>6</sup> I should take the caveat that these transformations indeed took a long time before these practices had completely disappeared from the Kerala society and studies record that practices, especially *marumakkathayam* and polyandry were still in place in Keralam even in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century period. Refer to my previous note on polyandry in this regard; For *marumakkathayam* see Gough 1952 and 1959, Arunima 2003; Saradamani 1999; Kodoth 2001 and 2002. To get a total commentary on the changing family patterns especially among the Nairs see Mencher 1962; see Silva and Fuchs 1965 for commentary on changing family systems among Christians.

reformation process in different communities. This had massively contributed to the huge public interest suddenly attracted by Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century period. An author in Malayala Manorama, a leading newspaper during the period, while the trial was progressing, wrote that

It was precisely the selfish interests of the [Nambutiri] lawmakers to maintain purity and prestige of their community that a law to punish by casting out all those who had sexual relation with an *antharjanam* was sanctioned. Accessing the wife of a spiritual Brahmin whose life is devoted to the teaching of Vedas should definitely be considered as a crime that deserves such a treatment. But today's Brahmins engage in at least three or four marriages and still approach a *sudra* [lower caste] woman to spend their nights with; they can never be considered on equal terms. *Is it not a grave injustice to demand one community to suffer for the sake of another?*<sup>7</sup>

Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam* was the first venue where oriental knowledge of local practices was deployed so powerfully as to generate wide public opinions. The trial was incidental in causing a sudden and violent discharge of hostility in the public sphere towards Nambutiri hegemony that was generally held as primarily responsible for all amoral practices in society of which the latest trial was projected as symbolic. The quote above shows the extent to which this knowledge had already gathered acceptance in the public realm and which was critical in shaping the new moral discourses through which Thathrikkutty would be seen in the subsequent periods. *Thathrikkutty's smarthavicharam* was the first site in the history of modern Kerala where issues concerning sexual morality, sexual freedom, the prevailing inter-community relations were openly contested with a rather wider participation; a site where

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<sup>7</sup> Malayala Manorama, June 7, 1905. 43 (16). 1-3: emphasis mine.

questions of sex and body were merged with questions of subjectivity and modernity.

## Section II

### The early anxieties

In the year 1904-1905 a Nambutiri woman (*antharjanam*) called Thathrikkutty was brought to trial for charges of illicit relations with younger village men.

The trial lasted six months. During the proceedings she disclosed the names of sixty three paramours, most of them men of high caste, repute and influence within the community. As a result she and all the men she named were ostracized by the community. Following this case the Rajah of Cochin proclaimed that in future, for holding such a trial the caste council would need to deposit a large sum of money in Royal treasury as a security” (Mathur 1969; 211).

Although *smarthavicharam* was a practice followed by the Nambutiri community the discussions around the same had a critical bearing on the larger cultural spectrum of Malayali society. In a considerably popular book on Thathrikkutty’s *smarthavicharam*, the author Leelakrishnan observes that “[T]he *Thathrikkatha* [Thathrikkutty’s story] has influenced literally all fields of significance in Kerala’s culture namely arts, literature, women’s liberation, social reformation etc. It has assumed the proportions of a legend, through tales orally communicated, the size of which can only match time” (Leelakrishnan 1977, 1). A number of texts, fictions, cinemas, short stories, poems, articles and studies, have been produced in Malayalam around this topic. Nevertheless there has not so far been any serious academic evaluation of the topic. This is



despite the passing references made in a number of academic texts (Agarwal 1994; Fuller 1976; Mathur 1969; Mayaram et al 2005).

The timing of the *Thathrikkutty* incident was crucial in transforming it into a central issue to be taken up by the reformers. The reform movement had already set its stage in different parts of the region now known as Kerala by then and the print media were already replete with calls to abandon the *degenerate* social practices. The role of print media, particularly newspapers, was crucial in popularizing Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam*. *Malayala Manorama*, the most well-known Malayalam daily of the period, regularly updated its readers as *Thathrikkutty's smarthavicharam* was going on. In fact reports of *smarthavicharam* events had started appearing, especially in *Malayala Manorama*, even before the Thathrikkutty's incident<sup>8</sup>. However Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam* was the first one where an updated sequence of events was made available to the larger public. For instance between 1903 and 1905 almost all issues of *Malayala Manorama* contained reports of the ongoing *smarthavicharam* with details thereof. On May 27, 1905 it reported the arrival of the king (*Valiya Thirumanassu*) in the capital Cochin after his visit to the neighbouring Thrissivaperoor district (now Thrissur) and the details of a *smarthavicharam*. The paper also reported that the king had decided, contrary to the custom, to provide an opportunity for all those men whose names were mentioned by the accused woman to

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<sup>8</sup> Examples are *Malayala Manorama* newspaper reports on May 29, 1897, *Meenam* 16, 1901 (English date unavailable) and June 27, 1903. Some issues in *Malayala Manorama* magazine contained the details of some of the *smarthavicharam* incidents with minimal details of trials conducted in and around the Kottayam district. *Malayala Manorama*, 1901, 12 (No.s 58 and 59)..

prove their innocence<sup>9</sup>.

The introduction of the technology of live reporting through print media was critical in shaping public opinions at each stage of the trial. This live space literally worked formatively in shaping a volatile public sphere that engaged in frenzied arguments on questions regarding sexual discipline and non-normative sex, prevailing forms of conjugality and so on<sup>10</sup>. This also led to the creation of a space where sexuality was looked upon as a major field of transformation with varying definitions consistently filling it. For instance an initial response to the trial held that “only the first person (male) has had intercourse with a *Brahmin woman*. All the other accused persons had sexual intercourse with a prostitute. Hence only the first person should be excommunicated”<sup>11</sup>. The same letter pointed to the dangers of relying upon the statements given by the woman alone. “For example a woman in a village was caught red-handed for committing adultery. The woman, who came to know that it was the oracle of the village who helped others to find her place, decided to teach him a lesson and mentioned his name during the *smarthavicharam*. In the end he too was excommunicated”<sup>12</sup>.

The newspaper reporting and the debates that followed were critical in objectifying both

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<sup>9</sup>“The king had conducted discussions about an impending judgment on the ongoing *smarthavicharam* of which the *sadhnam* [the trialed woman] is kept under custody in heavy protection. The difficulty in coming to a final judgment had mainly arisen from the fact that more than sixty people, of whom many were renowned in the society, had been implicated in the case” (*Malayala Manorama* May 27, 1905).

<sup>10</sup> See the quote in the previous section from *Malayala Manorama Op. Cit.* FN 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Malayala Manorama*, June 7, 1905 (emphasis mine).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

*smarthavicharam* and the traditional orders of sex. Thus the new *smarthavicharam* of Thathrikkutty was recast in the language of shame and punishment and of modern judiciary.

A list with the date, time, a detailed history and the names of accused men with proofs for each of the intercourses has already been prepared by the officials. All the 65 accused men were given separate dates for hearing at the palace. They were given the opportunity to prove their innocence and to ask questions with the woman directly. She replied like a barrister<sup>13</sup>.

Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam* also generated debates about the prevailing systems of justice. Although *smarthavicharam* was a communitarian practice, *Thathrikkutty's* trial had already caught the attention of the larger public for several reasons. While there was a stark absence of any opposition to conducting this trial there was a whole lot of opposition to the way the trial itself was conducted. One obvious reason for this was that since the list of accused men included people from other caste groups the validity of following *sankarasmrithi*, the text exclusively followed by Nambutiris of this region, was seriously challenged. The methods of conducting the trial, evidence that was accepted etc., differed from those followed by other communities. This evidently came out during the trial from a Brahmin himself. Rankan Pattar, one of the accused, while responding to the notice served on him, argued that, since he was a foreign Brahmin – one who did not belong to the original Kerala Nambutiris – the *Smarthan* of this incident was not eligible to conduct the trial. “The Smarthan of Keraladesam [Keralam] is ignorant about our caste-related customs, rules and regulations as also the *smrithi*<sup>14</sup> that we as a community follow.

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<sup>13</sup> Malayala Manorama, June 5, 1905.

<sup>14</sup> Rankan Pattar's reference here is to *manusmrithi* –the scripture followed by most Brahmins in other parts of India

Therefore the opinion of Sankaracharya Swamikal of Kumbhakonam or Sringeri should be sought in this regard”<sup>15</sup>. A report in *Malayala Manorama* suggested:

Previously . . . antharjanams used to be honest with the smarthan even when they had committed an error by accident or by ignorance. They never had any intention to deceive or defame anyone . . . [T]he antharjanams who get involved in smarthavicharam nowadays are so crooked and deceptive . . . at least now the governments of Travancore and Cochin should take sufficient care to bring changes in smarthavicharam according to the *new order*”<sup>16</sup>.

There were a number of suggestions before the king regarding the kind of changes required to make the *smarthavicharam* a more ‘judicial’ process. Rumours were widespread about literally everything related with the ongoing *smarthavicharam*. It was already the talk of the town, especially, in the Cochin and Travancore regions<sup>17</sup>. Two suggestions, about which rumours were widespread, deserve mentioning here; one was that the accused men, all those whose names were mentioned by the woman, would be called forth when they would be given an opportunity to directly put questions to the concerned woman in an attempt to prove their innocence. The second suggestion was that all the concerned records would be sent to an honourable judge of a court before whom the accused would be given an opportunity to orally prove their innocence. Both these suggestions were criticized on the ground that they did not contain sufficient room for the accused to provide evidence or any other testimonies that would

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except Keralam and some other selected regions.

<sup>15</sup> Patinjare Madathil Kittan Rankan Pattar accused no. 14. From “Smarthavicharam” Vol. I, p no. 26 of *Smarthavicharam* documents available at Regional Archives, Cochin (here onwards RAC).

<sup>16</sup> Malayala Manorama, July 22, 1905 (emphasis mine).

<sup>17</sup> Malayala Manorama was published from Kottayam, a district under the Travancore province then.

prove their innocence. “What purpose will it serve . . . when it is still believed that the woman would be fully honest and all the men are excommunicated on the basis of her statements alone. But the fact that over sixty names are already revealed proves that this woman is deceptive . . . [A] woman who have had sexual intercourse with such large number of people and who, by disguising herself, had enough mettle to visit places and see sights can never be trusted for what she states”<sup>18</sup>.

In fact trials and discussions around the practice of *smarthavicharam* used to be early occurrences in the courtrooms. As early as 1880 “a decision of *smarthavicharam* . . . excommunicating a woman and a man she had implicated, was taken to, and overruled by, the High Court in Madras on the grounds virtually that the *smarthavicharam* had not observed procedures acceptable to civil courts. The High court held that ‘the plaintiff’ (the excommunicated man) not having been charged, nor having had an opportunity to cross-examine the woman, or enter on his defence, and vindicate his character . . ., the defendants had not acted bonafide in making the declaration”<sup>19</sup>. O. Chandu Menon, author of the first popular Malayalam novel *Indulekha* and an erstwhile member of judiciary, had earlier provided the description of an instance of this caste procedure while he was a sub-judge of Canara – in the northern part of the present Kerala. According to him the whole issue emerged in connection with a lawsuit before the Calicut sub-court to determine whether a Nambutiri could lose his caste for violating some caste rules. “The ordeal was well attended and ended in so much confusion and uproar that many officials including myself were unable to see how exactly the scales stood; but the judges

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<sup>18</sup> Malayala Manorama, June 5, 1905

<sup>19</sup> Indian Law Reports (Madras Series) 12, 1889, cited in Thurston and Rangachari 1902, 224.

(Brahmin priests who officiated as judges) loudly and vehemently declared in favour of the poor accused”<sup>20</sup>. In terms of the number of accused men also Thathrikkutty’s instance was not novel. References to different *smarthavicharam* incidents are available from the archive records where the number of accused people was well over ten and twenty. Logan (1887) provides the following description

“Innocent persons are sometimes named and have to purchase impunity at great expense. In one case a women who had indicated several persons was so nettled by the continual “who else?” “who else?” of the zealous scribe who was taking down the details, that she at last, to his intense astonishment, pointed to himself as one of them, and backed it up by sundry alleged facts” (124).

The entry of the *smarthavicharam* into the public domain during the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was made possible by multiple factors, as I have already suggested, including the emerging importance of print media, the forming of a public sphere and the ongoing reform process. Discussion of the *smarthavicharam* had occupied a major space in this public sphere despite the communitarian resonance of the event. An author interrogates the need to involve members of other community in a process “that is purely intended to maintain purity of blood” within the Brahmin community<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless what caused such a preoccupation with an event, the occurrence of which was not an uncommon one within the Nambutiri community, was much more than the fact that it involved people from other communities as well. Thathrikkutty’s

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<sup>20</sup> (Cited in K P Padmanabha Menon (Menon 1933, 267-270). A discussion of both these instances are also available in Mayaram *et al* 2005., where the authors had initiated a discussion about the problems that persisted while dealing with local customs and practices (pp 200-201).

<sup>21</sup> Malayala Manorama, June 5, 1905

*Smarthavicharam* was gradually taking on the appearance of a major spectacle signifying the seriousness of sexual offenses in the modern era; it projected sex as a major issue that invited the attention of all communities. I have elaborated on this aspect later in this section. Amidst all the debates that were going on there was an absolute absence of voices that questioned the relevance of the trial itself. On the contrary all the initial debates were concerned with the question of how the whole process could be made more judicial or be modernized. Even courtroom discussions and debates, as we have already seen, centred on the compatibility of the proceedings from the perspective of a modern judicial system. Throughout these debates what was commonly conceived of as the very base of conducting the trial, that is the sexual misconduct of a *kulasthree*<sup>22</sup>, the questions of purity and bloodline, the negligence of accused men towards her chastity, remained unquestioned.

The site of *smarthavicharam* incited multiple images of Thathrikkutty<sup>23</sup> drastically different from each other and, sometimes, contradicting each other within the opposition of which the prescripts of chastity and sexual deviance were articulated. The initial reaction to Thathrikkutty's trial was a mixed one with curiosity regarding the event itself, hostility towards the woman and men concerned and so on. As the event progressed, rumours and gossips about the people involved, the proceedings, the involvement of the king himself and the options

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<sup>22</sup> Commonly translated as an ideal woman who represents all good qualities, most significantly including chastity and reverence for husband, of a home maker. This image of ideal woman, which was at the centre of the reform writings about constituting the domestic spaces in line with the emerging modernity, resurfaced and captured the public attention during discussions of Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam*.

<sup>23</sup> Although *smarthavicharam*- the trial, has a general and specific existence in the history of Keralam, in the popular imaginations the practice have a lively existence along with the name of Thathrikkutty. They are deeply correlated – one reminding the other.

available to the accused were becoming widespread. As mentioned earlier the persons accused by the woman were never permitted to disprove the charges against them, but the woman herself was closely cross-examined and the probabilities were carefully weighed. Until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the customary practice was that every co-defendant, except the one who was the first accused, did have a right to be admitted to the boiling oil ordeal as administered at the temple of *Suchindram* in Travancore. “If his hand was burnt, he was guilty; if it came out clean he was judged as innocent. The ordeal by weightment in scales was also at times resorted to. The order for submissions to these ordeals is called a “*pampu*” and is granted by the president [*smarthan*] of the tribunal” (Logan 1887, 125). Somehow the practice of issuing *pampu* had been stopped during the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>. Fuller (1975 and 1976) also makes a passing reference to the punishment ordeals in his brief description of *smarthavicharam*. While providing an account of the outcasting procedures among the Nambutiri community he states that

. . . [W]hen accused of illegitimate sexual relations the Nambutiri woman was lodged in a separate hut, for her presence inside her family house could pollute other members of her family. She was then brought before a caste court and interrogated. The court could only sit after the king had issued summons, and it was held under his patronage. If the woman eventually confessed, or was judged guilty, she was asked to name all the lovers, of

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<sup>24</sup> Records at Sucheendram Temple (available at RAC,Ernakulam) show that a "Kaimukkal" was done in 1802 *ce* by one Narayanan Nambutiripad of Polpakkara Mana (then at Killikkurissimangalam, Lakkidi of Palakkad District in northern part of Keralam). According to the available records this was the last *kaimukkal* instance. The next one turned out to be a failure. According to Logan (1887) “money goes a long way towards a favourable verdict or towards a favourable issue in these ordeals” (126). Krishna Iyer makes a passing reference to this ordeal in an article on pre modern social history of Keralam (Iyer, 1968). An online reference of this instance shows the extent to which the 19<sup>th</sup> century theories influence the contemporary knowledge of past. see <http://www.namboothiri.com>.



whatever caste. They were then brought before the court as well; their innocence or otherwise used to be determined through the use of ordeals, such as that with the boiling oil. The accused plunged his hand into the oil; if it was burnt he was guilty (Fuller 1976, 13).

Since the custom of issuing *pampu* did not exist anymore, there was no provision available for the accused to disprove the charges against them which eventually led to sympathy for their plight. A representation was made before the king in the year 1905 by a group of gentlemen (*sajjanangal*<sup>25</sup>) requesting him to arrange for a detailed hearing of the accused men in the absence of any other arrangements to that effect<sup>26</sup>. This, along with the demands to change the proceedings in line with the principles of the modern judiciary system, called for the king's intervention into the matter<sup>27</sup>. He took the initiative to make sufficient changes in the trial and thus to provide an opportunity for the accused to prove their innocence. A royal proclamation was issued by the king on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1905 where the rules that would govern the proceedings of

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<sup>25</sup> This is a common translation of the term although the caste composition of this group was not mentioned in the document.

<sup>26</sup> Document No. 309, RAC, Ernakulam. This is a main document containing a summary of the whole process of this *smarthavicharam* added with, at last, details of all the accused persons with *smarthan*'s note about each individual accused and the final judgment.

<sup>27</sup> The king's enthusiasm to conduct the proceedings in a smooth manner was quite evident. This was not only because *smarthavicharam* was practiced by the Nambutiris – the upper caste community in the prevailing hierarchy of castes in the region, but also because of the wide attention the incident has already gathered. An additional reason is cited by Bhaskaranunni (1965) and others (Nandan 2001; Leelakrishnan 2004); that there were rumours which suggested that during the course of interrogation Thathrikkutty had mentioned the names of 65 people and when the *smarthan* asked if there was more she replied by showing a ring (apparently interpreted as indicating the king himself, or a close relative of the king). Although a rumour, this has taken the form of a widely held belief that the king himself had to take the initiative to conduct *smarthavicharam* in a judicious manner. This rumour has apparently made appearance in almost all the literature around *smarthavicharam* including poetries, fictions etc. Bhaskaranunni (1978) has later shown the extent to which King's decision was influenced by this rumour by referring to the notes in the King's diary (152-55).

the trial were clearly set out. A main change that was made was with regard to the procedure itself that was introduced for conducting the hearing of the accused. The third clause of this proclamation decreed that, “the notice [to be served upon the accused] shall contain concise statement of the approximate time or the occasion when, and the place at which, according to the allegations made by the Sadhanam in her examination, he had carnal intercourse with her, and the notice shall also require him to produce on the day fixed in the notice all the evidence which he may wish to adduce in disproof of the imputation made against him”<sup>28</sup>.

Despite the fact that the tradition of issuing *pampu* had been stopped in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of the accused did try to get one in a desperate last attempt to avoid excommunication. Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nambutirippadu in his memoir refers to one such incident; that “[i]n the *notorious* incident of Thathrikkutty’s smarthavicharam two people, who were in charge of the famous Guruvayoor temple, were also involved. In order to avoid excommunication (Bhrashtu) they tried to influence the smarthan to get a *pampu*” (Nambutirippadu 1964, 133; emphasis mine). According to the author the original *smarthan* did not heed their request and they approached another Nambutiri who held equal social status. “The *pampu* that the latter Nambutiri issued became a controversy among in the Nambutiri community “and somehow the incident got leaked out . . . [E]ventually Nambiathan Bhattathiri [the Nambutiri who issued the *pampu*] was identified as guilty and he was demanded to expiate for this sin (prayaschitham). According to the vedic system prayaschitham [penance] implies punishment” (135). Kanippayyoor’s book mainly relies upon memories of his early childhood

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<sup>28</sup> Kerala Archives Newsletter (Archives Week Celebration Special), 1989: 1-7. Available at Regional Archives Cochin (RAC), Ernakulam.

discussions, gossip and hearsay to chart a map of incidents that surrounded the trial. Here it is notable that the general sympathy towards the accused men in the absence of *pampu* immediately gave way to a hostile response when the *pampu* was actually issued<sup>29</sup>. The controversy was a not only a result of the general hostility towards such a measure from within the Nambutiris but also because of the fact that “it got leaked out”; a reflection of the general antagonism towards the accused for the very acts they had committed as also towards the modern bureaucracy for its failure to maintain confidentiality.

It would be interesting here to look into the initial debates that had eventually led to the banning of the system of issuing *pampu* and the practice of hand dipping (*kaimukku*). In a letter written in the year 1812 by Rani Lakshmi Bhai, queen of Travancore, and sent to the concerned colonial officials she stated that “[T]his criminal jurisprudence was stopped with the arrival of Hyderali in Malabar. Now during his tenure as resident Munro is also trying to stop this *unscientific* practice in Cochin and Travancore”<sup>30</sup>. Rani Lakshmi Bhai was not in favour of attempts to stop the practice. However in 1824 the then British resident at Travancore in an order issued while considering a request made by some “prominent people” to not to stop this practice clarified the importance of stopping such practices. That “it is long since such barbarian practices are banned in *civilized countries*; such ordeals are never helpful to prove the *innocence or guilt* of the concerned people . . . Application of certain medicines on parts of the body shall keep

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<sup>29</sup> A general reference to this incident was made in an article written in the magazine Lakshmi Bhai in the year 1906. The author while discussing about the differences between the traditional and modern legal systems makes a sarcastic reference to the ordeal called “sucheendram kaimukku” and the politics involved in the issuing of *pampu* (1906 (1081 M. E) Vol. 2: pp 14-15).

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in V.R. Parameswaran Pillai (Pillai 1963, 319-321); emphasis mine).

them away from being burnt” (Raja 1915, 95-100). This historical background was re-invoked, discussed, and made as points of reference during the controversy over the issuing of *pampu* to the accused in Thathrikkutty’s *smarthavicharam*<sup>31</sup>. The core focus was on the scientific validity of the practice and the possibilities of the accused influencing the authorities with money. The interventions of modern science and bureaucracy played a crucial role in determining the nature and character of this whole trial.

The changes introduced by the king got a mixed reception from the society at large<sup>32</sup>. A response from a reader in *Malayala Manorama* magazine stated that “the *general disenchantments* with the changes introduced by the king in this context [*smarthavicharam*] are totally out of place . . . it is too early for us to make such judgments . . . [I]n any case this is a remarkable change in itself (*parishkaram*). So let us wait”<sup>33</sup>. The general concern and anxiety towards the trial and the whole proceedings is unambiguously represented in this letter and the writings that appeared in the press. A detailed report published in a special edition of *Malayala Manorama* newspaper in 1905 sums up the whole controversy around the *smarthavicharam* of Thathrikkutty. The report observed that apart from the *smarthan* and other people usually considered to be in charge of the trial (including the *purakkoyma*, the *meemamsakan*, the *Agakkoyma* etc) a superintendent and an office clerk were specially appointed to provide assistance in the ongoing trial. According to the report the list of accused included people from a variety of social statuses although some renowned people were also involved and that

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<sup>31</sup> Documents 411, 412 & 413 at RAC Ernakulam.

<sup>32</sup> Malayala Manorama magazine, Vol. 46 No. 15, 16 and 17.

<sup>33</sup> Malayala Manorama magazine, Vol. 46. No. 16, June 21 1905: p. no. 2 (emphasis mine).

“excommunication will put them in a death-like condition, there was a heavy threat for the woman’s (*antharjanam*) life or there is a possibility to kidnap her or to provide her with some ill-advices. Hence she is kept under heavy protection”<sup>34</sup>.

The special edition literally celebrated the opportunity opened by the incidence by referring to even the minute details of the trial. It included elaborate descriptions of the arrangements made by the state in order to smoothen the proceedings and to add to its transparency. With a highly enthusiastic flavor the special edition discussed the measures taken to note down all the details regarding each sexual intercourse separately, the proofs (the body marks, dates of intercourse and other related details) that Thathrikkutty provided the tribunal to prove the facticity of her statements, the details of the question answer sessions between the *smarthan* and the woman and the woman and the accused, when the latter were given opportunity to ask her counter questions, attempts made by some of the accused to get legal assistance by approaching advocates, attempts to secure *pampu* and the controversy that it lead to, and so on and so forth. The report said that “It is heard that the list includes people from Nambutiri, Varrier, Pattar, Nayar etc. . . . It is indeed a *sight* to watch the indomitability on their face when they go to question the woman and the grief-stricken expression when they come back”<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup> Malayala Manorama, *Thripponithura Varthakal* (Special edition- News from Thripponithura), July 5, 1905 (emphasis mine).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* emphasis mine.

The general *disenchantments*<sup>36</sup> that the reader talks about and the *sight* mentioned in the report stand for the eagerness, exhilaration, anxiety and deep-seated concern over the ongoing trial. Such wide and public expressions reflect the range within which the emerging definitions of sex, gender, pleasure, deviance, public and private, forbidden and decent existences were articulated. Interest previously confined to the community in conducting the trial was disseminated to the larger part of society through modern technologies of print media. There was absolutely no challenge raised against conducting such a trial although contestations did occur over questions of procedure<sup>37</sup>. The communitarian concerns over purity and mixture of blood that predominated in the previous trials gave way to an overt enthusiasm over acts of deviance, questions of chastity and punishments for committing acts of non-conformity. Articles appeared in newspapers and magazines as also the subsequent writings and discussions transformed the trial into a site where some of the most private acts committed between individuals were publicly discussed and negotiated on the basis of an emerging notion of sexual morality. Sex was becoming public. Possibilities of different forms of justice and procedure were enthusiastically weighed against each other in terms of their compatibility with bringing out the truth. What led to an initiative to bring changes was mainly the fact that the *smarthavicharam* no longer drew the attention of Nambutiris alone. The king had become accountable to the larger society for what seemed to be a communitarian practice.

Thathrikkutty was praised by many for the ingenuity, resoluteness and the self-command

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<sup>36</sup> Op.cit FN No. 32.

<sup>37</sup> A widespread disillusion against this practice was visible among the Nambutiris in the later period at the heights of reformation. Nevertheless these were retrospective responses against the practice after it was stopped in the year 1918. I shall discuss this further in a later section of this chapter.

she displayed during the proceedings, especially while responding to the cross-questioning by the accused; however her predicament after the trial was never a central concern. In other words there was an implicit unanimity of attitude towards the 'sin' committed by Thathrikkutty as also in accepting that it should be taken to trial. Thathrikkutty was becoming an instrument in the hands of the emerging Malayali public sphere to consolidate the modern notions of sex and aberrance, chastity and punishment, and of the changing definitions of private and public. Sex and morality did not any longer remain topics to be discussed within the communitarian realms; the whole society had a stake in those issues. This male-dominated public sphere actively participated in the debates, contestations, negotiations and exhilarations with a voyeuristic flavour and with complacency over the very fact that the culprits, all of them including Thathrikkutty, were being punished.

The central question around which the trial was conducted, as mentioned earlier, was whether the unchaste conduct of the woman had resulted in a progeny whose blood line (caste lineage or paternity) was dubious. Together with the question 'who was/were the paramour/s', the questions when and where did the intercourse/s exactly took place were also equally important. The year, date and time of each of the acts of intercourse that the woman had admitted were carefully traced in order to make sure of the legitimacy of the children of both the accused men and the woman. The widely interpreted issue of lineage or blood line as the main motivating force behind the conduct of this practice becomes ambiguous here since the children of both men, in their respective wives, and woman were counted in this respect. Their children born during the period of such illegitimate copulation were also excommunicated along with the others. Hence the very fact that all the men (whether they were Nambutiris or members of other

caste groups) were punished was much more complicated than it was represented to be; neither was it merely a concern about the blood line since the children of the men were also excommunicated- given the fact that their wives, mothers of those children, were not in anyway touched by the trial. The resolution of these complexities remained within the pre modern notions of purity which was translated simply in terms of concerns over blood line and chastity by modern rationality.

Simply put, the question of chastity was never a central concern; it was only a starting point and one among the many issues that governed the custom as a whole. Nonetheless the modern interpretations of the practice made a caricature out of the whole issue by representing these issues as the central ones. By doing this it was convenient to treat the issue of bloodline as completely incongruent and incompatible from the perspective of an emerging sense of modern rationality and the issue of chastity remained an unquestioned one throughout the debates. The direct impact of this cultural politics was that the whole focus remained on the men with the question “who else” drawing wide attention. At the same time there was a stark silence in this whole discussion around Thathrikkutty’s misconduct and breaking the rules of chastity. This was not because chastity was not considered important in the public culture. But the reason was just opposite, that women’s chastity was assigned a sacred position in the progressive discourse of morality that it escaped any social scrutiny to be conducted in public.

The discourses of sexual morality in the preceding periods had already prepared the ground where the ‘original sins’ committed were silently accepted as such; this was because the



sin was not debatable whereas the modes of trial, the methods of punishment were. The rights or wrongs of what she did was beyond any discussion, whereas the details thereof, the social status, hope and despair of the accused and the practices of the Nambutiri community in general did explicitly circulate in this male-dominated public sphere. In other words Thathrikkutty's 'sin' was 'understood' and was 'self-evident'. Later, when reform movement became strong among the Nambutiris, *smarthavicharam* was criticized on the grounds of the 'degenerate moral conditions' amidst which this, and other similar, practices existed.

The press coverage and articles that appeared during the trial were more concerned about sensationalizing the whole event. References to the individual offenders, with full details about their names, family and caste, were made in the reports wherever possible. In the immediate post-trial period, the newspaper reports indefatigably insisted upon the plight, after the excommunication, of the accused men, publishing stories of their seeking asylum in various places, details of families where more than one member was excommunicated etc. One such report mentioned how the members of the family of an accused had to file a case against him at the local court as he continued to stay at the family residence despite being excommunicated<sup>38</sup>. From the beginning the newspaper reports, wherever possible, sketched the details of individuals involved with descriptions of their families, place of residence, region etc. The veneration for the families to which the accused men belonged always contrasted with the abomination for the act they had committed.

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<sup>38</sup> Malayala Manorama (daily), September 20, 1905.

The newspaper reports, as also the discussions at wider levels, transformed the space of this *smarthavicharam* into a spectacle where deviant acts were being punished under the gaze of the public. The gravity of the transgressions committed, the methods used to discover the facts and thus to implement justice, the time, venue and frequency of sexual intercourses, the names and details of individuals, the arguments and counter arguments, the physical marks of the accused mentioned as proofs by the woman under trial, the disgrace, the punishment, all were disclosed before the public so that it could watch and observe, experience the shame and excitement, learn the lessons concerning an emerging moral regime, and understand the elusive differences between deviant and non-deviant and normative and non-normative sexual acts. The discussions about accessing the body of an *antharjanam* or an *antharjanam* making herself sexually available for others, in turn transgressing a predominant communitarian norm, touched upon numerous reference models all of which were commented, evaluated, judged despite the fact that they were not directly, or even indirectly, related to the actual incident. However all these sounded logical against the emerging discourse of sexual morality informed by 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial knowledge and the reformers' propaganda against the local practices.

The common associations of the practices of polyandry, matriliney and *sambandham* systems of marriage within inter-communal relationships had by then become typical examples of the Nambutiri 'tyranny' that had 'ruled the region for centuries'. The explicit sexual connotations that these practices invoked were often contrasted with the purity concerns of Nambutiris. In other words the sexual anarchy brought into light by this *smarthavicharam* immediately provided a site for the accumulating vexation over the Nambutiris and their predominant status as custodians of the local customs, rules and practices to suddenly explode

with a zeal to subvert the local framework for thinking about sex, marriage, body, deviance etc. Apart from making sex a public topic Thathrikkutty's *smarthavicharam* was an opportunity to unleash, and make public, the stock of terminologies and conceptual abstracts of disciplined sex that the progressive narrative of reformation had accumulated in the previous periods.

### **The textual interpretations**

The reason for the liveness in the *story* of Thathri [Tharikkutty] is its *moral* base. The theme of her biography is sexual anarchy that almost reaches sinning. It is precisely our carnal desires that perpetuate all our rethinking of Thathri. Who will not wish to enter into her mysteries? . . . Kuriyedathu Thathri continues to appear as a rival in the faux moral consciousness of Malayalis (Vijayakrishnan 2004, 12; emphasis mine).

*Smarthavicharam* invokes complex questions concerning pre-modern practices and their modern readings. It remained at large a practice embedded within power relations that preceded the modern epoch. This section consists of modern readings of Thathrikkutty and her *smarthavicharam* produced in the post trial period. The modern interpretations, all the variations thereof, articulate the emerging positions within modern Keralam with regard to sex, pleasure, non-normative sex and a variety of subjective dispositions. As a site *smarthavicharam* was clearly deployed to articulate the relations between bodily dispositions and a modern progressive society. Rather than reiterating the orthodox/western-centric definitions of chastity and the masculine predilections towards sex from a communitarian perspective, the debates consolidated a novel approach towards understanding sex and male-female relations from the vantage point of the wider society. This was particularly visible in the later discussions and writings on the topic

that coincided with the escalation of the Nambutiri reformation movement to new heights as also texts produced in the post-Independence period.

Despite the wide level presuppositions about the immoral actions committed by Thathrikkutty, the later authors discovered an entirely different way of deploying her existence and actions. The symbolic existence of Thathrikkutty thus given popularity was in no way even close to the actual incident as it was described by Thathrikkutty herself to the *smarthan* during the trial. The subtle differences that exist between these narrations, offered by Thathrikkutty herself and by the later authors, reveal the sexual politics deployed both by the reformers and the Malayali intelligentsia. The texts in the post-trial period have played a crucial role in shaping an understanding of *smarthavicharam* and Thathrikkutty. Most of these texts, including fictions, were produced in the post-Independence period although their critical significance remains in the fact that they represent the never-exhausted efforts to reflect contemporary ideologies in historical events. My use of these texts is not intended to draw attention to the obvious meanings that they reflect upon; rather it is meant to establish the links between questions of sex, deviance, progress etc., that were taken in a totally axiomatic sense to the extent the authors of these texts understood their common perceptions within a cultural context. These texts reflect direct and indirect, visible and invisible connections that exist between the modern discourse of sex and morality and the wider social and political context. Deeply embedded within these textual spaces are the continuities and discontinuities of this discursive space and ruptures which are albeit linked together under the grandeur of a modern rationality.

In a short essay published in 1936 V.T. Bhattathirippad (here onwards VT), a pioneer of the Nambutiri reformation movement in Keralam and litterateur, argued that, “if the community had allowed Thathrikkutty to seek a *suitable groom* in time this smarthavicharam would never have occurred” (Bhattathirippad 1936, 626; emphasis mine). Thus, according to him, Thathrikkutty was setting herself up against the whole Nambutiri community in order to retaliate for what disenchantment she had suffered during her earlier life<sup>39</sup>. According to VT three probabilities remained for a person while engaging in prostitution (*vyabhicharam*); they were desire, money or retaliation.

Thathrikkutty’s was a conscious struggle against the male chauvinist sexual anarchy, which was the rule of the day, with the same weapon. If desire was the reason she could have sought gratification from a selected few. Since she approached even the poorest ones it is clear that money was also not the motivation. Hence it becomes clear that it was a mental state of retribution that motivated her. She must have thought of insulting, disgracing and bringing disrepute to some of the most prominent people within the community and society at large, by implicating them in immoral activities including sexual intercourses (627).

What is obtrusive here is the very term that VT has deployed, that is *vyabhicharam*; directly translating the very act of Thathrikkutty as prostitution. The common Malayalam word

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<sup>39</sup> Published as a short essay in 1936 the article has reappeared in “The full collection of VT’s writings” (*VTyude Sampoorna Krithikal*) published in the year 1997 (626-628). For the sake of convenience I have referred to VT’s writings, including the autobiographical notes appeared as essays in scattered form from 1936 onwards until their publication in one volume in 1970 (*Kanneerum Kinavum*), to this single collection. Although I shall make clear the particular episode and their time of appearance in the text itself the page numbers belong to the single volume. VT was perhaps the most prominent leader of reform movement in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century in Keralam in general and within the Nambutiri community in particular.

*avitham* implying adultery and/or promiscuity is not used. Whereas within the common imagination of the Malayali cultural space both these terms invoke more or less the same moral connotations *vyabhicharam* or prostitution implies a different motive on the part of the woman concerned which is always other than or altogether different from sex itself. Whereas terms like *vesya* or *vyabhicharini*, the woman who engages in prostitution, invoke the picture of a woman who engage in sex more because of social reasons than her own desire, the one who is engaged in *avitha lyngika vezhchakal* or *bandhangal* (extramarital sexual intercourses or relations, sexual adultery, promiscuity) does it for gratification purposes<sup>40</sup>. The question of chastity has different implications in both these cases; while a question about the chastity of a woman engaged in prostitution will be considered totally irrelevant, in the popular imagination of a women engaged in illicit sex chastity is the most central issue. Thus the use of the term *vyabhicharam* helps VT to think more in terms of the intentions/causes of the act and locate them within the prevalent social conditions than to question the moral connotations of the act itself. In other words Thathrikkutty's self is freed from the moral/immoral implications of her acts and from questions of desire; it is now associated with retribution and the consequences.

On a different count, in VT sex becomes highly contested the use of which needed to be further conditioned to cast off its erotic implications. The sexual self of Thathrikkutty is completely forgotten, sacrificed and/or is constantly undisclosed and the public gaze is invited to the social repercussions of the whole incident. Asexualizing Thathrikkutty was the first step in acknowledging her capacities as an agent and any discussion of 'adultery' would have brought

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<sup>40</sup> This would be more or less equal to the difference in English between "tart" or "whore" (where sexual pleasure is implied) and "prostitute".

the discussion back to the ethics or morality of her deeds. Just as the newspaper reports contained an implicit agreement with regard to the ‘need’ for conducting such a trial thus resulting in the observation of a silence about the rights and wrongs of her deeds, VT also keeps himself away from discussing the basic questions upon which the actual trial was conducted. This is not exactly because these texts identified them as irrelevant. Rather such similarities in positions emerge out of certain cultural dispositions that exist despite the passage of time. For instance the basic concern surrounding purity, often translated in terms of the regulation of sexuality not only of the woman but also that of the men, remains the same for both those who initiated and conducted the trial and those who made a critique of the whole event.

It is an implicit agreement on the part of VT as to the wrongness and impropriety of her deeds that motivate him to assert how the presence of ‘a suitable groom’ would have eradicated the possibilities of this *smarthavicharam*. This way of reading also becomes highly problematic as it considerably distorts the facts behind the case. For instance the ‘groom’ suggestion fully hides the fact that Thathrikkutty was actually already married according to the custom of Nambutiri community. Her husband was one among those listed as accused and who was also excommunicated after the trial. Such misreading had anyhow resulted in elevating Thathrikkutty’s image to the standard of an icon. Monogamy is explicitly identified as the effective means for controlling and regulating the individual’s (especially females’ - in this context Thathrikkutty’s) sexuality. According to VT, Thathrikkutty’s resistance to Nambutiri patriarchy gathers significance as a “conclusion of the dark age in the history of Keralam” (627).

In the context of discussing his own *sambandham* relation with a woman outside his community, VT invites the reader's attention to how Thathrikkutty is understood within the popular imagination of Nambutiris. In his autobiography published in 1965, while describing this episode in his life, he states that "it was the Nambutiri youngsters who were more agitated. [They] scolded me, insulted me, and some of them refused to participate in the marriage. They hate Nambutiris who engage in a sambandham relation [although] they themselves can fornicate, can have *homosexual intercourse*. According to them . . . [the male in a *sambandham* relation] is as *viler as the one excommunicated for having slept with Thathrikkutty*" (288; emphasis mine)<sup>41</sup>. The hostility of youngsters towards VT is given an imaginary existence where both VT and his critics equally share their attitudes towards Thathrikkutty and homosexuality. In other words in the common imagination sleeping with Thathrikkutty and homosexual intercourse both gather the same moral connotation. I say this because VT's way of ascribing these views to 'them' considerably reflects on his own views about those issues.

A number of texts have followed this tradition of marking Thathrikkutty as a symbol of retribution against Nambutiri tyranny<sup>42</sup>. In her short story, written in 1938, Lalithambika

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<sup>41</sup> One of the main objectives of Nambutiri reformers was to make provision to allow the younger brothers to marry from within the caste as opposed to allowing only the elder brother. *Swajati vivaham* (marry from one's own caste) was a campaign gathering strength within, especially the younger members of, the Nambutiri reformers. It was during this period that VT, who was a prominent figure in the reformation movement, had to engage himself in a *sambandham* relation with a woman outside his community. This became a controversy among the reformers. VT's statement should be read against this background. Later, when *swajati vivaham* became a strong movement VT abandoned his *sambandham* partner and married 'legally' from his own community (283-291).

<sup>42</sup> In fact VT's opinion was more in the context of remembering the past – the discussions and debates within the community and in the larger society during the period of reformation. Nevertheless when I say a 'tradition' I don't mean to say something that was started 'by' a specific author rather as something that was constructed and has



Antharjanam (1909-1987), a renowned woman writer in Malayalam provides a firsthand account of the popular impression of Thathrikkutty within the Nambutiri community. Lalithambika, while narrating the dilemma of the author, reckons that “while presenting live stories of relationships on the basis of contemporary issues . . . [a woman author] will have to struggle against dissents from many corners including those from within her own community”<sup>43</sup>. The story, entitled *Prathikara Devatha* (Goddess of Revenge), has only two characters including the author herself; the other is Thathrikkutty making a late night visit to Lalithambika’s contemplations. The author’s engagement with Thathrikkutty begins when she experiences tremors on her body while realizing that the figure in her presence is none other than the “thathri”. “Oh . . . I was shocked.... It is she..... even mentioning her name is forbidden by our mothers..... hatred would be a synonym of her name..... Oh.. what else can I say....”<sup>44</sup>. In this diagesis Thathrikkutty assumes the role of the main narrator of her own story telling mainly “why she did it”. . . “I learned this technique . . . [in order] to satisfy my husband . . . since I was told that I was lucky to be married as the first wife of a healthy young man . . . In fact he himself taught me these techniques after our marriage. Probably this desire has become more an intoxication in me but I can promise he was the only object of all my desires”<sup>45</sup>. The rejection and negligence that she suffered at the hands of her husband eventually led her to abandon her conjugal home and return to the natal residence. Conditions were no better there either and,

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emerged as part of a larger discourse. In one sense it is very difficult to say when and by whom Thathrikkutty has gathered the image of a woman taking revenge. But from the newspaper reports onwards the language in which Thathrikkutty had been described had constantly placed her in the position of “responding” to the accused males’ (and thus symbolically to the male chauvinistic/patriarchal Nambutiris’) questions.

<sup>43</sup> From the story *Prathikara Devatha* (Goddess of Revenge) by Lalithambika Antharjanam, 1938 (2003) in “Selected Stories”, National Book Stall: Kottayam. p no. 38.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid* p. no. 40.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid* p. no. 41.

through an episodic narrative that unveils the dismal picture of women within the Nambutiri community, the narrator arrives at the moment when Thathrikkutty had to choose from the two options left to her; “either to be a hysteric woman or to be a harlot”. . . “It should be a retaliation not only for my sake but also for the sake of all the women who have suffered . . . Let people see and learn that not only men but women can also ruin like this”<sup>46</sup>. The author speaking through the narrator – Thathrikkutty herself – however struggles to extenuate, and justify, her acts by inserting statements that reflect upon her hesitation and helplessness while standing in a public place, attracting men towards her. “I tried to avoid them saying that I am a married woman with a husband and that I am not a prostitute, but they insisted . . . and they left immensely satisfied . . . and very soon her name was widely spread”<sup>47</sup>.

The narrative in the story, however remote from the factual reality, signifies the moral ground of its emergence. The complexity of the task that the author had undertaken directly pertains to an already established moral regime that has predetermined definitions about the past and events that had occurred in the past. The contextualization of the retributive acts provides the effective means for the author to depict Thathrikkutty. Simultaneously the author was also addressing the odium in the community for Thathrikkutty. Outside the text and within the popular imagination this common hatred and the sexual extravaganza, which Thathrikkutty confesses inside the text through imaginative accounts, have a direct relationship; a relationship established by the reformation discourse to detest “sex” outside recognized (monogamous, heterosexual) relations. It is precisely this generic imagination of Thathrikkutty that is articulated

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid* p. no. 44.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* p. no. 45.

in VT's interpretation of the common imagination of the male in *sambandham* marriage as viler. Thus the author, Lalithambika, could be observed as directly negotiating with her immediate surroundings responding to curiosities about the ethical nature of Thathrikkutty's acts. A justification of the act could arrive only by locating it amidst a set of (oppressive) relations that preceded the present and by a sense of revenge against those relations. After listening, within the story, to the whole narration of Thathri the author responds;

. . . [F]orgive me, but, for the public, thathri's self sacrifice was nothing more than an ordinary instance of prostitution. Although it created a huge uproar it couldn't show us the *right path*. *The intention will not justify the route taken* . . . you indeed threw light on that stark silence of darkness which was indeed a great challenge and it still glows for the younger generation that was to come. The goddess of revenge *deserves to be forgiven* for that light (316; emphasis mine).

This passage reflects on the author's ground rather clearly where Thathrikkutty deserves to be forgiven although the route she had taken, that is breaking the rules of chastity, could not be justified. The readers' understanding of Thathrikkutty is shifted to the context of the Nambutiri tyranny although 'what she did' cannot be justified. The dilemma of the author, in terms of situating Thathrikkutty amidst a constellation of moral definitions of chastity, sex, prostitution and adultery at the same time as justifying her, is resolved by maintaining a separation of her acts and its consequences; the acts could not be justified although they could be forgiven on the ground of consequences they invoked. In other words an elevation of her status from that of a 'mere prostitute' to someone who could invoke serious consequences for the society required a compromise in the form of labeling her actions as 'not justified'.

What is striking here, particularly in the light of the earlier concentration on the word for prostitute used by VT, is that Lalithambika has chosen an altogether different manner of describing Thathrikkutty's character and yet both these texts produce more or less the same results. Both these texts, through different routes, urge to define Thathrikkutty's self solely on the basis of her social significance urging also to forget (VT) and forgive (Lalithambika) her sexual self. VT's pragmatic observations clearly asexualized Thathrikkutty and instead projected upon the role of the sexually anarchic conditions within the Nambutiri community in determining her fate. This invokes a sense of victimhood of Thathrikkutty – a fate that could have been avoided through some social engineering – in the form of a suitable groom as VT remarks. On the contrary Lalithambika identifies her as having much more complicated personal motives. Lalithambika's was perhaps the first popular account of Thathrikkutty where one could identify her as a sexual being. However this projection of her sexual character is precisely what the author had to deal with since, as the author herself clarifies, the impression of shame that Thathrikkutty's image invoked emerge from the sexual extravaganza in her life story.

According to Ochs and Capps (1996) there exists an intimate relation between narrative and experience; that “narrative and self are inseparable in that narrative is simultaneously born out of experience and gives shape to experience” (Ochs and Capps 1996, 19). The imaginary autobiographical narrative of Thathrikkutty in Lalithambika (1938) is mainly a result of the attempt undertaken by the author to address her own surroundings defined by her membership in a traditional Nambutiri family. The memories of Thathrikkutty, especially within the Nambutiri

community, were built upon the shame factor that her incidence had brought for the whole community. Lalithambika provides a short glimpse of conversations and rumours about Thathrikkutty that circulates within the domestic spaces of Nambutiri households. She empathises with Thathrikkutty to the extent she herself is also subjected to the strict regulations of Nambutiri patriarchy. This experience of memories of Thathrikkutty and Nambutiri patriarchy shapes her account. While the sexual self of Thathrikkutty is an inevitable part of this account this needed to be forgiven in order to shift the projection towards a more socially relevant existence of her. As a result ‘forgiving the sin’ at the end of the story is an urge on the part of the author to desexualize Thathrikkutty in the popular memories.

These texts reflect the context – context in terms of the germane and relevant restraints of the social, cultural situation that influence language use, language variation, and discourse – which determine, influence, distort a particular narration, description or a fictional representation in ways that are specific and particular to that context itself. The progressive narratives of reformation, in all senses, subordinate, regulate, restrict and re-route these narratives and descriptions to a past. In other words the significance of Thathrikkutty’s acts was exported to a different locale that was temporally behind and morally degenerate although those acts were not justifiable from the present’s perspective. This has emerged from a deliberate attempt to maintain a clearly defined distance between Thathrikkutty’s self and her acts. Whereas Thathrikkutty was inherently used as a symbol to demarcate the past from the present, such a symbolic existence needed to be freed from any moral implications. Thus the distance between her acts and her ‘self’ was directly translated into the symbolic nature of her existence where she will be remembered in terms of the context in which she lived and against which she ‘fought’ rather than

in terms of a moral, pragmatic understanding of what she actually did. An asexualization of this ‘symbol’ was being undertaken. Thathrikkutty was becoming a symbol.

All the narratives of Thathrikkutty and *smarthavicharam*, local studies and investigations, fictional narratives etc., have followed these models of victimhood/retribution. Her symbolic significance within the cultural space of Keralam has been invoked throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century spilling over into the 21<sup>st</sup>. The popular imaginations of Thathrikkutty have invariably become a mixture of fictional narratives and ideological attributions. This is particularly so since the publication of the novel “Bhrashtu” written by Malayali writer Madambu Kunhukuttan and published in the 1960s. While “celebrating” the centenary of Thathrikkutty’s *smarthavicharam*, *Mathrubhoomi*, a leading Malayalam magazine in Keralam, had published studies and articles on Thathrikkutty. In one of the articles the author, Vijayakrishnan, investigates the question “thereafter what happened to Thathrikkutty?” (Vijayakrishnan 2004). The author steers his journey into the past through memories of people who belonged to the later generations of the close kith and kin of Thathrikkutty, through rumours in and around the locality where Thathrikkutty’s *illam*<sup>48</sup> was located. Kappiyoor Parvathi Antharjanam, one of the great-granddaughters of Thathrikkutty’s sister, while sharing her thoughts on Thathrikkutty from what she had heard says thus:

She [Parvathi Antharjanam] remember clearly what was told by her mother about Thathri’s wedding day; all those who accompanied the bride’s party for the occasion of bringing her to the groom’s house after the wedding anticipated a grand reception.

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<sup>48</sup> Nambutiri hosehold.

Immediately on reaching Kuriyedam [the name of husband's *illam*] all stood still. Some serious discussion was happening inside. The elder brother had made his younger one to marry for his comfort. He threatened his younger brother who insisted on getting the opportunity of first night (Vijayakrishnan 2004, 10).

This argument about the wedding day of Thathrikkutty made its first formal appearance in Madambu's novel where he elaborated the sequence of negotiations between the brothers for Thathrikkutty. In the novel a final settlement was arrived at after the younger brother, the actual groom, gives way to his elder one who thus gains the opportunity to spend the first night with the bride. In fact this once again carries the readers' imagination back to the old days when the elder son in a Nambutiri family held absolute control over the whole family property. Thus the negotiations are invariably inscriptions of the contemporary's axiomatic sentiments about the old power relations. During my interview with Madambu he said that this particular instance (as many others were) was merely fictional imagination. In fact arranging the plot for this particular sequence this way was a deliberate attempt to make "the context" clear for the reader<sup>49</sup>. Nevertheless Madambu's book was suggested as the main reference by some of the universities in Keralam in order for the students 'to learn more' about *smarthavicharam*. In order to avoid the danger of considering this fictitious account for a narration of facts the reprints of Madambu's book after 1979 came with the caveat that the book was a mere fictional presentation and many of the incidents presented there cannot be taken as originally happened.

With regard to the incident mentioned above the author, Madambu, had added in the

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Madambu conducted in February 2009.

aforementioned caveat that “a scene that was added in the novel in order to add to the excitement is being taken widely as an actual practice that existed among the Nambutiris; the scene where the elder brother spends the first night with Paphikkutty [the name of the character for Thathrikkutty in the novel] after the wedding”<sup>50</sup> (Kunhukuttan 1962). The same sequence recurs in many of the texts produced in the later periods. The serialized investigation of Thathrikkutty published by *Mathrubhoomi* weekly in 1977 projects the ‘first night’ incident as “the culmination of the unending torments that had begun even before . . . [and] after that she was not willing to concede before men” (Leelakrishnan 1977 (2004), 27-28).

According to the records at the Ernakulam regional archives, Cochin the first person who had sexual intercourse with Thathrikkutty, when she was ten years old – a year before her menarche, was Kuriyedath Nambiathan Moossu, the elder brother of Raman Nambutiri whom she married almost seven years later. This disproves the factual relevance of the first night incident which, as several other such accounts, is still deployed as a signifier of the degenerate conditions in the Nambutiri community. Fictional accounts, far from reality, have entered into personal narratives and memories about Thathrikkutty. Even while this continues to remain so Thathrikkutty still remains an ambitious project of the sexual politics in Keralam. It simultaneously justifies the movement from the pre modern to a more modern and progressive era of sexual discipline and threatens any deviation from the latter as a symptom of going back to the dark age.

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<sup>50</sup> In the foreword of the novel.



The language of 19<sup>th</sup> century colonizer and anthropologists' has continued to remain crucial in throughout the descriptions of Thathrikkutty. The progressive narratives of modern sexual moral regime with clearly defined differentiations of gendered spaces and bodily inclinations have appeared throughout these descriptions. For instance the liberty enjoyed by Brahmin women to visit her relatives, religious places, her own natal residence etc., or to leave her conjugal residence according to her own discretion along with a maid had often been interpreted as 'opportunities' used by Thathrikkutty. Her fondness for music, Kathakali and that she attended classes of a local teacher (*guru*) until she got married, are often discussed as 'cases of exception' for a Nambutiri woman during that period. Such classical depictions have complicated the representations of Thathrikkutty's life and the inevitable backdrop of *smarthavicharam* against which only her life history has a valid existence. Such additions not only validate the already acknowledged iconic values assigned to her but also make any reference of her or even of the practice, at the centre of the history of which she exist as a symbol, from any other perspective literally an impossible task.

Thathrikkutty's fascination for Kathakali is a well known piece connected with the whole episode of her life. A great deal of romanticisation has taken place around this episode. This have considerably drawn from oral and literal depictions of a past when Kathakali was presented as an art form exclusively meant for the entertainment of the members of the royal family and upper caste Nambutiris. According to popular narratives Thathrikkutty, as a member of an upper caste, Nambutiri, family, used this opportunity to access the artists. The biography of Kavunkal Sankara Panikkar – a well known Kathakali artist who was one of the accused in Thathrikkutty's incident– is invariably present in all these descriptions. In fact a legitimate account of

Thathrikkutty's sexual self could be seen only in this context of her relationship with Kavunkal, for instance the film *Vanaprastham*, directed by Shaji Karun and released in 1999, and an essay written by Govindan in 1951. Although with different implications both these texts acknowledge this relationship with the Kathakali artist as romantic. Govindan observes her desire as desire for the masculine body language of Keechakan – the mythological character most famously performed on stage by Kavunkal Sankara Panikkar; that “her sexual desires were . . . invoked by Keechakan” (Govindan 1951, 694).

However the later readings of this relation between Thathrikkutty and Kavunkal Sankara Panikkar or even the relationship she had with Kathakali – the dance form – have very often targeted Thathrikkutty's ‘notorious’ thirst for sexual pleasure. Even as early as in 1950s an author, in his commentaries on Kathakali as an art form of the region, laments that “if [he] was not excommunicated, this period would have been known as the age of Kavungal Sankara Panikkar” (Menon 1957, 311). According to the author this was a big loss which resulted from the “sexual thirst” of Thathrikkutty (312). He observed that “she [Thathrikkutty] possessed acute interests in Kathakali. At a proper age she was given in marriage to Kuriyedathu illam. After the marriage she made it a habit of visiting and staying at places like Guruvayoor, Thrissivaperoor [now Thrissur] etc., with a maid under the pretense of visiting her natal home [until] . . . everyday different lovers will play with her chastity” (Menon 1957, 311-312). The Kathakali episode in Thathrikkutty's biography has a critical space in popularising her position both as a goddess of revenge and as a woman of unfathomable sexual desire. At least two films produced

in Malayalam have taken Thathrikkutty's fascination for Kathakali as their central themes<sup>51</sup>.

In the earlier mentioned special edition on Thathrikkutty Vijayakrishnan observes that “[I]t is not a surprise that she [Thathrikkutty] was enticed by the virility of Kavunkal . . . Rumours also speak about how was he asked to visit her in the same costume . . . She was not only attracted to the splendor of Kathakali; she read books on it. What did she give in return for those who gifted her books?” (Vijayakrishnan 2004, 10-11). The sexual excess in Thathrikkutty's stories and her image as goddess of revenge is perfectly combined to produce a backdrop against which her 'exceptional' existence is rendered logical. In the contemporary social context in Kerala we find these combinations resurfacing as part of attempts to validate this social history. In yet another book published in the year 2001 an author observes thus

Nambutiris, and their women, never had difficulty for food. The women could travel around with a maid; can visit all the temples and can stay at all the *illams*. After puberty and until marriage they should not leave their home . . . they never cover their breast. While going out they will cover the whole body with a single cloth . . . She [Thathrikkutty] was unforbearing at any news of Kathakali performance. At times she pretended to be a Nair woman and dressed accordingly . . . [T]he rogue elephant Krangattu Kesavan, kept away during estrus, was quite popular during that period. The story of the woman inside the house who was also rutting out became very popular later”

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<sup>51</sup> These are films Parinayam released in 1994 and Vanaprastham released in 1999 apart from several other films with smarthavicharam as the main or sub themes.

Parinayam, Malayalam film. Directed by Hariharan, Written by M. T. Vasudevan Nair. Produced by G. P. Vijaya Kumar. Released in 1994 by Seven Arts films. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0230623/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0230623/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1).

Vanaprastham, Malayalam film. Directed by Shaji N. Karun, Written by Pierre Assouline, Shaji N. Karun and Raghunath Paleri. Produced by Mohanlal and Pierre Assouline. Released in 1999.

[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0202055/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0202055/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1)

(Nandan 2001, 63-64).

Nandan, in his book (2001), again discusses the different versions of how the relationship between the artist Kavunkal and Thathrikkutty was established. According to the various versions that Nandan provides he (Kavunkal) was either trapped by Thathrikkutty or such a relation did not exist at all (2001, 54-56). Thus Nandan focuses on blaming Thathrikkutty for she either allured the artist by using her sexual prowess or she wrongly testified to the *smarthan* during the trial. Both these assumptions, however, are built on the already established theory of retribution.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century representations of Thathrikkutty considerably draw from the already established social history the popularity of which has transformed it into commonsensical knowledge. It is precisely this common sense that is addressed in these writings and the authors invariably struggle as the different versions they produce easily become a re-production of an earlier version. This mainly emerges from the fact that Thathrikkutty and *smarthavicharam* have entered through a politics of knowledge inaugurated during the colonial regime. Part and parcel of such knowledge constructions has been values that have had both normative and abstract existence. The net result is that the ground of the descriptive space around Thathrikkutty and *smarthavicharam* has remained largely unchanged over time. The language of reformation and modernity had definite frameworks through which Thathrikkutty was/is remembered, defined and her significance accounted for. The numerous interventions from the many quarters could only rephrase, redefine, re-articulate and reconstruct Thathrikkutty mystifying the already

existing mysteries and intensifying her iconic capacities; the iconic nature of, and the allegories concerning, her existence and the conceptualization of a past in terms of its dark/uncivilized existence went hand in glove.

While the popular perception of Thathrikkutty was essentially implicated within descriptions of an amoral past, her victimhood and retribution, she at the same time continued to remain a mark of shame within the Nambutiri community. The sexual excess that accompany her memories are largely circumvented by shifting the focus upon her significance within a constructed history of sexual anarchy. This provides the definite framework within which her sexuality is wholly organized and configured. Outside this discursive framework it fails to gather any significance. Studies published especially from mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present could be characterized as situating Thathrikkutty amidst memories that invoke either an ignominious past or a shameful reality<sup>52</sup>. All accounts of her, fictional or non-fictional, have traced this past with the assistance of knowledge produced in 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is precisely within this huge framework that even the most evident facts were either distorted or hidden from popular knowledge. The different models of Thathrikkutty as an icon fail to produce a factual and an unconditional account of her life history or even of the vivid descriptions that contained in her responses during the trial.

The different interpretations have succeeded in regenerating a language of morality where sex as an act has to be meaningfully and logically connected with a standard social process, for

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<sup>52</sup> Leelakrishnan (1977 (2004)); Bhaskaranunni (1965); Nandan (2001); Vijayakrishnan (2004).

example reproduction. Such a connection erases the question of pleasure from popular accounts. In the case of Thathrikkutty from spectacle and a shame factor the whole incident transforms to assume the size of sexual and social revolution through which modern public morality was properly put in place within the regional culture. However an investigation into the construction of Thathrikkutty would be unfinished without taking into account the question ‘what actually happened?’ An investigation through the archive records considerably helps in elucidating the moral discourse around Thathrikkutty to the extent such investigation helps one to retrieve the original picture of her experience as she narrated it during the trial. It also helps us to confront a different image of the ‘dark age’ with an altogether different set of social and sexual geographies, fluidity in relations between same and opposite genders and so on. In the next section I deal with archive materials that contain descriptions of Thathrikkutty, the counter arguments provided by the accused men and the *smarthan*’s impression of them in the form of notes issued after every individual case. For reasons of space I have dealt with only a few out of the total sixty-five incidents<sup>53</sup>.

### **“Give me a bottle of rose water and you can have it ...”**

1080 ME<sup>54</sup> [AD 1905] *Midhunam* 18

“I know Anmathe Veettil Raman Nair [accused no. 49]. He was the mahout . . . I know

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<sup>53</sup> According to the archive records three men were already dead by the time *smarthavicharam* had occurred and notices were served upon the remaining sixty two. The regional archives at Ernakulam have kept all those documents pertaining to this *smarthavicharam* including the hearing of the woman and the men.

<sup>54</sup> Malayalam Era. It is commonly considered that *Kolla Varsham* or the Malayalam year is 825 years behind the standard Gregorian calendar. The dates and months are provided in terms of the Malayalam Era or the *Kollavarsham*. The English year and dates, whenever possible, are given within the brackets. The Malayalam month and date of each testimony follows the year.

him very well . . . I had mated with him, but only for once – It was in an afternoon at the Kalpakassery pathayappura<sup>55</sup> – I think it was immediately after the Thrissur pooram<sup>56</sup> in 1068 [AD 1893]. He was in his twenties then. The reason I had intercourse with him was that he had brought a bottle of rosewater with him after the pooram which was kept inside the pathayappura – I saw it. I took it for me- but he refused to give it. When I talked to him about this he laid the condition that, since he had seen me having sex with Kantaru Nair, his wish should also be fulfilled if I must get the rosewater bottle- I said I shall not return the bottle at any cost and agreed to satisfy his wish”<sup>57</sup>.

1080 ME [AD 1905], *Midhunam* 19

I know Palathol Itteeri [Ravi Nambutiri; accused no. 61]. He is my elder sister’s husband. Their marriage was in 1069 Midhunam [AD 1894]. I knew Itteeri even before that, probably from 1068 Medam when he came to Arangottukara on his way to Thrissur Pooram. It was during an afternoon. I was there with some other people. He greeted me. After he left I asked others about him and then I came to know that he was Palathol. He came to illam while returning from pooram. He was invited for the punyaham<sup>58</sup> of my elder sister’s first menstruation- I knew him since then- I used to visit Palathol frequently after the wedding of my sister . . . He was around 42-43 when he married my sister. I had sex with Itteeri on several occasions- all at either Kalpakassery illam or at Palathol matom<sup>59</sup>. The first [sexual] contact was in 1072 Medam [[AD 1897] - it was during a night in the northern verandah at the Kalpakassery illam. Elder sister was pregnant then and was brought to Kalpakassery for delivery and post pregnancy treatment- Palathol also came with her. Until my sister had returned to Palathol [the *illam*] after her delivery Palathol [the person] used to visit our illam frequently- and thus on one day when he was returning from Thrissur after pooram he brought some saris of which one had silk border. I kept it with me and conveyed through another woman that I would like to have it. Palathol accepted that on the condition that I ask him directly in person. 3-4 days after

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<sup>55</sup> Barnyard

<sup>56</sup> A famous temple festival celebrated annually at Thrissur, in the central region of Keralam.

<sup>57</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. I, p no. 64 of *Smarthvicharam* documents available at RAC.

<sup>58</sup> The custom of purifying the residence or *Illam* whenever it was polluted. Women’s menstrual period was considered as one such occasion.

<sup>59</sup> Although *matam* has different meanings here it is used as synonym of *illam*, a traditional Nambutiri household.

this when I was coming back from my bathe from the pond around the time of dusk, Itteeri approached me. It was almost dark then. I asked him about his condition. He accepted to give me the sari and requested me to have sex with him. I accepted. I said that I use the bedroom at the northern side and that I shall come out when he calls. We had sex at the adjacent verandah. I had to come out of the room because a maid was sleeping in the corridor. Last time we had mated was in 1079 *Dhanu* [AD 1904] at Palathol matam . . . my sister was during her period then. After dinner Itteeri went to Palathol matam. The next early morning when I went to the pond at Palathol matam to bathe we had sex - in between also it had happened several times. In 1075 *Chingam* [AD 1899] after my sister's delivery at Palathol matam. In 1079 *Etavam* [AD 1904] when Itteeri was at Palathol matam he sent for me and told me *that it is not right for him to ask me not to mention his name if the vicharam<sup>60</sup> occurs. But he wanted me to do it in such a way as not to harm his elder babies in both marriages.* Those babies had indeed come after our initial [sexual] contact. Itteeri had done several plays to satisfy me at Kalpakassery- when he comes to the illam he would hand his purse over to me and I could take whatever I wanted from it- I must have taken at least fifty Rupees from him<sup>61</sup>.

1080 ME [1905 AD], *Midhunam* 30

After her [sister's] delivery in 1075 she again delivered in 76- during the 76 pregnancy I asked her about the rumours about some sort of sickness for Palathol and that my sister would not be pregnant again. She said that there was some growth [on Palathol's body] which was then severed and healed. I never asked Palathol about this- nor do I know if he has some scar on his body as a result of this. Sister was again pregnant in 78; and now, when I am under this vicharam, I have heard that she is pregnant again<sup>62</sup>.

As I mentioned the 1905 *smarthavicharam* was different on different counts. The wider interest it generated in the region, the demands raised to bring changes in its practice in line with

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<sup>60</sup> trial; referring to the impending smarthavicharam

<sup>61</sup> "Smarthavicharam" Vol: I: pp 71-72, available at RAC. Emphasis mine.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



the modern judiciary system, the general suspicion about the king's and several other prominent people's involvement in the case etc., had culminated in the elaborate bureaucratic procedures precisely meant, apart from making it more 'judicious' and foolproof, to record each and every occurrence related to this *smarthavicharam*. For the first time in the history of *smarthavicharam* the accused men were provided with an opportunity to question the woman (*sadhanam*), to raise counter arguments with the help of evidence and to prove their innocence.

Thathrikkutty was brought to Thrippoonithura – then capital of Cochin – from Irinjalakkuda – place of Thathrikkutty's conjugal residence – by train on July 1905 and the trial was conducted at Thrippoonithura hill palace (*Kunnummal bungalow*) – now located in the Ernakulam district – under heavy security. In fact *smarthavicharam* was already completed under the supervision of *smarthan* at Irinjalakkuda prior to her shifting to the capital of Cochin<sup>63</sup>. However due to the multiple controversies it had already raised there was huge demand to conduct the trial again through changes made in its procedure. By this time Thathrikkutty and *smarthavicharam* were already hot topics of newspaper columns. This led to the decision to conduct the trial afresh at the capital itself. As a result *purushavicharam* – trial of the male accused – along with a whole lot of bureaucratic measures including those meant to document the whole proceedings and to make it a transparent one was also included.

Notices were served upon all the sixty five men with whom Thathrikkutty had already stated to have had sexual relations. The list of men included several close relatives of hers,

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<sup>63</sup>“Smarthavicharam” Vol IV: pp 15-16, available at RAC.

including her husband (Kuriyedath Raman Nambutiri), her father (Kalpakassery Ashtamoorthy Nambutiri), her brother (Kalpakassery Narayanan Nambutiri), elder brother of her husband, an uncle and two of her cousins. Of all the sixty-five men upon whom notices were served, sixty were present for the trial; two out of the remaining five had already passed away by the time the second *smarthavicharam* commenced at the capital (Thonnalloor Krishna Varrier and Njarakkal Achutha Pisharati) and others were absent because of illness (Parathayil Sreedharan Nambutiri), pilgrimage (Arangottu Sekhara Varrier) and one had already migrated to England (Pushpakath Kunjiraman Nambeesan). Out of the sixty who were present all except one refuted or denied the charges made against them. Thekkemadathil Samu Ramu Pattar, who accepted the charge, argued that he had been underage at the time when the alleged intercourse was said to have taken place. However the *smarthan* refused to accept this argument saying that “underage [was] not sufficient proof for one’s sexual incapacity”<sup>64</sup>.

Most of these men accused Thathrikkutty of deliberately framing charges against them to bring ill fame to them and their family members. There was a wide spread confusion regarding what could be considered as valid proofs in order for this practice to remain competent with the modern judiciary system. This persisted while almost all validations submitted by the accused, as also the arguments offered by the *smarthan* to dismiss those proofs and their counter arguments, signified stark ignorance of the modern judicial system. Most of the validations contained details of paddy harvesting on the dates of intercourse mentioned by Thathrikkutty, certificates of land occupancy, letters sent by them to others on the said dates from elsewhere to prove their absence and so on; rare were those who provided medical certificates. Thathrikkutty, on the other hand,

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<sup>64</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol I: pp 18-25, available at RAC.

had to provide detailed descriptions including the time, date, year and location of each and every sexual intercourse she admitted. These were further supported by references to ceremonial, familial or other socially important occasions including menstrual periods, periods of pregnancy, temple festivals, Ayyappan Vilakku<sup>65</sup>, Kathakali performances, harvesting periods etc. Whereas both these sets of evidences did not fit in any sense with the modern judicial system *smarthan*, who was equally ignorant about how to handle the proofs accumulated before him, used his discretionary right and all accused were excommunicated at the end of the trial. Thus the practice of identifying the guilty solely on the basis of the woman's words, which was the custom preceding to this trial at the capital of Cochin, was retained on this occasion too despite all the efforts to ensure 'justice' in a modern sense.

Nevertheless Thathrikkutty's descriptions do not in any way help the reader to situate her within the popular models of understanding that circulate in the Malayali culture. Her statements reflect on a different dynamics of gender geographies and relationships of play and pleasure within the social order. In her descriptions she makes it clear that her behaviour was no secret in the locality, especially among the males. Many of the sexual contacts had resulted from passionate requests for sex made by men on the basis of their prior knowledge of her relations. I use the term requests because such knowledge, on several occasions, functioned only as a minor factor in initiating conversations that eventually led to those sexual contacts. For instance in the

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<sup>65</sup> Locally held celebrations in the name of the deity Ayyappan. Reference to *Ayyappan Vilakku* is given in order to confirm the timing as it is usually organized between the Malayalam months of *Vrischikam* and *Dhanu* which is around the months November and December.

case of Anmathe Veettil Raman Nair<sup>66</sup> the one time sexual contact between them was evidently a result of the blithe conversation between him and Thathrikkutty over the bottle of rosewater that fascinated her. The bottle belonged to Raman Nair who demanded sex with her in return for his bottle.

What is interesting in her description is that Raman Nair refers to Kantaru Nair, another mahout at the *illam*, with whom she already had sexual contact. Such reference only helps Raman Nair to place his request and Thathrikkutty makes it very clear that she agreed to fulfill his wish because she did not “want to return the bottle at any cost”<sup>67</sup>. There was absolutely no mentioning of any fear on the part of Thathrikkutty in any these descriptions. In the context of her relationship with Muntayoor Madhavan Nambutiri (accused no. 53), who was an epileptic, Thathrikkutty had described the numerous sexual contacts that had taken place between them since their initial sexual contact “immediately after [her] 12<sup>th</sup> birthday”<sup>68</sup>. Madhavan, a distant relative and a childhood friend who lived in her neighbourhood, had a secret relationship with a woman in the neighbouring village. This was more like a clandestine relationship than an original *sambandham* which was the customary practice for younger male members of Nambutiri families.

He had a secret relation with a woman at Kizhakke Varrieth. One day while he was on his way to meet this woman he had sickness and fell unconscious – his father came to know

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<sup>66</sup>The testimony relating to whom is given in the beginning of this section, recorded by *smarthan* on 1080 ME. Op. Cit. FN 57.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. IX: p no. 193, available at RAC.

about this and warned him not to go there anymore. Then one day when we were on our way to the temple I asked him, just for a conversation, if he would still like to meet his woman at Kizhakke Varrieth- while replying me he started asking about my dealings with Vasudevan Nampoothiri of Desamangalam and I accepted. Then Madhavan said that if I can deal with him in the same way then he wouldn't visit that woman again- this was how he requested for our initial contact- I accepted his request. The first mating had occurred . . . some five or six days after this conversation. I remember it as 1069 Kumbham [AD 1894] because it was immediately after my 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. While we were having sex in 1079 Medam [AD 1904] he requested me not to mention his name before the Nambutiri from Desamangalam. He said that he is empty handed- not in a good relation with the Moossu [the elder brother] - it will be difficult to even survive then and so on. Now Madhavan would be around 27 years of age<sup>69</sup>.

The mentioning of previous relationships on the part of the men recurred on several occasions in Thathrikkutty's descriptions. In almost all these instances Thathrikkutty do not characterize those men, or their knowledge of her sexual relationships, in terms of fear or as a threat that eventually led her to concede to their wish. The way she describe such mentioning of other relations indicates that it was merely a shortcut for those men to express their desire; a background against which their requests would not seem completely out of place. It was more a request-acceptance model rather than posed in the language of menace or fear. In one sense Thathrikkutty, in her descriptions to the *smarthan*, provided logically grounded situations where conversations, usually more intimate and casual ones, eventually culminate in requests for sex on the part of the male. Simultaneously she did not hide, in her descriptions, how she remained open and jovial on these occasions almost anticipating what was forthcoming. Sometimes she even made moves on the basis of her anticipations. For Madhavan Thathrikkutty's relationship with

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<sup>69</sup> "Smarthavicharam" Vol. I: p no. 66, available at RAC.

Vasudevan Nambutiri was one way of explaining to her the kind of ‘deal’ that he anticipated. This sort of logic, or attempts to ascribe logic to the twists and turns that had eventually led to sexual contacts, circulates throughout her descriptions to the *smarthan*. The use of force is completely absent in these narratives.

Another notable issue is Thathrikkutty’s use of the word *apeksha*. Literally translated as request, *apeksha*, had a slightly different connotation at that time embedded within the power relations that regulated caste relations and differences. On most occasions Thathrikkutty used this term to signify how the men conveyed their desire to her. More formal than casual in any sense, this term could not have been expected from a woman unless she was treated by those men with the utmost respect<sup>70</sup>. Her relationships with different men were not esoteric either. In her descriptions she provided details of the numerous conversations she had had with many of these men about the preceding/other sexual relations in a casual and informal tone. Palathol Ravi Nambutiri (Itteeri – accused no. 61)<sup>71</sup> was Thathrikkutty’s sister’s husband. According to her descriptions her relation with him was rather an intense one which they continued for a relatively longer period. The relation between Ravi Nampootheri and Thathrikkutty was not a secret. Cheeramputhoor Raman Nayar (accused no. 47), who was a singer for the Ayyappan Vilakku – a seasonal celebration organized at the local levels marked by devotional songs dedicated to the local deity Ayyappan – had visited Kalpakassery *Illam* when Palathol Ravi Nampootheri and his

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<sup>70</sup> However it is also notable that Thathrikkutty had not mentioned of a single instance where she had denied a request. Considering the openness and honesty she displayed while revealing everything about her sexual relations the absence of any instance of denial deserves further reading.

<sup>71</sup> The testimony relating to who is given in the beginning of this section, recorded by *smarthan* on 1080 ME. *Op. Cit.* FN No.s 61 and 62.

wife were present around the time of her pregnancy<sup>72</sup>. According to Thathrikkutty's description she had sexual intercourse with Cheeramputhoor only once when he visited Kalpakassery *Illam* to sing for the *Ayyappan Vilakku* organized by Ravi Nampoothiri. “[I] had frequent intercours with Palathol [Ravi Nampoothiri] at Palathol *Matam* – Raman came to know about this – *probably* he also had a request”<sup>73</sup>.

Mullappilly Durgadathan *alias* Kunjan Nampoothiri (accused no. 57) “came to know of *my behavior* through Muntayoor Madhavan, the childhood friend who was epileptic [accused no. 53], and conveyed his request through him . . . and I agreed”<sup>74</sup>. Peramangalloor Kunjunni Nambutiri *alias* Mannan (accused no. 58) was a friend and a close associate of Palathol Ravi Nampoothiri.

I have seen him on several occasions ever since my sister was married to Palathol [Ravi Nambutiri]. We had engaged in sex twice or thrice. I think the first one was in 1074 Medam [1899 AD]. All the rest must have occurred before Karkkatakam (around September). It happened at Palathol *matam*. The first intercourse was because of Palathol’s [Ravi Nambutiri’s] *recommendation* . . . Palathol told me that Mannan was a close associate of him who had *sambandham* with his daughter and that somehow Mannan had come to know of our connections and his wish should also be fulfilled. That is how our first mating happened – then before my sister left after her delivery we again had intercourse. He was less than 30 at that time. He had given me one rupee each on both occasions. I can recognise him even now<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. IX, p no. 111, available at RAC.

<sup>73</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. IX, pp 117-120 & 111, available at RAC. Emphasis mine.

<sup>74</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. IX, pp 273-308, available at RAC.

<sup>75</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. I, pp. 70-71, available at RAC.

The use of terms again becomes important here. The first time she engaged in sex with Mannan was because of Palathol's recommendation. She used the term *suparsha*, which literally means recommendation, in her description. The other term *nirbandham* – meaning compulsion – which was also popular in usage at that time is absent here. On occasions like this when the first intercourse had resulted from another person's intervention, the subsequent acts of intercourse, in her descriptions, are more logically associated with the availability of a suitable time and place; that is, Palathol was completely absent from the subsequent contacts leading to presume that they resulted out of their own intimacy. In the whole narration provided by Thathrikkutty the use of the term fear, from a first person perspective to signify her initial response to an invitation, occurred only once. This was during her narration of Kantaru Nair (accused no. 48), the mahout at Kalpakassery *illam*, with whom she had admitted to having had intercourses on two occasions. Kanataru who saw her with Arangottukara Sekhara Varrier inside the *pathayappura* asked the latter about this although he did not tell him the truth. "So he asked me and I told him the truth. He then wanted for himself. His wish was fulfilled two days later. I had to do this because *I was afraid of him making my case with Varrier public . . . our second intercourse took place almost immediately after the first one*"<sup>76</sup>.

Many of those who were in constant relation with Thathrikkutty knew or at least anticipated the impending *smarthavicharam*. As per the records, Palathol Ravi Nambutiri had called Thathrikkutty in 1079 ME (1904 AD), a year before the actual trial took place, specifically

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<sup>76</sup>"Smarthavicharam" Vol. IX, pp 121- 132, available at RAC. Emphasis mine.



to instruct her how to mention his name during the trial. According to her descriptions he did not request or demand her not to reveal his name during the trial. On the other hand she had described how he specifically mentioned about the injustice (*anyayam*) involved in making such a demand. His request pertained only to removing any possibility of his children being excommunicated<sup>77</sup>. The complexities associated with the notion of purity are again invoked here as the children's excommunication was directly related to the time of their conception by their mother and the time when their father had committed adultery or had violated the norms of the community. Ravi Nambutiri wanted Thathrikkutty to frame the timings of their sexual intercourses so that his children would be exempted from excommunication. Muntayoor Madhavan, with whom Thathrikkutty had sexual relation from 1069 to 1079 ME (1894 to 1904 AD), had had requested her not to mention his name during the impending trial as he was not only poor but was also an epileptic<sup>78</sup>. In the response filed by Madhavan he, just as many other accused had done, argued that there had been a deliberate framing of charges against him. According to him this was due to the various quarrels that had taken place between him and the members, especially the female, members, of the Kalpakassery *Illam*. Apart from providing a detailed account of the whole history of these quarrels, Madhavan also filed a plea before the king on grounds of his sickness.

1. I received the notice. I have not committed the crime as mentioned in the notice.
2. I would like to state that I am an epilepsy patient and cannot move, nor am I permitted by my father, without assistance. All those who know me know this

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<sup>77</sup> *OP. Cit.* FN 62.

<sup>78</sup> *OP. Cit.* FN 69.

very well.

3. The above mentioned sickness occurs at least five or six times a month. On occasions it is very severe.

Madhavan Nambutiri also provided the testimony of a witness to prove his sickness and all that he mentioned in his request. However all the evidence, testimonies and arguments in favour of the accused, including the six pieces of documentary evidence provided by Palathol Ravi Nambutiri, were rejected by the *smarthan*<sup>79</sup>.

Kavunkal Sankara Panikkar (accused no. 55), the Kathakali celebrity, in his reply to the notice served upon him, denied outrightly all the charges made against him. In fact in her description Thathrikkutty had mentioned how she managed to invite Kavunkal during the daytime to her *pathayappura* (barnyard) where she recited all of the verses from the part of Keechakan in the “Keechakavadham Kathakali” to which he danced. Immediately after this they had sex in the *pathayappura* itself<sup>80</sup>. According to her descriptions this event occurred in 1070 ME (1895 AD) and in his reply Panikkar argued that “it is impossible to believe that a woman of that age (Thathrikkutty was twelve years old then) could memorise and recite all the verses of Keechakan. Also, since there are other people at the *illam*, how could this have happened between us during the daytime?”<sup>81</sup> However Thathrikkutty’s ability to recall things and events from the past considerably impressed the *smarthan* that on several occasions, including in the

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<sup>79</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. IX, pp 193- 212, available at RAC.

<sup>80</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. I, p no 68, available at RAC.

<sup>81</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. IX, pp 251-263, available at RAC.

case of the Kathakali artists, he used this as a point to dismiss the counter arguments of the accused. His question about the timing was not even addressed by *smarthan*<sup>82</sup>.

Most of the relations that she was accused of had in fact occurred, or were entered into, when she was less than thirteen years of age. She was twenty-three at the time when the trial was conducted. However she managed to give a more or less perfect description of all the relations with direct and indirect evidence. For instance in the case of Palathol Ravi Nambutiri he questioned Thathrikkutty's allegations claiming that "Thathrikkutty must have been aware of [his genital] disease . . . and she could not have entered into a sexual relation with" him. Nevertheless Thathrikkutty having already had mentioned about this disease in her description of her relation<sup>83</sup> with Palathol the *smarthan* said that "sadhanam [Thathrikkutty] had already mentioned about this part in her testimony . . . and this only further proves her remarkable ability to remember things correctly"<sup>84</sup>.

Ranathe Achutha Pothuval (accused no. 56) was a Kathakali teacher and a singer. He was invited by Palathol Ravi Nampoothiri to Kalpakassery *Illam* to provide training in Kathakali singing for some of the family members.

One night I was lying in the room adjacent to the Purathalam<sup>85</sup> and he was lying outside.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *OP. Cit.* FN 62.

<sup>84</sup> "Smarthavicharam" Vol. IX, pp 325-351, available at RAC.

<sup>85</sup> An open room with wall on three sides, an outer verandah (meant for the use of strangers and lowly-placed

From our respective places we started reciting Kathakali verses. After some time he wanted me to open the room. I refused. Then he said that he knew of my behavior from Muntayoor Madhavan and wanted me to satisfy him also. I agreed and we mated for the first time. I think it was in 1073 Kanni month [1898 AD] – then before he left in Vrischikam (around October), again in the purathalam, we had mated for four or five times. He was in his twenties then<sup>86</sup>.

The dynamics of these relations, as narrated by Thathrikkutty, lie in that they had always crossed the temporal, spatial and the normative restrictions associated with the very act of sex and had very often spilled beyond the caste hierarchies that is said to have prevailed then. The picture that emerges out of these descriptions remained beyond the Victorian imaginations of the reformers. The timings of these sexual acts were spread throughout the day and night and their spatial setting ranged from the bedrooms within the *illams* to the *kyyala* (mud-fence) lying outside the *illam* and the *ambalapparambu* (temple campus). The places and the *illams* where all these took place – mainly three *illams* including Thathrikkutty’s native residence, the Kalpakassery *illam*, her conjugal residence, the Kuyedath *illam*, and her brother-in-law’s *illam*, the Palathol matam – were geographically considerably distant from each other considering the modes of conveyance available then. Around all these places Thathrikkutty and her sexual relations were no secret.

The temporal, spatial and communal settings and the acts of transgression simultaneously display the casualness and the mechanic character of sex at the same time as showing that it was

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visitors)

<sup>86</sup> “Smarthavicharam” Vol. I, p no 68, available at RAC.

blended with great amounts of intimacy, passion and desire. The graphic narratives provided by her to the *smarthan* had, every now and then, exposed the infinite pores that allowed fluid relations between people of different caste and status and between males and females in the society. The social situations described by her that facilitated the coming together of these individuals belonging to different caste groups completely problematise the neat and hard differentiations and categorizations often attributed to caste and gender relations and interactions during the earlier period. The popular discourses of Thathrikkutty, on the other hand, have remained successful in constructing the representation of her subjectivity in a drastically different and substantially untruthful manner.

## **Conclusion**

The blithe and playful conversations, the language of desire and joy and the casual and intimate moments unveiled in her descriptions have remained completely absent in the popular narratives. On the other hand tailor-made stories of her victimhood and personal vendetta against the Nambutiri patriarchal order gained popularity. The popular depictions of Thathrikkutty completely conformed to the moral standards envisioned by the 19<sup>th</sup> century reformer by associating deeply negative connotations to sex outside monogamous relationships. The incident was/is constantly fictionalized and allegorized, narrating the story of a past – rather a degenerate one – rooted within uncontrolled desires and loose morals; an inevitable component of this past thus constructed was the binary opposition between the oppressor and the oppressed defined in terms of the Brahminic hegemony. The direct translation of this in terms of loose morals and sexual anarchy provided the reformer with ample space not only to problematise caste relations primarily reflected in the forms of conjugal relationships but also to insert the narrative of

progress in the recasting of body and desire.

The allegorisation of Thathrikkutty spills far beyond the immediate realms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reform discourses. The huge amount of literary and other textual and visual productions concerning her, and the instance of *smarthavicharam*, have elevated Thathrikkutty to the role of a martyr. The reproduction of these in the contemporary cultural spectrum considerably draws upon the already available victimhood - retribution models. What assigns Thathrikkutty a common significance in the culture of Kerala is a constructed knowledge of its history where Nambutiris and their scriptures were projected upon as its custodians. In popular memory this period equally signifies sexual anarchy where non-monogamy and concubinage – to borrow from the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists' vocabulary – were part and parcel of the daily lives. Such historical knowledge circulates as self - evident and factual in popular narratives of Thathrikkutty. The huge attention drawn by her *smarthavicharam* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a result of the reformation propaganda that projected non-monogamous, non-modern customs and practices as basically contributing towards the society's uncivilized, unprogressive conditions. The frame of understanding the whole event and terminologies used by the media and the public sphere foregrounded the centrality of sex in the ongoing social transformations.

While Thathrikkutty and *smarthavicharam* continue to register significant impressions in the popular assumptions and memories of non-normative sex, the trajectories of her emergence as a symbol give rise to interesting questions. The different circuits of her symbolic existence have all equally sidelined the original sexual self of Thathrikkutty. Her prodigious existence

owes to two reasons that are diametrically opposed. First, there was a stark silence in the Nambutiri community with regard to Thathrikkutty in the period that immediately followed the trial and excommunication. An author suggests that “Thathrikkutty’s name was noticeable for its stark absence in the magazines *Unni Nambutiri* and *Yoga Kshemam* which were the main mouthpieces of Nambutiri reformation [in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century]” (Sheeba 2004, 14). The anxieties addressed by Lalithambika in her short story further elaborate how this silence was an outcome of the sense of shame that overlapped Thathrikkutty’s memories.

This was a result of the huge publicity given to the event during the trial and the reformers’ propaganda that severely criticized everything associated with non-monogamous practices. As already discussed, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropological descriptions discussed above, a number of *smarthavicharams* preceded Thathrikkutty’s where less or equally large number of people were involved and excommunicated. Nevertheless the reformation propaganda with focus on Brahminic scriptures, non-modern and inter-communitarian conjugal/sexual practices and the boom in print technology helped in the projection of Thathrikkutty’s case as unique. The media hype literally transformed the event into a spectacle where offenders were being punished for engaging in sex outside the normative frameworks. Individuals were identified both according to their community and for the offense they had committed. This shifted the significance of *smarthavicharam* outside the Nambutiri community as it was no longer treated as a communitarian practice. Instead it became a platform to identify, trial and punish the accused that the public watched with much excitement.

However the reformation movement in the subsequent period, particularly the Nambutiri reformers, succeeded in foregrounding a different image for Thathrikkutty in the public sphere. The reason for shame and embarrassment, resourced in her acts of promiscuity, was then deliberately kept aside by focusing on the causes, that remained outside her body and being, that led her to commit such actions. Here emerged the second reason that led to an exaltation of Thathrikkutty's image and her symbolic significance in the society. Thus the shame factor was toppled to assign new meanings to Thathrikkutty's existence and her, what was until then predominantly defined as highly immoral, actions. Her prodigious existence is then reasoned from the other end of the scale that is victimhood and revenge. Defining her actions in retributive terms was a rediscovery made possible through the writings of the leaders of the Nambutiri reformation movement, mainly VT's, in the second and third decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century; Lalithambika's short story was critical for it brought together the abstract elements of both the modern moral conception of sex and the colonial definition of pre-modern sexual anarchy in a more popular form. While this remained so the subsequent discussions and debates followed the old perimeters.

Thus Thathrikkutty and the *smarthavicharam* had, and still has, an indispensable role in depicting a past that was totally incongruent with progressive ideals and for celebrating the rise of modernity in Keralam. The symbolic construction of Thathrikkutty was a product of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Malayali public sphere's deployment of public morality to analyse and popularize modern definitions of sex. Such construction assigns her an agency in absentia. My analysis of the politics of this construction shows how intertextual connections across different time periods – almost covering a span of two centuries – project on colonial knowledge as real knowledge and



the beginning of expanding our consciousness. This linear, progressive narrative of Thathrikkutty's subjectivity and agency cannot be disrupted without going outside the modern discourses of sexual morality. It is precisely for this reason that she continues to be a live presence in the contemporary discussions where signs of deviancies are analogized with the case of Thathrikkutty.

## **Section II**

### **Re-forming the Hegemonies: Postcoloniality, Sexual Morality and Homosexuality**

## Chapter 3

### (Hetero) Sexual Excesses: Social Realism in Mid Twentieth Century

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*To be sure it is impossible to separate totally the ideological inscription in the text, the ideological production of meaning induced by the work of the text, from the literary form it is given. We are not dealing with a single text in isolation. Moreover, each text has a specific way of inscribing the ideological within itself and of producing the ideological.*

Regin 1992

#### **Introduction**

There were strong attempts, as we have already seen in the previous chapters, in early modern Keralam to engender and sexualize the social spaces and to de-traditionalize bodies by liberating the same from caste and communitarian practices. There was a whole shift in the notion of subjectivity and sexuality during this period. The intense campaigning in the early modern period resulted in the deification of progress and reformation; it secured for monogamous structures of moral subjectivity, rendered heteronormative, an unchallenged position in the cultural contexts of Keralam. In this chapter I will argue that this hegemonic ground and the associated discursive practices of sex and progress were diffused into the public imagination through the mediated spaces of social realism in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was a space where the cultural politics of sex assumed candid forms under the guise of wider participation of the public. The more leftist-oriented realism removed the earlier anxieties of material and moral progress from the centre stage and replaced it with concerns about the

differential levels of vulnerabilities that the capitalist structures created in society. There was an unprecedented widening of the public sphere witnessed in this period. The production of literature and other art works depended on a relatively 'democratic' pool of life experiences during this period of social realism.

Social realism in Malayalam literature was introduced under the leadership of progressive writers' movement (*Purogamana Sahithya Prasthanam*) that swept its terrains in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. An outbreak of contentions with lasting effects on the Malayali public sphere and culture followed the initial realism enterprises in the late 1930s resulting in what could be termed as the second phase of reformation in Keralam. The scholarly discourse about social realism often categorise it as humanistic and as having democratized experience through the technologies of representation. Social realism in Malayalam literature is widely understood as the precipitating cause in deviating drastically from the erstwhile structures and moral bases of representation. However as I shall argue in the course of this chapter such generalizations have often overlooked the hegemonic grounds that mediated its divergent enterprises. Social realism in Keralam was more informed by its pedagogic potential and leftist ideology. Nevertheless a close reading of this space testifies to the fact that the "collective process of ideologizing" (Humez and Dines 2002, 89) progress as a way of life continued, consciously and unconsciously, to constitute the mainstay of the turbulent contestations that this period witnessed.

The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century debates signify the creation of multiple layers of a middle class public sphere all of which were separated from each other by the methods they proposed to build

a progressive society. These methodic concerns were very often articulated in the language of progress and heterosexual subjectivity, the commonly given goals of reform discourse, which continued to remain uncontested. In other words the space of social realism from its beginning in the 30s and 40s of twentieth century was closely surveilled to resist any shift from the heteronormative foundations. The widely acclaimed revolutionary connotations often attributed to social realism in effect were consistently pushed back in the public sphere while dealing with its subversive effects. In this chapter I attempt to show how questions of subjectivity were brought back with a different twist in the public domain during the movement towards social realism from mid 1930s onwards. While I briefly look at the classical scholarly discourse of social realism my main attempt in this chapter remains with addressing the complexities involved in this space and how questions of heterosexual subjectivity survive through these complexities. The progressive writers' movement (*Purogamana Sahithya Prasthanam*), that inaugurated the emergence of social realism in Malayalam literature, marked a space where the prevailing economic structures and moral centralities were often problematised with varying results.

The emergence of realism in literature is marked by the sudden surge of questions about desire and pleasure as also the quick interventions that followed to 'straighten' this space of representations. I make an attempt here to understand how body, sex and pleasure were contested with meanings specific to the emerging modernity and how the colonial versions of progress and reformation were once again rendered a central significance in the ongoing contentions. The outcomes of these contestations have had lasting impacts in shaping the varied cultural contexts in Kerala where gender and sexuality, especially those concerning same-sex practices, is

constantly projected as a major issue requiring the sanctions of the heterosexual progressive frameworks. There were different and multiple circularities of argumentation getting shaped in this sphere where the older, colonial, notions of body and subjectivity often revisited as ideal models in order to regulate and make sense of the ongoing transformations.

The predominant conception of this space as an autogenous one and/or as having stirred, in an unconditional manner, a new set of questions and concerns in the social order is challenged in this chapter. As we saw in the last chapter *Thathrikkutty* and *smarthavicharam* were reinvoked in the 1930s and were consolidated as images with iconic values. While the reform enterprise was still negotiating with traditional practices the space of social realism was gathering momentum by outrightly challenging the upper class and caste orientations inherent in the reformation literature. There was a rupture in this period in terms of shifting the focus towards exposing the daily experiences of ordinary humans within a modern capitalist world. Fiction – both short stories and novels – and poetry were counted as potential, and as the primary, media of the social imagination. The language of reformation was radically countered by the realism *genre* of writing in this period to break its moral centrality. As a result of this, new forms of debates and contentions appeared in the public sphere. As I attempt to show in this chapter the older, reform centric notions of subjectivity were intensely deployed in the public sphere in order to counter the moral challenges raised by the realists' camp in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless there were also interesting commonalities between the different sides of contestation that were critical to notions of subjectivity and specific the postcolonial modernity of the region.

## **Social Realism in Malayalam literature- general trends**

Social realism, in common academia, has always been defined in terms of the close association that works of art and literature have maintained with the social conditions. For instance Nochlin, in her analytical description of European art in the nineteenth century, contextualizes social realism in the closer relation that those art forms maintained with the social conditions (Nochlin 1990). That the works of art produced in that period displayed stronger interests in the prevailing social conditions than the art preceded it. Thus according to Nochlin realism implies the artists' engagement with the social surroundings (Nochlin 1990, 258). Harris, in his account of the history of the new art in Europe, further configures social realism in terms of the specificity of the social configurations amidst which a work of art was produced. It is precisely the "real conditions" that prevail in a society at a given point of time that determine the nature of works that endeavour to respond to them rather than assuming a passive position (Harris 2001, 69-70). At the same time as developing and promoting a social history of art that insists upon the importance of social conditions when assessing the reception of art works and practices in their social context, social historians consistently warn against applying general theories of cause and effect, arguing that the application of terms like realism are specific to the particular configuration of social conditions that prevail.

In the 1930s social realism was primarily addressing the reform oriented conceptions of subjectivity. A new and distinct phenomenal world, in terms of ethical practices, bodily affairs, conjugalities, lifecycles and so on – that contrasted the early community based life practices – for the people to inhabit was rendered familiar and natural during the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century in

Keralam<sup>1</sup>. This period is also mentionable for the methodical concerns around the modernizing enterprise in Keralam<sup>2</sup> apart from legal provisions made in the realm of industrial relations, caste related practices, women's education and so on<sup>3</sup>. It was precisely against this backdrop that a movement in the literary sphere was gaining momentum in the 1930s with the sole intention of using this space for the well being of subjects across class and caste differences.

The emergence of social realism in Malayalam literature had evidently led to ideological shifts reflected in the public contestations. It paved the way for moving the axis of contentions from more reform-oriented discourses around local traditions and practices to technologies of representation concerning their potential in building a modern society. Another significant question raised in this context was around the kind of experiences that needed to be represented. The morally flavoured prescriptive tone in the earlier narrative practices was severely challenged by the new *genre* of literature which claimed to represent the social conditions in a more realistic sense. In the mid-thirties and forties of twentieth century a bulk of novels and short stories started appearing under the label of “progressive writings” – a phrase used in common parlance then and in subsequent periods. The claim towards being more progressive than the conventional language of reformation was mainly based on the strategies evolved to include within the mainframe of literature life experiences from lower caste/class divisions and practices and

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<sup>1</sup> According to Geertz, subjects embody culture not as simply as it is situated and imposed by culture as such or by the personality development classes; rather it is in the sense that people live in a distinct phenomenal world access to which is exclusively determined by a set of embodied practices (Geertz 1973, 1983; also see Good and Good 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See my discussion of Devika's article on Family Planning Programme in Keralam cited in chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> See Rajeevan 1999, Jeffrey 1987, Velayudhan 1998, Devika 2002a, Devika and Varghese 2010, Cappannari 1953, Gough 1968, Houtart and Lemercinier 1978 and 1978a, Meera 1983, Lindberg 2001.



relations considered morally reprehensive until then. However as I shall elaborate later in this chapter neither the ‘new’ literature nor the contentions that erupted following their publication were free from definite ideological orientations that centered around questions of building a modern progressive society.

Although the novel was heralded as a mainstream literary expression of aesthetic experience with the publication of *Indulekha* by Chandu Menon in 1869 historians of Malayalam novel generally agree that the emergence of fiction, especially novels and short stories, as a popular form in Keralam was a development in the mid-thirties (Das 1995, 281; George 1998, 102-110). Between the publication of *Indulekha* and the death of C.V. Raman Pillai – a well known Malayalam novelist in the early phase of modernity who wrote historical novels – in 1922 only a few novels were published in Malayalam. George (1998) writes that the Malayalam novel received “a new lease of life” only in the 1930s when the progressive writers’ movement was gathering momentum in the state. According to him this was a period when the influence of the West was felt more directly on the works that were produced in Malayalam. He calls this period the second phase of modernity in Malayalam literature when the writers were inspired by western literature and leftist ideologies and wrote more closely about life (1998, 105). This was also a period when the art of the short story became popular in Malayalam. Avasthi observes that, during this period, “writers... used short story both as an effective means of propagating their humanistic beliefs and ideas as an expression of a new aesthetic” (Avasthi 2004, 8). The short story was even considered to be an effective tool of informal education for the whole population and the publishing industry also rose to the occasion. “Literary periodicals like

*Mathrubhumi, Kesari, Samadarsi, Mangalodayam* and *Chitrayogam* did yeoman service to the establishment of the short story as a respectable and influential artistic medium” (9).

Social realism in Malayalam literature has continued to be valorized in the scholarly discourse and this has indeed captured the imaginations in its contemporary manifestations as well. The humanistic beliefs that Avasthi attributes to early short story writers can be applied to the analysis of other fictional representations, especially novels, produced in this period. In his commentary George shows how the publication of *Pavangal* – the Malayalam translation of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* – in 1925 by Nalappattu Narayana Menon had indeed inspired the writers to remain faithful to their own experiences and surroundings at the same time as instilling humanistic values into their works (1998, 102). Social realism in Malayalam writings during this period was a production of the overwhelming influences of leftist ideologies, and humanistic values and was recognized as schematic for its didactic and pedagogic imperatives. Das, in his observations about the unprecedented growth that Malayalam literature experienced during the thirties and forties in the last century, points out that the novels and short stories produced in this period “shared a strong sense of realism and deep human interest in the life of the oppressed and the marginalized . . . [i]f one has to look for an Indian *Les Misérables* it is to be found in Malayalam literature” (1995, 282).

As part of their project to challenge the conventional literary modes already established in Malayalam literary *genre* previous to then, the progressive writers in the thirties started looking at non-English *genre* of fiction writing from the West, especially Europe. English was still the

main language through which translations of works from Russian, French, German and other European languages were received and read. As opposed to this Malayalam translations of works by authors like Maupassant, Balzac, Chekov, Zola, Gorky and so on started appearing for general consumption during this time. The main propaganda in this context was led by Balakrishna Pillai (1889-1960), popularly known in Malayalam literary circles as Kesari – the name of the journal he had once edited. Kesari Balakrishna Pillai translated literary works of a fictional and non-fictional nature from French and other non-English western/ European contexts. Malayalam writers during this period had the opportunity to get acquainted with some of the best fiction produced in these languages.

This was entirely new since until then writings in English, and English translations of a selected bunch of literary works from other languages, were the only foreign literary works available for reading. This was also limited to a small segment of the population who had had the opportunity to go to the English medium schools. The availability of these writings in Malayalam, filled with new experiments and new modes of representing their respective social conditions, at that time played a crucial role in constituting a new reading public with new reading practices in Keralam. This was an important turning-point since it laid the foundation in Keralam for the reception of Malayalam fictional writing that depicted lives from a different perspective. Progressive writers, determined to break the hegemony of reformation narratives that targeted the non-normative, traditional practices, instead borrowed from the framework of these non-English European literature that rendered social conditions more complicated. The widespread Malayali perceptions of this continental European literature as ‘different’ and more

‘genuine’ to the experiences they depicted inspired the local authors to focus on the living conditions of the economically poor and downtrodden.

Certain compelling and unconventional themes started appearing in the newly-produced fictions that were evidently intended to challenge the established common perceptions of a class-based and morally complacent culture and society. According to George, “there was a proletarian emphasis in the new fiction; the common man became the new hero” (George 1998, 104); themes that challenged mainstream fictional writing were not only accepted as suitable for fiction but also recognized as relevant in a changing world (1998, 105). The titles of some of the fictions that appeared during this period illustrate this. *Odayil Ninnu* (From the Gutter) written by Kesava Dev in 1942, *Thotti* (Scavenger) by Nagavalli R.S. Kurup in 1943, *Thottiyude Makan* (The Son of a Scavenger) and *Thenti Vargam* (The Beggar Clan) by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in 1947 and 1950 respectively. All of these dwelled upon themes concerning the lives of lower-class people depicted against the rigid moral framework of society. “The protagonists in their narratives are the labourer, the rickshaw puller, the prisoner, the scavenger or communities and social groups such as the fisherman” (Das 1995; 282).

One of the most evident ways of challenging the established moral world was to include characters and incidents considered as over-the-top, immoderate, deviant and perverse. It was often the case that the plots in these fictions sketched a world that overturned and even destabilised the moral universe and the usual caste, class and gender hierarchies. In his story *Thotti* (Scavenger), published in 1943, author Nagavalli R. S. Kurup gives a detailed description of the life of a scavenger. Banned in the year of its publication by the princely state of

Travancore for its ‘revolutionary content’, the narrative involved the romantic and sensual experiences of a scavenger’s life depicted against the daily routine of a scavenger, focusing on the collection, transportation and disposal of filth. The author, Nagavalli Kurup, in his foreword to the third imprint of the story wrote that “they [stories and fictions with similar themes] were part of efforts that were deliberately undertaken to shift the focus of narration from the lives of the upper caste, wealthier people” (Kurup 1955, 5).

### **Revolution, the emergence of “bad stories”: the moral havoc**

The subversive intentions that guided the production of these literary works came out in a full-fledged manner in writings that openly challenged the persisting sexual morals in the prevailing literary imagination of that period. A collection of short stories titled *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal* (Five Bad Stories)<sup>4</sup>, published in 1946, was a clear articulation of the ‘dissolute’ intentions that drove these authors. As is reflected in the title itself, all five stories dealt with themes that were highly and explicitly sexual in their contents. Published by the People’s Bookstall, a moderate publication house run by T.K. Varghese Vaidyan and operated from Alappuzha, a district in the Northern part of Keralam, the book was banned in the very year of its launching in the name of vulgarity<sup>5</sup>. A huge controversy erupted following its release and only a few copies could be sold out of the thousand copies that were printed before the ban was announced. The rest were confiscated and destroyed by the police, who also sealed the press<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal* (Mal- Five Bad Stories), 1996 (1946), Imprint Books: Kollam

<sup>5</sup> “Bad stories set to comeback”. In *The Hindu* online edition on October 12, 2008. Written by Mathew, Dennis Marcus.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

Although the book was banned for its vulgar content there was also a significant political flavor added to the whole controversy. This was a period when Keralam came under the strong influence of the leftist-communist ideologies and there were sporadic but strong peasant movements in different parts of the region. Alappuzha, the district from where the book was published, was one of the main areas where the revolution reached its heights in the form of the famous Punnapra-Vayalar revolt. The constitutional reforms proposed in 1946 by the then Diwan of the princely state of Travancore, Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, was opposed by the communists who maintained that the reforms intended to create an American model of executive in Travancore. The slogan “American Model Arabikkadalil” (Dump the American model into the Arabian Sea) was popular during those days in the different parts of Keralam, which was still not a unified territory. The region around Alappuzha was a Communist stronghold and the communist workers organised a mass uprising in October 1946 against the authority of the Diwan, and practically established their own government in the region. This led to attacks and the deaths of Travancore police officials and government officials in that region. Martial law was declared in and around the district of Alappuzha and the uprising was brutally suppressed with the help of police and the navy on October 25, 1946.

Interpreted variously as the struggle for freedom against the oppression of the Diwan and as the coir workers’ opposition to the prevailing feudal system and the proposed constitutional reforms, the Punnapra- Vayalar struggle played a significant role in bringing communist ideologies into the mainstream intellectual life of Malayalees and in the growth of the Communist Party as one of the main political force in Keralam. This growing influence of communist ideologies, the full force of which started to be felt strongly from the mid-1920s

onwards, had a lasting impact on the *genre* of literary production, initiated by the progressive writers' movement, as well as on the constitution of a reading community. In fact the association between leftist ideologies and the progressive writers' movement in Kerala was so close that, as one author observed, "the main inspiration [of *Jeevat Sahityam*] was left wing politics" (Nagendra 1988, xxiv)<sup>7</sup>. *Jeevat Sahityam*, which was founded in April 1937 in a conference held at Thrissur, was later renamed *Purogamana Sahityam* (progressive literature) in 1944 in order to signify its proximity to the idea of progress (*purogamanam*) (Chandrasekharan 1999, 104). The growing influence of the leftist ideologies was felt in the constitution of reading groups also. This was particularly so in the public library movement which started in the late 1940s when libraries for public access were set up in different parts of the region. These spaces were often accused of catering to leftist ideologies and political activities under their influence<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The intimate relation between the emergence and growth of these two was much stronger that one can hardly find any difference between two in the general frameworks of contemporary interpretations. See for instance how Paul Zacharia, a well-known writer in Malayalam, in an interview categorically and in a self-evident manner states that "[C]ommunism [in Kerala] came in as a progressive movement in literature and art and paintings and theatre" (interview conducted on April 6, 2011 by Shobha Varrier and published at <http://www.rediff.com/news/slide-show/slide-show-1-kerala-assembly-2011-in-conversation-with-paul-zacharia/20110406.htm>. Accessed on January 2012).

<sup>8</sup> It was not uncommon in those days to find columns in newspapers and magazines that wrote openly against the functioning of public libraries for their overwhelming leftist orientation. *Malayala Manorama*, a leading Malayalam daily, wrote that "at present the libraries of the state are turned into communist centres and that the collections of these libraries are mainly communist literature which are irreligious and immoral" (Editorial, *Malayala Manorama*, 1952 May 22); *Deepika*, another well circulated Malayalam Daily, wrote that "the libraries of the state were working with the sole intention of spreading communist ideology and these libraries are filled with Russian literature which were actually spreading communism in the name of progressive literature" (Editorial, *Deepika*, May 30, 1952 ). What concerned these writers was not merely the spread of leftism and its activities in the state as much as it was about instigating an immoral ground where the modern progressive literary practices took place.

It was precisely against this background that the book *Five Bad Stories* was banned. It is noteworthy that the book was published from Alappuzha which was one of the strongholds of communist party at a time when the revolution reached its heights in the region. All the contributions in the collection dealt with sexually explicit themes against the background of the lives of the economically and socially deprived classes. The book, along with other similar ones, was an unconditional declaration of the era of social realism in Malayalam literature and displayed a deliberate attempt to deal with down-to-earth realities, albeit from a different ideological perspective. Five Bad Stories, through its very title, neatly conveyed the intentionality behind its production. Produced during an era when “moral values were considered precious and stories and fictions were essentially considered as vehicles of the same” the publishers themselves “announced it as a bad book”. This implicitly carried the subtext emphasising not only the authors’ intrepidity and the morally violating themes in the collection but also the fact that the “readers can choose to decide whether or not to read it”<sup>9</sup>. The “bad” in the Bad Stories was necessarily a signal about the morally offensive themes and the language deployed in the book – representing a common strategy adopted by the progressive writers to confront the disciplined moral language of the erstwhile literatures. Thakazhi, another well known Malayalam writer and a Jnanapeedam award winner who authored one of the Five Bad Stories during the early stages of his writing career, wrote in the foreword to the 1996 reprint edition that “the attempt was mainly to write and publish slang and folly”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Ponkunnam Varkkey, one of the contributors to the collection, in an interview with V.Y. Rahim for his foreword to the recent edition of the book launched in the year 1996. (*Anchu Cheetha Kathakal*, 1996, Imprint Books: Kollam).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* Interview with Thakazhi.



A common observation made about progressive Malayalam writing, beyond the praises commonly accorded to its adoption of social realism, is that it oscillated between the economic realities of life and certain given sexual figures. George observes “it would appear that some writers took a vow to write only about hunger and about women selling their chastity to satisfy hunger” (George 1998, 191). Such stereotyping, nevertheless, enabled the writers to combine and articulate concerns about the economic and moral structures. There were also conscious attempts during this period on the part of the writers to restrict such challenges to the heteronormative order already established in Keralam. I shall come back to this point in the next section of this chapter. In fact economic realities seemed to be offering new possibilities of narration in the wider Malayalam literary sphere that emerged from this period. This was as much a result of the influence of communist ideologies and the newly arrived translations of works from non-English western contexts as it was about challenging and negotiating the structures and practices, both economic and moral, that continued to prevail from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Keralam. This was a period when democratization of the concept of 'body' was witnessed in the field of literature both in terms of caste and gender. Writings in this period started depicting the life-worlds of lower castes and womenfolk in a more subjective manner rather than as merely serving the feudal/patriarchal structures or as mere objects of social transformations.

As I have already suggested the new trends was not free from the influence of new ideologies. On the one hand, the progressive realists endeavoured to project the realities through their class based definitions of the social world. On the other hand they articulated a universal approbation of modernity and ideologies of progress as reciprocal and mutually fulfilling. Concerns of progress remained at the heart of these shifts. For instance the concerns addressed

during the period between 1937, when the *Jeevat Sahityam* was formed, and 1944, when its name was changed as *Purogamana Sahitya Prasthanam*, were about inaugurating an intimate relationship between literature and ideas of social progress<sup>11</sup>. Attempts were also undertaken to define the very concept of progress<sup>12</sup>. These concerns were shared by not only those who actively took part in the movement but also by those who resisted the movement in literature on different grounds. It was precisely amidst these complexities around questions of progress that social realism as a major feature in the history of literary and artistic representations emerged in Keralam in a full-fledged manner.

Social realism in Malayalam literature was not something that was confined to the progressive writers' movement alone although the influence of leftist ideologies especially in the form of addressing the economic realities was dominant in the production of literature and other art forms in this period<sup>13</sup>. The literary sphere in Keralam was divided between writers who

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<sup>11</sup> Chandrasekharan 1999 pp. 216-274. The concerns were quite visible in writings that addressed the contemporary literature and about the status of the movement.

<sup>12</sup> These questions persisted, in an intense manner, even after the change that was brought in its name. In other words the period as I mentioned here need not be taken as a definite epoch when these ideas were consolidated. A. Balakrishna Pillai, the main driving force behind *Jeevat Sahityam*, was writing on these questions even from 1925 onwards much before the movement had begun. Muntasseri another critical figure of the movement was another source who constantly invoked this question of progress through his writings. In 1945 he wrote "what is progressive literature/ or what is that ideology which holds all these progressive writers together? . . . It is definitely good that whatever is being written is good for progress, but we definitely need to pause and rethink about the direction in which 'progress' is progressing?" (*Mangalodayam*, 1946 (ME 1123), 239-240. Volume number/ date missing).

<sup>13</sup> Nagavalli R.S. Kurup, who wrote *Thotti*, a novelette that was banned in the early 40s, was one among the contributors to the collection of good stories. It is interesting to note here that Kurup, who touched upon themes that were equally unconventional as those dealt by the progressive writers, considered his story as 'good' as opposed to being a 'bad' one. See Kurup's story "Veli Kettal" (The Making of a fence), in *Anchu Nalla Kathakal* (Mal: Five Good Stories). Kozhikkode: K.R. Brothers (1947).

belonged to the progressive camp and those who declared themselves against the movement. In the aftermath of the publication of *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal*, this rupture came out openly when those who belonged to the latter camp published a collection of short stories that was entitled *Anchu Nalla Kathakal* (Five Good Stories)<sup>14</sup>. However the changing economic structure, its impact on social relations, poverty and hunger played a major role in the stories in this collection also. What determined the difference between *Nalla Kathakal* and *Cheetha Kathakal* (Good and Bad Stories) was mainly the presence of the morally unconventional and sexually explicit elements in the stories of the latter collection. The historical juncture at which the production of both these collections took place is significant as the debates that surrounded their production and circulation clearly articulated some of the lasting concerns which dictated the production of literature and other art forms in the subsequent periods. A closer reading of both these collections enables one to understand the nuanced differences that led the authors to define their collections as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ respectively. Body, sex and practices were alluded in a rather explicit manner in ‘Bad Stories’ of which the title was a generic but brief synopsis of the trend that the very authors of these stories, along with others, had set a few years before. On the other hand these practices remained implicit or completely absent in ‘Good Stories’ which were nevertheless still struggling to remain close to represent the social and economic realities.

Despite the attempt to draw clear distinctions that would establish a story as good or bad, stories and art forms that were addressed as bad were condemned solely on the basis of their overemphasis on economic inequalities. The representation of subjectivities and practices, considered until then as morally offensive and which evidently separated the Good and Bad

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

stories, was a later invention when progressive writings started depicting practices outside of heteronormativity. In other words the use of language, the subjects, practices and relations were not identified as points to be contested so far the progressive writing restricted itself to depicting heterosexual subjects under the metanarrative of monogamy. In this context criticism against authors who wrote ‘bad stories’ was highly complex and dense with contradictions. The writings of P.C. Kuttikrishna Marar, another renowned literary figure in Malayalam, deserve special mention in this regard. Marar who was one of the main sources of this criticism in Malayalam literary world, accused the writings emerging from those authors as “spreading darkness in human lives which are already dark . . . what good culture and motivations will it create in our minds? What progress will our society and literature attain as a result of these [writings]?”<sup>15</sup>.

Marar’s antagonism against writings that emerged from the progressive camp of literature was based on his hostility towards its political affiliations. As pointed out earlier, progressive realism and leftist ideologies were commonly understood as synonymous in the Malayalam literary world that prevailed then. This led to a situation where the hostility towards the latter became the main cause for criticism against the former. Marar stated that “these writings are solely for the sake of spreading an ideology which holds that only by focusing upon the economic difficulties of life and by objugating the rich could a piece of literature become successful . . . [t]hese writers believe in developing a revenging attitude among the working class

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Chandrasekharan 1999, 121. The article was originally written by Kuttukrishna Marar in 1948 in the Malayalam magazine *Kaivilakku*. All the references to this article are quoted from Chandrasekharan 1999 and the page numbers refer to this book.

making any compromise quite impossible”<sup>16</sup>. Marar further summoned the writers to publicly declare their political affiliation “instead of being intimidated by the question whether or not they belong to the progressive camp”<sup>17</sup>.

However a closer reading of the constitution of this space of realism in its early stages during the 30s and 40s takes it beyond the immediate political and economic realms. Beyond the visibility of exchanges that have marked Malayalam literature until recent periods to the extent that writers on several occasions were accused of serving political parties through their writings, there remained a common space. It was common to the extent that it, beyond the exigencies of pragmatic politics, always articulated a space where the writers had struggled to emphasize gritty realism in their works. It was here that attempts were made to depict the lives of common man and woman and their sufferings and struggles. Even writers who were labeled as hardcore political ideologists of either side actively took part in the constitution of this space. Going back to the episode of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ stories, the subtle differences that went into the constitution of such binaries comes to light. On a microscopic level these differences focused on the issue of centering around body and desire in literature and on a macroscopic level such differences were widely understood as emerging from concepts and practices of a new – colonial – economy.

### ***Swavargarathi, Sadhacharam and Asleelam (Homosexuality, Morality and Obscenity)***

The challenge of ‘good stories’ to what was seen as the “tendencies to exaggerate” the economic differences and inequalities again took the form of ‘realism’ of a different kind that

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* 111-120.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* 134.

basically addressed the social and economic transformations in a rather nostalgic tone. The question of sex and desire was only implicit in these stories which, on the other hand, stressed the earlier traditions of romantic and ascetic love that did not consider body as an active agent involved in it. This space of realism had indeed negotiated between these earlier traditions and the new trends that stood for unrestrained depiction of sex in aesthetic representations. The famous lines *mamsa nibaddhamalla ragam* (love is not bound by flesh/body)<sup>18</sup> written by the Malayalam poet Kumaranasan (1873-1924) needs to be specially discussed in this context. Asan, whose role as a poet was crucial in transforming Malayalam poetry from the metaphysical to the lyrical in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century period, was a continuously critical presence in debates around the question of depiction of sex and love in literature and other art forms. The category of love without sex was introduced in modern Malayalam poetry by Kumaranasan. An active participant of reform movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kumaranasan was the first general secretary of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) movement – started by Sree Narayana Guru in 1902 for the welfare of Ezhavas of the region (Parayil 2000; Mathew 1989).

Asan, through his poems, introduced and popularized the romantic traditions of Sanskrit literature among Malayalis in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Deeply influenced by reform ideals and colonial values Asan was a strong proponent of pristine love (divine love) and sexual discipline. It was precisely this schema of love without sex that was reinvented in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century public sphere to counter progressive realists' claims and challenges. The verse line quoted above – *mamsa nibaddhamalla ragam* – of Kumaranasan was foregrounded by the counter camp to support their claims to free literature from the overt influences of sexual desire. Stories and

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<sup>18</sup> From the poem *Leela* written by Kumaranasan in 1914. (Kumaranasan 2009 (1914). Kottayam: D.C. Books)

fictions – and other art forms, especially films in the subsequent periods – were measured on the basis of the importance they attributed to sex as an essential component of love and life at large. In other words the flesh-bound love has kept recurring in the public sphere of Keralam as a conceptual schema that could be projected onto literature and other art forms in order to classify them as salacious and otherwise. This was not as much part of the official discourse as it was to preoccupy the internal spaces of the local intelligentsia where ascetic love was still valorized to a considerable extent as opposed to open descriptions of sex<sup>19</sup>. The imagery of flesh replacing asceticism and concerns about the changing economic proportions of the region were to become fertile grounds for tackling and for dealing with questions of homosexuality and its representations in the public sphere. I will come back to this argument later in this chapter and in the next chapter also.

Thus realism in Malayalam literature was a complicated terrain which, at the same time as opening space for the ordinary man and woman to appear as subjects of narratives, simultaneously put in place conflicting practices, of writing and reading, to deal with the question of desire. The differences that were presented in political and economic versions were not so much as they were differences of a moral nature. They basically focused on the question of what reading practices should be entertained by society in order to remain more progressive

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<sup>19</sup> The writers who were often accused of writing in obscene language were still recognized with state awards and other honorariums. Vaikom Muhammad Basher. Madhavikkutty, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and so on were writers who belonged to this category. While their books continued to be the best sellers in the market the charges made against them ran parallel.

and modern (Surendran 1950)<sup>20</sup>. Surendran's article was an early articulation of these anxieties around the depiction of sex in literature. However a clear instance of deploying concerns about the question of social progress as an effective tool for dismantling writing practices on a selective basis emerged, again in 1947, in the aftermath of the publication of *Shabdangal* (Voices) written by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. *Shabdangal* was the first piece of fiction in modern Malayalam literature that touched upon the topic of homosexuality. The debates that surrounded the publication of this short novel by Basheer, and certain subsequent writings that were produced on the question of *asleelam* (obscenity) in Malayalam literature, resulted in the formation of a prolific space. The investments made in this space during this period were critical that public contentions in the subsequent periods consistently borrowed from its basic formulations.

The initial debates, the glimpses of which we have already seen in the previous passages, about addressing the real life issues in literature centered on the question of reflecting upon the social and economic differences. However while this continued to preoccupy the local intellectual schema there appeared certain other questions that hijacked the main attention from such larger and overwhelming equations. *Shabdangal* was an epiphenomenon of the ongoing trends of realism that nevertheless became instrumental in unleashing harsh criticism in public sphere towards the depiction of sex and desire in literature. This is despite the fact that there were stories and fictions produced in the preceding period, especially in the years after the

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<sup>20</sup> In this article, published by *Mathrubhumi* weekly in 1947, Surendran clearly brings out some of these early concerns where he raised this question in an attempt to mediate between these two differing traditions of social realism (Surendran 1950).



formation of *Jeevatsahityam* in Keralam, that depicted sexual practices more openly<sup>21</sup>. *Shabdangal* on the other hand contained minimal direct references to questions of desire and sex, by comparison with the common practice that was prevalent, especially, in literature produced under the banner of *purogamana sahityam*. It is quite interesting to note that the critics of progressive realism – or rather progressive critics – were not sufficiently alarmed about representing sexual practices in literature until open references to a same-sex encounter appeared in *Shabdangal*. This throws our attention to a range of questions surrounding the cultural hegemony of heteronormativity in Keralam. This cultural politics has spilled beyond the world of realism and literature, and have critically regulated not only the limits of the narratability of desire but also its very constitution in the collective social memory.

### ***Shabdangal***

As mentioned previously *Shabdangal*<sup>22</sup>, published in October 1947, was the first piece of fiction in modern Malayalam literature that touched upon the topic of homosexuality. Published in the immediate aftermath of Indian independence, this novella is a critical representation of the life experiences of a soldier during the Second World War and thereafter. It provided an

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<sup>21</sup> This is not only with regard to the collection *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal*; production of stories and fictions that depicted heteronormative sex, within and outside monogamy, was a common phenomenon in Malayalam literature ever since *Indulekha* – the first full-fledged, modern Malayalam Novel – was published in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. However the early descriptions were confined to expressions of mutual love between partners of opposite sex and lust for a woman's body rather than treating sexual practices as such. It was not until the thirties that references to body parts and descriptions of sexual practices as such started to appear in Malayalam literature. Even then such open descriptions were reserved for instances where opposite partners were involved. See Raghunathan Nair (Nair 2003) for a historical understanding about the depiction of body, sex and desire in Malayalam literature from mid 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

<sup>22</sup> Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. 1947. National Book Stall: Kottayam.

*aposteriori* explanation of nationalism and morality that was quite an unusual one in the social context that it addressed. This was demonstrated in the kind of response that it invoked in the immediate aftermath of its publication. *Shabdangal* was severely criticized for challenging the “norms of morality and standards of respectability”<sup>23</sup>. Even so it remained distinctly popular among the reading community in Keralam for a substantially longer period of time. The representational and reading practices behind the production and circulation of *Shabdangal* bear witness to the inauguration of an era where such matters would constantly be regulated by the informal structures rather than the formal ones. Thus public opinions and discussions in the public sphere were to become crucial in this context rather than state interventions or even laws. There was a frame in the making in the public sphere around the post production period of *Shabdangal* where writing practices were informally regulated by tagging and judging them. Nevertheless this frame was clearly embedded in the earlier celebrating patterns that contemplated over questions of progress and modernity. *Shabdangal* thus gave a clear first-hand opportunity for these progressive concerns to revisit the Malayali public sphere where they were rearticulated in order to channelize social realism in literature and other art forms in particular directions.

A scathing account of a soldier’s life experiences narrated by himself to the author the novella uses the device of the soldier's narration to discuss the horrors of war, the power politics

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<sup>23</sup> *Sabhyatha* and *Sadhacharam* (Nair 1947(1994), 152) - these two words represent the common parlance around *Shabdangal*. Although these terms were part and parcel of the critics’ writings on the novella in the aftermath of its publication they were first coined, in the context of *Shabdangal*, by the author and the publishers themselves as catching phrases in order to advertise its arrival preceding its publication. It was advertised as a severe challenge against *sabhyatha* – decency, respectability – and *sadhacharam* – morality. See the foreword to the novella written by Kesari A. Balakrishna Pillai in the 1948 edition of *Shabdangal*, (Kottayam: National Book Stall. 9-16)

involved in it, the frustrations of the soldiers, questions of desire, sexual diseases and moral perversions in fairly open and ideological terms. Basheer promotes different hypotheses in this short novel through his answers to the soldier's questions. The experiences and situations narrated by the soldier are also made more clear to the reader by seeking clarifications by the author. Basically presented in the form of a conversation, the novella assumes the proportion of an ideological treatise that critically reviews the official explanations given for these situations. The unrelenting mordacious descriptions remains intense throughout the novel affecting almost all the situations that it covers, from scenes of war to the scenes of the street lives of prostitutes. The strikingly realistic language of the narrative however takes the novel beyond the paradigms of the normal fictional language of the period and confers on it an aura of chronicle; every shocking incident that confronted the narrator in the past is elucidated with the help of explanations that breached the overwhelming commonly held, progressive notions of nationalism, morality and a foundational economic structure. For instance take this piece of conversation between the author and the narrator from the chapter entitled *Premabhajanam* (ladylove) in *Shabdangal*

Soldier (S): . . . *What have you to say about prostitution?*

Author (A): *Whether it is good or bad?*

S: *Yes.*

A: *I have heard it said that prostitution is the world's oldest profession. Many follow the calling even today. From beggars to queens. Anyhow I wouldn't like my mother or sisters to practice it.*

A: .....

*S: Have you felt that there is always an economic problem behind the practice of prostitution?*

*A: There must be some such thing!*

*S: Why do women become prostitutes?*

*A: Probably because there are men.*

*S: Is that any reply?*

*A: Why should men go to them? Let us not waste time in pointless discussion. From the point of view of male the fault is always that of the woman. Looked at from the female point of view the fault lies with the man. Either the fault is in both sides or in neither. On what basis are you going to decide between right and wrong?*

*S: On the basis of morality.*

*A: Morality of which part of the globe, of which people?*

*S: I don't know. Isn't there something we ordinary call morality? Don't look at other women, monogamy, chastity and so on.*

*A: Morality is different for different religions. Take monogamy. Some religions allow polygamy. Some allow polyandry too. There have been kings and people among whom mothers and sisters could be taken as wives. That was their morality. Among animals and reptiles and birds mothers and sisters become mates. Among humans too, even today, such practices go on. A sister could conceive from her brother, a mother from her son, a daughter from her father.*

*S: Isn't that terrible?*

*A: Why?*

*S: Well, I don't know why?*

A: *I'll tell you why. You have a philosophy of life. You were wrong saying that you had no such thing. Wasn't your foster father a priest in a temple? He has taught you.*

*About good and bad. That is your philosophy of life.*

S: *You may be right. Let me ask you something. Is it possible to maintain honesty in relationships between men and women?*

A: *In sexual matters?*

S: *Yes.*

A: *How can I say? How can I speak for all the men and women in the world, other than myself? If only honesty could be maintained – it's a hope. Generally speaking, can anyone be said to be consistently honest and truthful in anything? We may try to be good and honest before others, but are we before ourselves?*

S: *What is your opinion of the future of human race?*

A: *Nothing bad, why do you ask?*

S: *Among the people in this world, seven out of ten have gonorrhoea or syphilis.*

A: *Who said this?*

S: *An eminent military doctor.*

A: *He must have said it to frighten soldiers.*

S: *Among soldiers, nine out of ten have the disease. This is a fact. They are next door to death. The others? Workers, farmers, lawyers, officials, kings, political workers, artists, journalists, poets, writers, prostitutes, reviewers, beggars, presidents – in this varied population of the world seven out of ten have gonorrhoea or syphilis.*

A: *I don't know whether they have it or not. Anyhow aren't there medicines?*

*S: Only the rich can afford them. Even then it cannot be completely cured. It is like a smouldering ember hidden among the ashes. Doctors talk about instances of gonorrhoea being transmitted through the blood and semen for three generations. Perhaps it is more terrible than leprosy. Anyhow I am terrified of going near prostitutes. I haven't gone to them. When I was discharged from the army and stayed in the city I had a woman. Till then, as long as I was a soldier my loved one was the picture of a film star. That picture was the beloved of many of us.*

*A: Meaning?*

*S: The picture had lips, eyes, breasts, navel and thighs. (20-23)<sup>24</sup>.*

Except for the lurid descriptions intended to capture the gravity of war situations and the disillusionments of sexual encounters the novella basically continues through a series of conversations similar to this. The author remains the objective observer and the narrator, that is the soldier, is the subject representing the ordinary human embedded in the moral structures, struggling to find a way out of it. The above passage represents the task the book has undertaken and the method deployed by it; that is to centralize the local moral regime and expose the fallacies and fragilities surrounding their existence. The author's direct take on morality is especially notable here. While hinting at the heterogeneous moral standards followed by humans across the globe, he deliberately exempts his own society from the same. The use of the phrase, "*Among humans too, even today, such practices go on*" effectively represents his keeping these practices away from his own cultural locale. Although the same passage could effectively be

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<sup>24</sup> All the page numbers of *Shabdangal* belong to its English translation. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer 1976 (1947). *Voices*. Tr. Abdulla V. Sangam Books (Orient Longman): Bombay (Mumbai).

read as ironically referring to how such practices did go on in Keralam, there is absolutely no hinting of the same anywhere in the text. Instead it restricts such references to generic and sweeping categories such as the “humans”.

It should be remembered that this was a period when polyandry and matriliney were not completely in disuse among certain communities in Keralam and their existence was seriously debated in local and academic circles<sup>25</sup>. Matriliney and *sambandham* were also still practiced and their discussions were still not completely absent in the periodicals and magazines published then<sup>26</sup>. Against this background *Shabdangal*, as also several other stories and fictions produced during this period under the label of social realism, unveils the strategic ploy that was more or less commonly deployed. This *genre* of writings hypostatized heteronormativity and construed it universal meaning turning the reader’s attention to its idealized existence, which was effectively challenged by those writings. There was also a significant shift taking place in this period when these authors targeted the hegemonic language of reformation and heteronormativity. The historical advances made by these monogamous moral structures were completely unaddressed

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<sup>25</sup> My discussion of polyandry in the previous chapter.

<sup>26</sup> An author in *Mangalodayam*, Malayalam magazine circulated in Keralam during the period, questions the monolithic existence of this monogamous moral structure in Keralam. His statement “it has become impossible to walk on the street due to this *sadhacharam*” deserves mention here. The reference was to both the realism literature that were being produced and the critics’ writings. He observes that “these modern moral structures of monogamy and chastity are to be found in all the stories and fictions being produced irrespective of who writes them, whether progressive writers or anybody else”. He also describes its existence among statements issued by political parties and by other prominent personas in the society “as if this *sadhacharam* alone would fetch progress for us.” (Thomas, C.J. 1948. “Vimarsa Veethi” [Mal: Path of Criticism]. In *Mangalodayam* 8 (9); page numbers missing). Whereas progress, to imply a modern welfarist understanding, continued to be the central concern in these descriptions they also signified a *genre* of literary criticism that focused upon the non-modern cultural traits as their point of departure. However criticisms such as Thomas’ failed to receive wider acceptance and reference to the non-monogamous moral structures was almost completely absent from this space.

in the new writings which, in a sense, completely neglected the still prevalent non-monogamous, non-heterosexual practices in the society.

With regard to *Shabdangal* sequences of the sort mentioned above frequently recur throughout the book where the experiences that are narrated often emerge in a surprising/shocking mood for the reader. The shifting away from the rural and peasantry backgrounds of Keralam that was most common in literature during the period to the violence of war and the impersonal urban settings considerably helps the author to produce images and sequences that were not entirely familiar to the common Malayali readers. The human eye that was found in the soldiers' food during the war, blood instead of water that was drunk, a male prostitute disguised as a female and a prostitute's child laid on the street side and bitten by ants while she was busy engaging her client are among some of the stark images that emerges out of this narration. All of these images except the last one were not familiar in literature produced during the period. The book is replete with negotiations between the moral and the amoral and many of the images that it yields out of its situations could easily have been considered offensive to public morality.

However the critics' attack against the book focused upon the one single episode depicting the soldier's sexual encounter with a *hijra*<sup>27</sup> whom the soldier had apparently thought was a

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<sup>27</sup> The term that the author uses is *aan vesya* (male prostitute). The male in question, apparently dressed up as a female, later explains to the soldier about the collectivity he belongs to and the customs that all members including him undergo before they are initiated into this. A clear reference is made to that of *hijras* although the narrator, as well as the author, continues to mention him as a male and not as a *hijra*.



female. The mistake is realized only after the encounter. The narration of the contretemps and the utter dismay of the soldier after he realizes the mistake committed do not involve any reference to gay desire or same-sex love. In fact immediately after the realization, the narrator's tone shifts to that of a disappointed client, as opposed to a despaired lover, and there is a sudden and precipitous movement of narration from love to sex. The logical corollary of this event in the narration is the narrator's, the soldier, getting inflicted by gonorrhoea as a result of this encounter. As opposed to the usual sequence of seeking explanation from the author for all the incidents narrated, in this particular instance, there is absolutely no explanation sought or given. The only discussion that follows the description of this incident is the narration of soldier about his conversation with male prostitute about how he was initiated into becoming a sex worker. Thus the author bypasses the risk of commenting upon a non-heterosexual union. Even the encounter is narrated as if it were a heterosexual one rather than to imply the opposite. Although severely criticized, during the period of its publication and in the subsequent periods as well, a closer reading of the text enables the reader to identify strong heterosexual foundation that articulates in itself during the soldier's narration and the authorial interventions.

The narratives and counter narratives reflect upon the text being reticent on the issue at its disposal opening both to its subversive and non-subversive readings. On the one hand the text, through its very discussion of this event, discredits the predominant status of heteronormativity in plots produced then. On the other hand it simultaneously evades from the obligation of explaining the same leaving the question to the readers. However the design of its narration of this whole event is particularly capturing for its style as the whole episode of the soldier with the male prostitute is presented in a heterosexual fashion until the sudden realization after the sexual

encounter; thus evidently sketching it as an accident, an unusual incident or an unfortunate turn of events in what was until then thought of as a romantic, heterosexual, relationship. This is not in any way meant to discard the subversive nature of the text produced during a period when reformation discourse was still on its heights. Nevertheless the text at the same time reveals the hidden frames for understanding sex and body those were rooted in the commonly held ideals involved in the production and reception of a text.

It is interesting to note that a text produced with the intention of breaking the modern moral structures opens with a passage that highlights the essentiality of hygienic qualities.

- *Who are you talking about?*
- *About myself, of course!*
- *I see.*
- *Didn't you ask me to start from somewhere?*
- *Yes. . . yes. . . I didn't mean it so seriously. I thought . . . you were . . .*
- *Mad? Isn't that so?*
- *What's your illness?*
- *Madness!*
- *Even if it is so, can't you clean your teeth or take a bath? Your looks, your hair, your beard, those foul-smelling clothes . . . . Can't you take a bath at least and go about clean?*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Op.cit.* FN 25; p.11

This passage at the beginning allows the text to sink into the consciousness of the reader where both the text and the reader are synchronized to take on the hypothecated grounds of morality. It is precisely here that the historical discourse of morality in the reformation period is reaffirmed in the public consciousness under the guise of a discussion of bodily hygiene. In the first chapter we have already seen how such hygienic practices of body were made into an effective tool by the reformers to focus on the body. In the book *Shabdangal* this association has a non-enigmatic and unambiguous association with questions of morality, especially later, inside the text, when such an association is extended to the question of sexual diseases as well as to personal standards of hygiene.

*Shabdangal*, by all means, was, as Pundey described, a critical text that, “reveal[ed] the worldliness of criticism” and was “constructed according to the critic’s location” (Pundey 2003, 141-142). The short novel reflects upon the conditional existence of desire amidst a constantly negotiated field of culture. The making of its texture is a significant element in the modern history of representations of non-heterosexual relationships in Keralam. By not deviating from the common standards of realism in literature *Shabdangal*, at the same time, has dissociated the same-sex encounter from any standard or acknowledged mechanisms of desire. That the representation of such relationships was to be confined to sexual acts in spaces that are well beyond the mainstream social circles and to be depicted only in the margins as constantly violating the social morals became an accepted practice in writings that touched upon these issues later. *Shabdangal* also inaugurated the practice of representing ‘the homosexual’ as an essential persona that is nevertheless a social construct.

In other words the homosexual is to be identified only through his sexual habits which were inculcated into his body and soul through abnormal socio-sexual intercourses. *Shabdangal* inaugurated many trends in Malayalam literature especially in the context of representing homoeroticism. The logical association of this practice with sexually transmitted diseases and the ‘need’ to justify one’s sexuality are one among the few. The post-encounter biographical descriptions of the *hijra* takes the reader to the homo-social spaces like schools and hostels where children are initiated into masturbation and same-sex intercourse. Justifying one’s alternative sexuality here invariably assumes the form of stories of exploitation<sup>29</sup>. However the much larger space of negotiations that surrounded the publication of *Shabdangal* comes to visibility only if one were to visit the different temporalities when such negotiations actually took place. Also the discursive impact of *Shabdangal* cannot be read solely with reference to the constitution of its text. The heated debate that its publication caused about the kind of experiences that could be and could not be represented in literature and the enterprises to define sex and obscenity in literature was equally important in cementing the reading and writing practices.

### **The constitution of an informal, ‘censoring’ public and a “digressive” space**

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<sup>29</sup> In the context of the contemporary sexuality politics where narrations of homosexuality emerge from a more subjective perspective, such descriptions often touch upon this aspect of ‘one’s “becoming” a homosexual’. A strong instance is the book *Oru Malayali Hijadayute Aatmakatha* (Autobiography of a Malayali Hijra) published in 2006. A substantial portion of the book deals with the question how Jereena, the author, became a homosexual persona during her school life. See Jereena 2006.

*Shabdangal* thus became incidental in articulating the discursive limits of representing desire. Typical of the writings that emerged from the progressive realists' camp, *Shabdangal* went further than others in speaking about desire in its extreme forms simultaneously displaying the limits of such articulations. The shared ground for the realism enterprises was a heterosexual, monogamous morality with reference to which only the articulation of desire was sensible. Sex, love, adultery, promiscuity, prostitution, chastity and so on became prominent issues where the fluidity and dynamics of cultural practices were often discussed. Body was re-centered as a site to discuss these varied manifestations of desire cutting across class and caste divides which nevertheless compressed the sexual moral sphere to that of a one man, one woman context. Such recasting and the intense debates that followed in the public sphere, nevertheless, witnessed certain circularities where prerogatives of progress and reformation were still rendered pristine and unchallengeable. This effectively relocated sexual practices and desire back at the centre of the discourse of progress also inaugurating the second phase of reformation in Keralam.

The reform narratives in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century addressed concerns around a degenerate culture in prescriptive but hegemonic language. It was invested beneath the progressive equations of corporeal practices and attempted to efface the heterogeneous cultural practices followed by different sections of society. Social realism in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the other hand, aimed to alter the caste and class centrality of the preceding discourses. It was precisely here that the leftist models of social conflict on an economic basis hijacked the centre stage by diffusing the focus to ordinary human experience. Desire was an effective tool to capture the dynamics of those daily experiences and to reveal the subtleties behind them. The apparent paradox behind this revolt against the preceding narratives on an economic basis was

that it granted the heterosexual, monogamous model of morality, that the previous regimes tried to impose upon society, an unchallenged status. This worked as an implicit model of reference and as a source from which definitions of rights and wrongs flowed.

By the time realism as a major trend had enveloped the production of Malayalam literature in the late 1930s, this moral structure had gained wider acceptance as an essential prerequisite to remaining progressive. The debates in the public sphere were around constituting a modern society with a strong sexual moral foundation. The basic issues, modernity and modern sexual morality, remained unchallenged within this framework<sup>30</sup>. The title *Purogamana(m)* meaning progress in its title conveyed the extent to which the movement was in implicit agreement with the discursive paradigms of progress. Its heterosexual, monogamous foundations were accepted as given. However the interventions of realism writings, in one blow, shifted the ground of debates. Even while the progressive frameworks remained unchallenged at large the reformers' elitist language and language of sexual discipline were effectively countered by progressive

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<sup>30</sup> The weak lines of defense against the hegemonic language of *sadhacharam* was clearly seen in the article published in *Mangalodayam* magazine that I previously mentioned (*Op.Cit.* FN 27). The author stated that [n]owadays in newspapers, whether they are run by the communist party or the congress party, only one thing is heard of- morality . . . [T]he problem remains in using the term 'we'. Who constitutes this 'we'? Does it include the Nambutiris and Christians? Are Nairs involved? Does it include the Muslims who haven't yet left for Pakistan? If it does then it should be clarified what remains common between a Muslim who considers marriage as a mere contract, a Nambutiri who prefers *sambandham* relation, a Nair who prefers joint family and a Christian who considers even sex between married couples as a matter of sin.

However such resistances had already become "a thing of old times" and was attributed a faint existence that no longer deserved to be followed. See the response to this article in the subsequent two editions of *Mangalodayam* in the same year.

realism on other accounts. This caused critical changes in the axis of debates in the Malayali public sphere.

The debate between reform oriented moralists and those who favoured traditional customs and practices (as we have already seen during the reform period and during the debates around *smarthavicharam*) suddenly became a debate around practices of representation. It became a debate between those who wanted to utilize the modern, democratic spaces of representation to mitigate the economic differences – and probably to humanize and democratize the experience that was being represented – and those who opposed such transitions adopting a rather conventional position identifying literature and other forms of representation as potential carriers of reform message. However there was, at this point, strong agreement between the two sides about the underlying structures of morality; the disagreement basically pertained to, one, as we have already seen, on defining the social problems on the basis of their economic significance, and, two, about the kind of language to be used and the kind of experiences that could be narrated. The silent, categorical affirmation of the indisputability of hetero-moral structures emerged against the background of these various complexities.

It was against this context that *Shabdangal* was produced which further incited open discussions and debates on the ethical dimensions of depicting desire in literary representations. The debates were thus far restricted to the way social issues were defined; definitions of reality that guided the production of literature and creative art. The issue of *asleelam* (obscenity) was only in the margins of this space of negotiations as we saw in the context of the publication of

*Anchu Cheetha Kathakal* and, subsequently, *Anchu Nalla Kathakal*. Post *Shabdangal* social obligation of the writer was reexamined in the public sphere in terms of the way body was narrated, the use of language, and the pedagogical possibilities of such narration in order to educate and spread social awareness among the readers. There was a huge uproar against *Shabdangal* immediately after its publication; the opposition to the book came from all corners of the society including from within the progressive writers' circles (Chandrasekharan 1999).

The most powerful intervention in terms of demeaning the production of *Shabdangal* came from Guptan Nair, a well known critique in Malayalam literary field known for his non-partisan positions. He wrote that,

[h]omosexuality is a most serious problem in our society. I feel that to write about it in such a casual fashion is a criminal offense. A solution for the increasing instances of homosexuality in our society lies in spreading knowledge and education about sexual issues among our children and in improving our moral structure. . . The writer has the responsibility . . . to not to narrate the grotesque if that doesn't help the reader to develop a sense of righteousness. (Nair 1947/1994, 153).

Following the production of *Shabdangal* the liberties of representational practices under the umbrella of progressive realism writing were critically debated. The site hosted discussions that articulated the links between questions of desire and modernity's promises of progress through an overwhelming reinvention of reform narratives. This eventually resulted in a new regime of



representation where restrictions in subtle forms were put in place over the question of desire and its depiction. The angry response against using representation to depict desire outside ‘normal’ forms was vented on the very first appearance of homosexuality in Malayalam literature. Even the slightest appearance of same sex content was received with much hostility; out of all the instances depicted in the novel, commonly referred to as “wastrels and fornications” (Nair 1947/1994, 153), homosexuality was selectively identified as a theme that failed the potentials of progressive writing practices. The familiar question ‘which writing practice was more progressive’ was most effectively deployed in reconditioning the representation of desire in literature.

Ideologising progress became a contested territory with various claims simultaneously complicating the scenario. The net effect of these debates was that the language of those who supported and criticized *Shabdangal* merged on several points. For instance the supporters claimed that the function of same sex relation in the story was to signify the degenerated moral grounds that commonly prevailed in the society rather than to depict its practice as such. Sahodaran Ayyappan (1889-1968), a renowned social reformer and journalist-politician, praised *Shabdangal* as “a new venture both thematically and methodically . . . Social reformation shouldn’t be restricted to the superficialities and instead should clean the internal parts of the society by removing the dirt from it”<sup>31</sup>. Ayyappan expressed his opinion in a speech delivered to a public gathering in 1948 assembled to discuss Basheer’s novella. Ponkunnam Varkki, one of the contributors in the *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal* and present during the occasion, stated that “[P]rogressive writers like Basheer are inviting the readers’ attention to the festers beneath this

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<sup>31</sup> Ayyappan’s speech in 1948 quoted in Sanu 2007, 153.

beautiful blanket . . . creating an impression in the readers' mind that such diseases should be cured"<sup>32</sup>.

Guptan Nair while criticizing Basheer for writing *Shabdangal* compared Basheer's obstinate nature to that of a "man who dipped his food in his body waste" just to show his freewill (Nair 1947/1994, 153). It is worth noticing here that both the criticism and support emerged from grounds that were organized under the label of reformation. Reform paradigm continued from the early time periods had considerably influenced the new realism movement which further embraced the pedagogical possibilities of the regime of representation. Thus the author, the critic who supported and who opposed *Shabdangal* shared the same parameters in resisting same sex practices as degenerating the cultural-moral foundations of the society. There was unanimity in defining same sex practice as a social sore. This became the common ground for praising the novella in the subsequent periods as well. Prostitution and same sex intercourse were parallel phenomenon "that kept destroying the moral consciousness of the society" and "Basheer was simply driving the readers" attention towards this (Jayakumar 1978, 58). This terrain centering on the question of depicting same sex practice as a theme, focusing on *Shabdangal*, has lasted for a long time to come and even today interpretations and misinterpretations of the novella provide a familiar ground to establish the sociality of representational practices.

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<sup>32</sup> Speech in 1948 quoted in Sanu 2007, 153. The author K.M. Sanu was also present on this occasion.

In his book published in 2003 Raghunathan Nair writes that “*Shabdangal* unveils the horrific images of the overt sexual instincts of a young man who was an offspring of a prostitute. . . [where] the young man, who caught sexual disease as a result of his unfettered sexual life, is describing his life experiences to the author in a confessional language” (Nair 2003, 58-59). Here all the background details provided by the author including the prostitute mother and the young man’s unfettered sexual life are factual mistakes. In the novella the soldier is described as having no idea about his parents and the sole occasion when he lost his control over his sexual instincts was when he met the male imposter, apparently dressed up as a woman. However such misreadings, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, are silently consumed in the public sphere irrespective of Basheer’s huge reputation as a writer. The generic reprehension against the depiction of same sex contents in literature comes onto surface through such writings. The deployment of *Shabdangal* within this larger discursive space invites our attention to the multiple ways through which not only same sex relations and practices but also differences in sexuality, especially their articulations in representations, are brutally attacked.

The site of *Shabdangal* was remarkable for the extent to which it initiated discussions on obscenity in literature and later in other creative arts. During the very early days of its publication the unanimity in labeling same sex relations and practices as ‘social sores’ have had an immediate effect in terms of eradicating homosexuality as a theme from all mainstream spaces of contestations. As I mentioned in the previous passages there was absolute unity in interpreting this practice as unethical and outside the purviews of decent social existence. There were other concerns around which contestations did occur and which were still crucial in constituting a vigilant public eye that constantly examined literature and other works of art for

their obscene contents – what is commonly called in Malayalam as *asleelam*. The space of critiques around *Shabdangal* was quick to shift its focus to this issue which, by default, was identified as pertaining only to the depiction of male-female relationships. Sukumar Azhikkode, another prominent critique in Malayalam literature, has written substantially on this topic. In a book published in 1952, an elaborate critique of progressive literature (*purogamana sahityam*), an exhaustive analysis of the term *asleelam* and its influence in Malayalam literature was undertaken. According to the him

What is commonly called in English language as pornography or obscene literature is extremely notorious throughout the world. This disgust is apparently the result of the inability of the writer to depict the aesthetics of sex based upon love between male and female. . . There have been obscene writings in the past also. But the motivation for the writer to engage in writing obscene contents then was either his own uncivilized existence or that it was a mere time pass. In any case those writers never imagined that they were doing a better job. . . On the contrary those who write obscene literature today are considered as, and they themselves come under the imagination that they are, performing serious work for the betterment of the society and that such works are reflections of their civilized nature. . . [Obscenity] could even be described as cancer that has inflicted not only literature but also all the modern art forms. . . It possesses the power to spoil everyone, from children to old men. . . especially children and youngsters by leading them to the fickle land of eroticities [where] their basic substance would be totally worn out.

(Azhikkode 1952, 28-30)

The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century critics combined the old reform concerns with the recently emergent questions in practices of representation. Definition of desire and the pedagogic potential of representation were debated alongside. Azikkode's book, from which the above quote is given, was a direct offshoot of the controversies erupted in the aftermath of the publication of

*Shabdangal*. Azhikkode had indeed addressed several concerns that marked this controversial space. It was literally an attempt to consolidate the status of obscenity in Malayalam literature by bringing under one umbrella all the arguments that remained scattered across this space. The general antagonism against obscenity in progressive literature was mainly grounded on the earlier aesthetic concepts of love as free from sex. It was precisely here that opposition to ‘flesh bound love’ was consolidated in a full-fledged manner as a conceptual schema to liquidate the realism writers’ arguments which claimed sexual practices outside the normative forms to be an inherent component of love and life at large. Within the former composite that claimed the legacy of Kumaranasan, the famous poet who wrote the lines *mamsa nibaddhamalla ragam* (love is not bound by flesh/sex)<sup>33</sup> in the earlier decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, desire was often depicted as mere craving for flesh. It often involved romanticizing the traditional literatures of the past simultaneously negating the streams of obscene contents that were involved in those depictions<sup>34</sup>.

The term *mamsam* signifies raw flesh often invoking the mental imagery of wild animals’ appetite. A glaring instance of this tradition of understanding desire would be the end number of Malayalam films, especially in the 80s and 90s, where rape scenes were often symbolized under the visuals of wild animals hunting down their prey and enjoying their meal by licking over the

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<sup>33</sup> *Op.cit.* FN 19

<sup>34</sup> For instance Azhikkode in his essay considers Venmani Kavitha – referring to the tradition of erotic poetry that assumed the proportions of a movement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Keralam with simple and natural poetic diction in place of Sanskritised "Manipravaalam" on the one hand and pure Malayalam songs on the other – as emerged from the authors’ intentions for a time pass. Responding to the argument that obscene depictions were part and parcel of earlier literature he replied that “one mistake doesn’t eliminate another. If it existed in the past it cannot sufficiently justify its existence in the present . . . [A]lso those exemptions cannot stand as examples for the traditional literature” (Azhikkode 1952, 28 & 43-44).

bloodstained flesh. Sex involved in a romantic relation, on the other hand, were (and, on several occasions, still are) often symbolized by turning the camera to some picturesque background of flowers, gardens or snow clad mountains. The symbolism of these depictions captures sex in negative and positive implications respectively although sex as such is visibly absent on most of these occasions. Apart from soft touches those visuals are completely devoid of any reference to nudity. This is not to discount the huge collection of cinemas produced under the banner of ‘soft-porn’ films. However they do not enter into the mainstream public sphere discussions and the erotic depictions that fill their canvass are indubitably granted meaning as pornographic. The same is applicable to novels and stories labeled as pulp fictions. For instance in the foreword to his anthology of fictions that contained open depictions of sex Raghunathan Nair excuses himself from selecting pulp fictions written by authors like Pamman and Rajan Chinnangath by saying that “my topic is not pornography. My aim is to capture and examine the strategies deployed by writers who have taken the natural desire for sex to the levels of spirituality” (Nair 2003, 6.)<sup>35</sup>.

The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century debates surrounding social realism provided first hand opportunities for the public sphere to retrospectively reflect upon questions of progress. The challenge of *Shabdangal* against the “norms of morality and standards of respectability”<sup>36</sup> invited the focus of the public sphere back to questions of body, sex, desire, erotic pleasure, propriety and respectability and so on. Apart from the fact that the novella itself was grounded on the subtleties

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<sup>35</sup>Navaneetha Maruthur in her unpublished thesis has undertaken an interesting discussion of the subtle lines that distinguish the ascription of meanings in Keralam to sex as “pornographic” and as an essential part of social realism. See Maruthur (2010).

<sup>36</sup> *Op.cit.* FN 24.

of local heteronormativity its reception raised serious questions about the formation of a common ground for contestations between the different concerns that simultaneously inhabited the public sphere. This common ground, marked by heteronormativised principles of morality, remained beyond the vicinities of contestations about the liberties of representational practices. In other words the contestations shared the common ground of heteronormativity while debating about practices of representation. Post the controversy of *Shabdhangal* and *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal* the writers were extremely careful in adhering to the borders between social realism and pornography. In the context of the text written by Azhikkode, as was several others' in the period, despite the fact that their basic anxiety pertained to the ongoing controversy after the publication of *shabdangal* the novelette was mentioned only in passing by the author as part of his generic criticism against progressive literature in this regard (Azhikkode 1952, 42). His book did not mention, in any elaborate sense, homosexuality as an issue to be discussed in this regard. This was not just because, as I said earlier, homosexuality in Basheer's *Shabdangal* was already a resolved issue; the main reason was that homosexuality was defined as a social problem, a social sore that should be discussed outside the boundaries of questions concerning obscenity or eroticity.

The reform paradigm of progress and the newly invented progressive potential of social realism were inevitably the predominant frames within which these multiple contestations occurred. There was a clear division of the public along these lines and, ever since, the synonymous existence of the mental imageries of desire and flesh, or the excess of desire outside the allowed limits of monogamy, continued to be deployed in different forms as an effective tool to regulate the representational practices. The figure of prostitute and economic inequalities

continued to be the effective tool for progressive writers to claim for their realistic approach and to challenge the dominant moral scripts. However these realism enterprises were not beyond the dominant regulatory modes constantly articulated in the public sphere through different forms and representations were restricted to the accepted modes of depictions. Later the production of popular art especially Malayalam films in the 70s and the 80s were absorbed into this larger trends unleashed by the earlier debates. Tales of exploitation as a result of economic inequalities and invasion of women's bodies, especially women of a lower class, were recurring themes in the area of cultural production.

### **Intertextuality**

*Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights; directed by I.V. Sasi) released in 1978 was a film that openly reclaimed the legacy of social realism in Malayalam literature of the 40s. A comparatively open depiction of a prostitute's life against her economic and poor family backgrounds the film ran into packed theatres. At the time of its release the film was heavily criticized for its "indecent exposures" and for being "responsible for launching soft-porn cinema as a *genre* in India" (Maruthur 2011, 274). The insightful account of Maruthur draws from the circulation and reception of this film in different time periods and in different contexts and the challenge it raises against any essentialised understanding of the structuring logic of the regional public sphere. While this remains so, on the other hand, the film represents the logical structure of a public morality that has indeed learned to remain silent about issues that are, by definition, outside the boundaries of heteronormativity. In one of the scenes in this film Rajamma (Raji), the central character performed by Seema in her debut role, openly expresses her fascination for the writer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and is shown as reading the novel *Shabdangal*. According to Maruthur this "reference to *Shabdangal* and the creation of a reading prostitute" helps to



“establish the director’s realist, literary credentials even as he is crafting a commercial film” at the same time as “morally uplifting” Raji’s status from that of an ordinary prostitute (2011, 282).

The various effects of its signification emerge from the intertextuality involved in the making of this text revealing closely the paradigm of realism that always straddle the boundaries of pornography and social realism. Maruthur points to a different signification of *Shabdangal* in the film where its reference has been deployed to enhance the image of the film by directly drawing from the progressive realism’s legacy of challenging the local moral realm. In the film we find *Shabdangal* not as a text that was challenged for depicting homoeroticism; by then it was already transformed to a text that challenged the moral values just as the film itself was valued for its realistic content twenty years after its release. Maruthur draws our attention towards the changing overtones of the critiques of the film who initially identified it as merely pornographic and a “shame” for Malayalis before radically shifting towards affirming the film’s realistic and political potentials almost twenty years after its production (2011, 273). The line of distinction between pornography and realism was a rather thin construction built on the local moral foundations. While it remained a fact that *Shabdangal* was a highly controversial text its homoerotic aura was taken away from the centre of its controversy. These abstract, complicated definitions of pornography, social realism and obscenity were not, as already seen, without being contested. Nevertheless they were privileged repositories of a heteronormative moral sense unwilling to concede any space for negotiating homoerotic practices.

This logical structuring of a moral sense invoke serious challenges for the academic understandings that consider both homosexuality and pornography as parallel phenomenon to the

extent they were predominantly considered as threats to the normative, reproductive heterosexuality in a society constantly engaged in reform enterprises. As Dean (2000) in his treatise argues that such understandings are bound to miss the “ideological and other investments that account for the link between them” (132). In the context of Kerala homosexuality was completely out of context from the whole of these debates whereas pornography or obscenity in realism’s representations was heavily contested. In other words those contestations were exclusively reserved for productions that were launched under the banner of realism or progressive writing. Works that were exclusively identified as pornographic were not a subject matter of any serious concern here. They were essentialised as outside the moral frameworks and as shame for ‘our’ society, as was articulated in the early criticism of *Avalude Ravukal* and by Azhikkode in his comments on “obscene literature and/or pornography”. This sheds light upon the complex cultural politics undertaken by public sphere and the multiple ideological circuits through which categories are conferred different implications in different locations and contexts.

The hegemony of heteronormative moral sense that dictated these contestations erased the possibilities of even contesting with any public significance literary works that depicted same sex relations as a theme during this period. At least three Malayalam fictions, published between 1960 and 1990, belonged to the category of openly depicting same sex relations- *Pennu* (Woman) Written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and published in 1968, *Rantu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls) by V.T. Nandakumar in 1975 and *Chandana Marangal* (Sandal trees) by Kamala Das in 1989. These literary representations, although mostly confining homoeroticism to the status of a subplot in their mainstream heteronormative narrations, were still ground breaking enterprises. Despite the overarching tone of normativity these works, especially *Pennu* and

*Chandana marangal*, endeavoured to normalize the simultaneous existence of sexual practices without sufficiently accounting for their homo-hetero divides. Against the prevailing climate of progressive writing these were challenges in an absolute form not only because of their strong homoerotic flavour but also because they emerged from authors who were vanguards of social realism in Malayalam literature.

None of these novels were unconditional depictions of same sex love or practices; on the contrary open depictions of homoerotic relationships were deployed to enhance its image of being an underground or a sideline activity. I have focused on this point in the next section of this chapter while reading the narrative in *Pennu*. The intertextuality of these narratives emerged from their manipulation of the subtle lines between realism and pornography which allowed sufficient room to insert unconventional sexual practices. However their reception in the public arena focused more on the reformative capacities of these narratives against the backdrops of agrarian economy (*Pennu*) and nuclear family structure (*Chandana marangal*). The queerness in their narrativity was more or less completely overlooked in the reception of these fictions. For instance Kamala Das (Madhavikkutty), in whose writings same-sex intimacies and practices were not an uncommon theme even before she wrote *Sandal woods*, was very often read as being “unfeminist” for such occasional references to same sex desire (George 2002, 112). George argues in her paper that this was the common situation that prevailed in the reception of Das’s writings even while “[t]he centrality of sexuality [in her writings] was so commonly accepted that even brief mentions of her work included some comment on her representation of male-female relationships (112). While Das’s writings were widely accepted as exposing women’s

oppression under patriarchal structures her depiction of relations outside the heteronormative/heterosexist models was conveniently kept aside.

In his introduction to a 1997 anthology of modern Malayalam short stories, Satchidanandan, poet, editor and critic in Malayalam, made the following appraisal of Kamala Das's work: "Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das) explores the innermost recesses of the female psyche in her uninhabited portrayals of man-woman and woman-woman relationships" (quoted in George 2002, 117). George observes that "this one phrase inclusion of "woman-woman erotics" is the only serious mention in literary criticism of same-sex dynamics in Das's work" (118). On the other hand Nandakumar's novel, initially published in serial format in the Malayalam magazine *Chitrakarthika* between 1973 and 1974, was commonly accredited as close to pornographic which did not require any further thoughts. Later when this novel was adopted in film format<sup>37</sup> in 1986 "its erotic content was completely removed" (Vanitha and Kidwai 2001, 313). The novel which narrated the story of two young girls in school who fell in love for each other was changed altogether in its film version. The elaborately described sexual scenes and even the explicit theme of love between the girls in the novel were missing from the film which changed the central plot of the story to show the girls running away from the school to avenge their schoolmarm.

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<sup>37</sup> *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (Malayalam film: The migratory bird never cries), released in 1986, directed and written by Padmarajan. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0248755/?ref\\_=fn\\_al\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0248755/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1).

Apparently the film was trying to cash the popularity of the novel which, during its serialized presentation in the magazine, had indeed elicited huge response from the readers<sup>38</sup>. However despite the novel winning popularity among the readers it was not taken for any serious discussion in the mainstream public arenas. In Raghunathan Nair writing in 2003 we find strong reflections of the non-contentious argumentative space that discarded the novel as cheap and junk written by an author “rated as below average” (Nair 2003, 6). The apparent paradox lying behind these formulations signify popularity as a concept manipulated to validate the thin lines of distinction between pornography and social realism; that there was not one definition for popularity. It signified different things in different contexts. The fractured reception of the novel at different levels of public sphere signifies multiple publics scattered across the spaces of culture. However their contestation signified only different reading practices, as opposed to any paradigmatic shift, of which the ideological circuits did not vary from each other in any fundamental manner. In other words the open antagonism between these multiple layers was only at a surface level. Beneath their abstract configurations those ideological foundations consistently worked towards neutralizing and normalizing the disruptive narratives. Thus even

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<sup>38</sup> During the initial episodes of the novel the response column of the magazine was filled with readers responses; whereas the euphoria over the selection of an unconventional theme in a magazine that was intended for the general public was clearly visible this also was a fractured reception. Take for instance this letter from a reader about the novel:

“The epidemic of homosexuality is widely spread in the contemporary western society. Even in India this is publicly and secretly practiced in places like Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta. It is not an isolated incident in Kerala also. Our writers generally do not enter into these territories either due to gaudiness or personal inhibitions. Congratulations to Nandakumar on this occasion” (From *Chittrakarhika*, 1973 June 25).

Responses such as these were coming from readers who generally identified themselves as ‘common men’ filled with distaste for the overarching intellectual enterprises undertaken by social realism. Nevertheless they reflected a space where multiple publics were present at different levels even though their ideological foundations had stark similarities despite variations in their circularities.

while those fictional narratives were widely read they were far from success in initiating any discussions on these lines.

In fact a large number of short stories, novels and poetries were produced during this period from 1940s to the 80s that contained open depictions of alternative sexualities and sexual practices within and outside of heterosexual frameworks. Some of the best short stories written by Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987) and K. Saraswathamma (1919- 1975) concern the double standards of sexuality and other gendered issues entrenched in the social mores of upper caste Malayalis. In his story *Thiruseshippu* (Divine relics)<sup>39</sup> written in 1967 Ayyaneth depicted the story of a nun who possessed quenchless desire for sexual intimacies even after her initiation. In yet another story *Bhramanam* (Revolution)<sup>40</sup>, written by the same author and published in the year 1977, a young woman was depicted as having strong sexual feelings for her female hostel mates whom she seduces one after the other. She eventually commits suicide as a result of her failure to backout from the “unnatural pursuits”. P.G. Johnson in his novelette *Nercha* (Oblation)<sup>41</sup> similarly narrates the story of a nun who desired for a married, worldly life and whose dreams were destructed with her father deciding to offer her services to the church as nun. She finds solace in same sex relations with other sisters inside the same cloister and in masturbation. However these narratives could not initiate any vibrating discussions in the prevailing public sphere of Keralam and there were also other factors at work which conditioned their reception within an already established framework.

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<sup>39</sup> Ayyaneth. 1967. *Thiruseshippu* (Mal: Divine Relics). Sahitya Pravartaka Sahakarana Sangham: Kottayam.

<sup>40</sup> Ayyaneth. 1977. *Bhramanam* [Mal: Revolution]. Sahitya Pravartaka Sahakarana Sangham: Kottayam..

<sup>41</sup> Johnson P G. 1992. *Nercha* [Mal- Oblation]. Media Publications: Kozhikkode.

Whereas those early women writers were either brutally attacked or were completely marginalized for entering into what was predominantly considered as a sphere reserved exclusively for males, works that depicted homoerotic themes were also received within an established set of paradigmatic beliefs. The case of Lalithambika is a clear instance for the fate of early women authors. Lalithambika, who wrote the story *Prathikara Devatha* (Goddess of Revenge, 1938) about *Thathrikkutty*<sup>42</sup>, was victimized and attacked by the patriarchal supporters. In a foreword to the collection of her short stories published in 1956<sup>43</sup>, written twenty years after *Prathikara Devatha* was published, Lalithambika remembers in utter dismay the sort of heinous assaults on her personal integrity and freedom to write and express not only on the face of her publishing the story on *Thathrikkutty* but also about her general writing career. “It is forbidden even to mention her [Thathrikkutty] name. Depicting an unchaste Nampoothiri woman as goddess? Why not name her as the devil of revenge?”<sup>44</sup> While the quote above shows the general attitude of hostility against her writing the story about Thathrikkutty, during her writing career she faced criticism even from prominent Malayalam authors like Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and E.V. Krishna Pillai. “She painfully remembered [in her autobiographical notes] the atrociousness of criticism that she confronted from these eminent writers and in the infinite anonymous letters that she received” (Raveendran 2010, 67).

Raveendran also notes how Thakazhi, who was an acclaimed writer during the period and who wrote many stories and fictions that far exceeded the conventional sexual moral structures

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<sup>42</sup> See my commentary on the story in the previous chapter.

<sup>43</sup> *Irupathu Varshathinu Sesham* [Mal: After Twenty Years]. 1956. Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham: Kottayam: pp7-11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid* p. no. 10. Also see the commentary in Raveendran 2010, 62-65.

of the period<sup>45</sup>, attempted to interrogate the ‘moral integrity’ of Lalithambika as a writer through one of his short stories published in the late 50s. In the story titled *Adarsakathmakathwam* (Idealism) “Thakazhi depicted the author [Lalithambika] as an antharjanam [Nampoothiri housewife] who wrote stories as a result of her unsatisfied sexual cravings” (Raveendran 2010, 68)<sup>46</sup>. Similarly Saraswathiamma, another woman author during the period who wrote at considerable length about issues concerning the oppressive patriarchal structures, was “completely sidelined in the name of her feminist orientations” (Joseph 2010, 20). Saraswathiamma’s writings were powerful depictions of women’s oppression in the society questioning such celebrated ideals as chastity, monogamy and so on. In one of her stories the protagonist says, “[W]hat remains here are some of the photos and letters sent to me by some men. I think half of my chastity is already gone through these relationships. I am only half chaste”<sup>47</sup>. Joseph observes that “she [Saraswathiamma] was far ahead of her time in terms of questioning the patriarchal structures. This was precisely the reason why she was so effectively sidelined” (2010, 19).

In her book on how women’s writing is often suppressed in patriarchal societies Joanna Russ shows “polluting” as opposed to “denying female agency” as an effective strategy deployed.

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<sup>45</sup> In the next section of this chapter I have dealt with Thakazhi’s novelette *Pennu* (Woman), which depicted same sex intimacy between two women against the rural agrarian backgrounds, in an elaborate manner.

<sup>46</sup> Later Thakazhi wrote an article in confession of this. See *Thakazhiyute Paschathapam* (Mal: Thakazhi’s confession). In *Kalakaumudi* (1987, March 1): p 11.

<sup>47</sup> From the story *Pathi Pathivrathyam* (Mal: Half chastity, 1965) written by Saraswathiamma. Quoted in Joseph 2010, 17



[T]hat is to promulgate the idea that women make themselves ridiculous by creating art, or that painting or writing is immodest (just as displaying oneself on stage is immodest) and hence impossible for any decent woman, or that creating art shows a woman up as abnormal, neurotic, unpleasant and unlovable. *She wrote it alright -- but she shouldn't have.*

(Russ 1983, 25: Emphasis author's)

The gender politics in Keralam deployed the moral standards of decency of women and their caste positions within the local social order. The criticism against Lalithambika was a reflection of the widespread derision against a (falsely) constructed sexual image of the Nambutiri femininities and masculinities. The predominant image of Nambutiri males as boisterously engaged in looking for sex avenues outside the bodies of their own women or as having turned out to be effeminate figures because of the erosion in the superior status of their community (and thus an erosion in their masculine virilities) in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century guided the general (mis)beliefs about the sexual discontentment of Nambutiri females. The image of Nambutiri housewife (*antharjanam*) letting loose her sexual frustrations through her writings could be held against this backdrop. It should clearly be noted here that all these incidents were happening within the earlier mentioned reform and pedagogic frameworks of progressive realism and there was a strong definitional enterprise at stake to the extent of defining who can write what in terms of the gender identity of the author. That there was a clearly defined field that a woman author was predominantly expected to explore through her writings. Kamala Das was perhaps the only writer who managed to survive through this turbulent environment despite the exclusive depictions of alternative and non heteronormative issues in her writings.

The gender undercurrent was a significant factor in conditioning the reception of works that narrated practices outside the boundaries of heterosexuality. In the context of her

commentaries on Kamala Das's *Sandal trees*, George argues that "homoeroticism is played out differently according to the gender. When men are portrayed as engaged in same sex relationships, this is interpreted as part of sexual license available to men" and when "women indulge in same sex pleasures, it does not always register as sex" (George 2002, 119). These paradigmatic set of beliefs conditioned both the production and reception of works that presented themes of homoeroticism and the larger discursive practices around reformation, realism and pornography laid a strict surveillance over any open, public discussion of art works produced on these lines.

### **Text and context**

In this section I make an attempt to understand how same sex intimacies and practices were represented in social realism literature produced in the post *Shabdangal* period in the second half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. I make an attempt here to deconstruct *Pennu* – a short novel written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, the author commonly known as the Malayalam novelist who "typified the generation of the progressive" (Natarajan and Nelson 1996, 192) and one of the contributors to *Five Bad Stories*. The novella, published in March 1968, despite its open depiction of same sex intimacy was still discussed as a mainstream realism text. The various thematic concerns around pleasure and the reform potentials of literature emerge onto the surface of the production of this text which simultaneously reflects upon the inherent subtleties involved in the sexual politics of this period.

While representation of same sex intimacies was ridden with complexities making any generalization difficult, the particular narrative strategies and reading practices often resulted in

inserting such representations in the dual paradigm of pornography and social realism. Narratives often had to shift their focus towards social, economic and cultural dimensions broadly defined in heteronormative terms even while telling the story of same sex intimacies. This was in order to save from being labeled as pornographic at the same time as exploring the possibilities of realism where the sexual dynamics of body was an essential component to cater to the tastes of the new reader. Thus what would have been otherwise queer narratives, or pornographic in the popular perceptions, often represented other sexualities as deviations from the 'normal' circuits of sexuality. While saying this I, by no means, intend to say that open and unconditional representation of 'other sexualities' could only be counted as subversive. But the various narrative strategies followed by social realism particularly in the second half of the last century reveal how the earlier reform ideologies and the leftist influences of social realism were producing new configurations of body in the public domain. Such narrative praxis and their reception were critical in delimiting the possibilities of transgressions as well as in diffusing the sedimented moral ideologies of progressive modernity.

As I mentioned in the previous section during the period of social realism in Keralam from late 1930s onwards it was not quite uncommon to find references to homoerotic situations in Malayalam literature. Nevertheless there was certain definite narrative praxis that usually accompanied such depictions. Whereas same sex intimacies between women was a more common theme than among men it was more often than not projected upon as constructing images of women with unquenchable amount of sexual desire. Except Kamala Das woman authors who touched upon homoerotic themes were more or less completely absent and except in Basheer who wrote about an accidental sexual encounter between two males there were not

much reference to same sex intimacy between males. George Marangoly in her commentary observes that even in Kamala Das “homoerotic situations were evoked only to be put aside again and again”. According to her Kamala Das consistently transit through these pleasures of disciplining that could easily be interpreted as “ultimately homophobic”. That her fictions were replete with “this backtracking and crisscrossing over into same-sex relationships and back to heterosexuality with the possibility of return left open” (George 2000, 754).

This situation in fact resulted in a neat and uncontested paradigm of realism versus pornography; that the works were either read as authors’ projection of his own desires onto his female characters or that same sex relations were considered as incidental and/or as subserving the mainstream progressive plots of the narration with the former being easily classified as pornographic and the latter falling into the progressive frame of realism. Of those mentioned in the previous section Ayyaneth’s and Johnson’s stories, and to a greater extent Nandakumar’s story as well, were generally interpreted as pornographic and as enterprises suggesting patriarchal depictions of exuberant feminine sexual desires. At the same time works by authors like Thakazhi and Kamala Das were valued for their realistic potentials, and thus progressive, and homoeroticism in their fictional works were often casted underneath their superficial elements of hetero-patriarchy. As I discussed earlier in this chapter the conceptual alignment of texts as pornographic and realistic relieved the mainstream public sphere from any obligation to invoke same sex relation as a major topic to be discussed. This in fact was a rather effective method deployed to turn a blind eye towards the subversive potentials of those fictional works.

While this continued to remain so the production of texts were taking place within this larger framework invoking interesting equations that were of paramount significance to their contemporary socio-cultural context and blending them in order to overcome smooth categorizations. On the one hand pursuits for pleasure were denied any independent existence, unless they were sufficiently embedded within the normative plots and addressed what were predominantly concluded as the most pertinent social concerns. Inserting homoerotic situations on the other hand demanded that such insertions be made under the cover of an overwhelming, even if superficial, heterosexual plot. As George in her article about same sex desire in the autobiography of Kamala Das *My Story* argued that when same-sex desire floods the pages it is often depicted as “indulged in because heterosexual options for sex are closed. This is often the course that female sexuality takes in the South Asian narrative in which lesbian desire is an explicit feature of the story” (George 2000, 754). As in the context of *Shabdangal* progressive and normative concerns revisit the realm of textual production and deny social realism any independent existence.

On the first onset let me clarify that I do not consider text as an unproblematic representation of the context. I also do not simply imagine the relationship between the text and its context as something that is or is not self-evident or as clueing the historical backdrop in any absolute terms. Harold Bloom suggests that “the relation of text to context (as though to bring the historical “background” a little closer) is a false problematic and has produced . . . an illusion of narrative intelligibility. The problematic . . . its stead recognizes text as itself a historical event” (Bloom 2003, 204). Andrew Taylor argues that “the annexation of writers from the historical and social milieus in which they lived and worked serves only to assign to a particular

text a false independence from the rest of the culture, such that text and context have little, if anything, to say to each other . . . [T]he context can have a productive, even if sometimes problematic, relevance to the literary text under discussion” (Taylor 2002, 14).

Nevertheless, as Welleck and Warren has argued, it would still present enormous difficulties if one were to attempt to re-construct the meanings that any text had for its contemporary audience; such an attempt would “merely impoverish it” (Welleck and Warren 1956, 31). The reconstruction of its contemporary implications is precisely intended to make a sense of the context in which the text appeared. The troublesome trajectory in evaluating the text and context relationship in academics have essentially involved such mundane problematics as reducing the text to the biography of the author, for grubbing facts, for not considering the literary value, incorrect reading of materials, not considering the social significance of the material and so on (Ellis 1977, 105; also see Taylor 2002 and Melve 2007). However I presume that the separation of the author from the text and the separation of the context from the text are two different things. They need not be conflated with each other. As John Fiske, on the other hand, has explained about the sociality of cultural artifacts including texts, that, “all meanings of self, of social relations, all the discourses and texts that play such important cultural roles can circulate only in relationship to the social system” (Fiske 2010, 1-2). Also the role of ideological elements in constituting the basic texture of the text cannot be easily overlooked.

While addressing concerns surrounding analysis of literary works, especially in gay/lesbian and queer theoretical works, Steven Seidman (1997) suggests that deconstruction has

been a source of inspiration, especially for queer theory. That “literary texts are viewed as social and political practices, as organized by social and cultural codes, and indeed as social forces that structure identities, social norms and power relations” (147). The categories of knowledge around which they are organized, in turn, structure the way we think and organize our experience.

These linguistic and discursive meanings contribute to the making of social hierarchies. Deconstruction aims to displace or disturb the power of these hierarchies by showing their arbitrary, social and political character . . . It is this rendering of literary analysis into social analysis, of textual critique into social critique, of readings into political practice, of politics into politics of knowledge, that makes deconstruction and queer theory inspired by it an important movement of theory and politics (Seidman 1997, 147).

The question of social realism and the text and context relationship are closely related with each other since the context, by and large, is defined by the prevailing social and political conditions. While saying this I am consciously following the sociality of the text to the point of text mediating the various practices (real and non-real or imaginative) prevalent within the society. This is not to simply follow the argument about a symbolic relation that the author attempt to build, through text, with the social world in order to understand it. Rather text, even without the mediation of the author, is built upon the various discursive paradigms that constitute its contemporary social world.

*Pennu*

In this section I do not intend to look into the politics of reception of this novella in Kerala, rather focusing on how the text was constructed against an argus-eyed public sphere watchful for any possible threats in works of art, especially literature. The mid 1960s onward in Kerala was a period, like in several other locations in India, when there were some active feminist movements that focused on the oppression of women in patriarchal structures. In the previous sections I have already noticed how stories and fictions with a focus on relations outside heteronormativity were very often read either as pornographic or as belonging to realism *genre*. In the case of the latter, non-heterosexual contents in the concerned works were usually rendered insignificant by projecting the heterosexual problematic involved in that work. The local feminist readings often fell into this category where such elements as rape, marital rape and other oppressive forms were treated as saturating points for articulating female oppression in the society. Critiques were even willing to support the questioning of the institution of marriage and “obligation to wifely fidelity” as George in her article on Kamal Das’s writings has argued (George 2000, 734). However from this frame of feminism where ideals such as chastity and wifely obligations were still celebrated, non-heterosexuality was not only often kept outside but was also opposed vehemently. Against this background a text could gather social recognition only by creating occasions and sufficient space for the heteronormative family and/or relations and by leaving ample possibilities for any alternative forms of sexual desire to return to its ‘normal’ forms.

Thakazhi was one of the foremost Malayalam writers belonging to the tradition of early social realism. He won the Jnanapeetam award in 1984 and the Sahitya Academy award in 1957. In 1968 he published a short novel *Pennu* (Woman) which narrated the tale of two young women



who happened to fall into an intimate relationship with each other<sup>48</sup>. Even though the novella had elaborate sequences of sexual intimacy between two women depicted in it, the emerging feminist patterns' interventions opened alternative possibilities of reading it. The new readings focused on the oppression of women articulated in the novel and completely sidelined the sense of homosexuality that it invariably invoked. Sumathi, the protagonist, having abandoned by her husband and later by the protector who was ruthless for her ill fate, happens to fall into an intimate relationship with the concubine (Gaurikkutty) of the latter. The intimacy very soon transforms into a sexual relationship between the two.

So far Gaurikkutty has never experienced how it to be a housewife is. She was never given an opportunity. Should it not the case then that she must be ignorant of how to take care of her husband and administer the household activities? But, there is a taste to be a housewife in every woman's being. Gaurikkutty also had that predilection somewhere within her being in a raw manner. She was not a servant in that house, rather she was the mistress (*Grihanayika*); and she was a wife (*bharya*). There was an obvious specialty with that relation. It was not just a relationship between two women. It was not very easy to assume what kind of relationship existed between the two. . . . It was not rare to see those faces merged into each other in deep kissing in the nook and corner of that house. Sumathi protects Gaurikkutty and she in return takes care of Sumathi. Sumathi does not work only for herself. It is not contract based; rather that relation is based upon love and affection or something even above that. Sumathi thinks that Gaurikkutty should eat well. She shouldn't be careless about herself. Gaurikkutty is also very careful and very eager to feed Sumathi well. It would have been called a husband-wife relation had they been a man and a woman. What will we call it now?<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Thakazhi Sivasankarapillai. 2005 (1968). *Pennu* (Woman). Poorna Publications: Calicut

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*; pp 54-55

In an essay titled "The Burden of English", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak urges that we pay due attention to the "implied reader" of any text. She argues that "[t]he figure of the implied reader is constructed within a consolidated system of cultural representation. The appropriate culture in this context is the one supposedly indigenous to the literature under consideration" (Spivak 1992, 276). The regional public sphere and cultural production are invariably embedded in a mutually reciprocal relationship, to the extent the one constitute and configure the other. However, as opposed to what I have been doing in the previous sections, here I will analyse how the different moral anxieties unleashed in the public realm in the post *Shabdangal* Keralam have effectively regulated and mitigated narratives in the subsequent periods even when they were dealing with subversive and destabilizing plots. The passage quoted above from *Pennu* has a critical role in straightening an otherwise subversive narrative where a relationship established on mutual pleasure is further translated into its economies and the inherent power relations. The dynamism involved in the relationship between two women gets immediately transformed into a mere instance of heterotaxy, where a female supersedes the role of 'husband', albeit embedded within the very same power relations that characterize the familiar husband-wife relationship. The clear demarcations in terms of duties and obligations and their performance within the space of family enfold the narrative of a relationship 'without a name' with heterosexual order. In other words the logic behind the ordering of desires, the 'legitimate' sexualizing of bodies, the conversational practices that reproduce heterosexual order in everyday lives, all recur in the text transforming the incidence of same sex intimacy between Sumathi and Gaurikkutty into one that was accidental, unintentional and disoriented to itself. This, in one sense, is a short cut for the author to avoid questions regarding the immoral and unnatural nature of the relationship being narrated.

The text gathers its legitimacy by reserving spaces inside its narrative so that it could be read as a chain of accidents and absences. The same sex intimacy between the two women, Sumathy and Gaurikkitty, is a result of definite absences. Such a relationship is completely unintentional and is made possible by the series of absences in both of their personal lives. It is precisely in translating the intimacy between the two women into the subsistence economy of their existence, and in describing the transformations from definite vacuums that marked their lives towards a more progressive and morally plausible existence that the narrative assumes the power of a legitimate script. Paraman, the protector, fills the gap in Sumathi's life after Divakaran, who was originally married to Sumathi and who never returned home after one of his regular weekly trips to other places in search of livelihood, although what exists between Sumathi and Paraman is an asexual relation. Sumathi was more frigid with Divakaran because, as she narrates to Gaurikkutty later, for him sex was merely a "rite after dinner whenever he was home"<sup>50</sup>. Paraman's intention is to make Sumathi's life better for reasons that he makes known only towards the end of the novella; what took him to her was his disappointment with Gaurikkutty, the village prostitute, whom he patronized for a long time before shifting his attention to Sumathy. Paraman also works elsewhere (everyone in the village thinks he is located in Bombay or some other distant locations because he visits the village after long intervals sometimes spanning for more than a year) from where he sends regular money orders, first to Gaurikkutty and later to Sumathi.

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*; p.no.40

In the village everyone thinks Paraman as a lewd because of his relation with Gaurikkutty although he had an asexual relationship with her too. Because she was not willing to change her lifestyle, nor to mend her life as Paraman wished, despite all the money orders that were sent, he abandoned Gaurikkutty on one fine morning and approached Sumathi as his new destiny. His providence has a turbulent beginning precisely because an asexual relation was even beyond imagination. Sumathi was still keen to reserve her body for her husband-in-absence despite the privation she and her child experienced. She too subscribed the villagers' beliefs about Paraman. Her skepticism lasted until Paraman left the village filling her with advices on how to live a better life (the main conditions included taking regular baths and eating good food) and the first money order actually came in search of her, in lieu of Gaurikkutty. The latter, having lost her charm and failed to attract clients as she once did, approached Sumathi for financial support in a desperate move. This very soon led to an intimate relationship and they start living together. Both of them being women the neighbours and villagers don't have much to doubt about their relationship.

What attracts Sumathi to Gaurikkutty is her naïveté and inexperience in leading, and ignorance about, a 'normal' family life. The contrast in the ideals that appeal to both of them individually blur in the similarities that mark both of their existence. While for Sumathi chastity is the foremost ideal for a woman, for Gaurikkutty being unchaste is part of her life. Both were abandoned by their previous benefactors and both have a new one – for Sumathi it is Paraman, and for Gaurikkutty it is Sumathi herself. A severely complicated plot the narrative touches vividly upon the political economy of every-day lives and spaces, family life, conjugal expectations and obligations, cultural encounters between people of different class and sex,

negotiations about sexual and asexual intimacies, the construction of effeminate male and female and the masculine female and male, the contrast between the *kulasthree* (the chaste woman) and the *kulata* (the prostitute), the conventional and transgressive erotic spaces and the abstract and feverish desires.

The plot progresses through transitions in both their individual lives; for Sumathi from being an impervious housewife who was never keen to elevate, nor was even concerned about, the material conditions of her family to an active paterfamilias who not only earned money from her work in the paddy fields but also handled the money that she earned and received through money orders (from Paraman) in the most strategic manner. Gaurikkutty, on the other hand, was also changing from a vagrant demimondaine who was always outside the frameworks of family to an active insider of a family where she took care of the whole household activities including cooking, cleaning and so on. Despite her being most unfamiliar with what “a woman does inside her family” the “predisposition inherent in any woman” saves her. In short Gaurikkuty was transforming to a housewife. The narrative inside this text, as specified earlier, definitely involves deliberate detours from its subversive elements thus constantly reminding the reader of the moral implications involved and reclaiming its stature of normalcy. Nevertheless this in no way suggests any weakness on the part of the author while attempting to provide a narrative that shows the possibilities of alternative relations of intimacy. The elements of subversion are still strong in the narrative although it was rendered invisible in its post readings.

Even today Sumathi doesn't belong to another man. But she has become the property of another woman. That woman's name is Gaurikkutty. This woman, Gaurikkutty, has had

relations with hundreds of men. Gaurikkutty has already performed a part of obligations that Divakaran had, being the husband of Sumathi. Is it possible, then, for Sumathi to deny herself as the wife of Divakaran or Gaurikkutty? Being a husband of Sumathi Divakaran had another social obligation- To build a home that is systematic in order to ensure the proper bringing up of the children he has produced- Divakaran couldn't fulfill that also. Then who fulfilled it? Paraman, the one who made Sumathi a good housewife by not only saving her from deprivation but also by guiding her with advices . . . Then who is Sumathi's husband? Is it Divakaran, the one fat guy who tied a *tali* around her neck and produced a child? . . . Who has the courage to say that [Divakaran is her husband]? The society and religion may say so. Is it Gaurikkutty, the coquette who has destroyed many men, their families and at last herself and who, now, has helped a woman for whom the indivisible element of wifeness is lost by showing her the erotic world at least through the backdoor? Is it not possible for her also to claim to be the husband of Sumathi? But today Gaurikkutty has become a wife . . . Does this sufficiently fulfill husband's role? After Divakaran, the father [of her child], and Gaurikkutty, the lover, someone is required to take care of the family- that is Paraman . . . Sumathi's husband is this triad – Paraman, Gaurikkutty and Divakaran<sup>51</sup>.

Here Thakazhi definitely raises the equations above both the monogamous and heterosexual structures. He translates what was (and for most of the Malayali cultural domain it still is as I argue in the next chapter) commonly imagined as a western phenomenon – homosexual relationship – into a pure mechanism of pleasure and desire. For instance the imagination of desire as constantly violating the moral norms recurs in the text which further leads to descriptions where the boundaries between hetero and homo are blurred and negated. Thakazhi does not configure his descriptions amidst such recognized divides nor are his subjects in this novella in any sense lesbians. They are completely embedded in the local cultural geographies. However the laying out of this local has the most significant role in the text since its

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*; pp 57-58

configuration in a univocal moral language retains the shadow over the expression of same sex desire leading to the common conclusion that the author does not render any legitimacy on it. The pleasure mechanisms in the narrative can only operate against the restrictions already imposed on it. Thus even while homoeroticism is consistently projected as a significant event of the story its narrative just devalues its purchase as well.

In the passage above from *Pennu* Thakazhi unambiguously situates sexual pleasure in the realm of Sumathy's relationship with Gaurikkutty. This is ascribed independence even amidst the crowd of descriptions that problematise the many absences in Sumathy's life, the foremost among them being the absence of husband. In fact the author observes Gaurikkutty's position more fit for a wife than a husband indirectly showing that such an intimacy would have been possible even in the presence of a real husband. However there is a retrieval evident in the narrative of its main plot surrounding Sumathy's subjectivity amidst an oppressive patriarchal system. This actually guides the narrative's practice of shifting from questions of desire to questions of subsistence and patterns of oppression in a heteronormative system interchangeably and consistently monitored under a definite tone of moral anxiety. Thus to the common reader the novella simultaneously conveys the impression that desire has always been, and needs to be, interlocked in the pragmatics of individual subsistence and social existence; that pleasure derived from such relationships even while fulfilling one's sexual needs can't be a part of her social existence.

It is at this point that the above quoted passage appears in the text where there is a return to the husband factor in Sumathy's life. The author here intelligently dissipates the attention of the reader to the multiple absences operating in her life, projecting sexual pleasure as just one among them. This brings it back to the meta-narrative of family and conjugality and the multiple obligations involved in it. There is also the narrative of power operating underneath in the novella. The reason why Gaurikkutty has become a wife rather than a husband of Sumathi, despite her primary role in availing sexual pleasure for Sumathi, is because of Sumathi's being the chief provider for the family – both through her work in the paddy fields and the money orders that come in search of her. Gaurikkutty is no longer able to attract clients as she once did and is at the mercy of Sumathi for her livelihood. Sumathi's treatment of Gaurikkutty varies from deep emotional involvement to utmost contempt – something that is characteristic of a husband's treatment of his wife in a conventional family space. There is a stark absence of power in Gaurikkutty for two main reasons; one that she is not familiar with familial space and is not a “completely family woman”<sup>52</sup>, and two that she is economically dependent on Sumathi.

The conventional concept of same sex desire being an ephemeral phenomenon in an individual's lifetime and a 'stage' towards a more matured composure rooted firmly in heterosexuality recurs partially in this novella as well. The abrupt ending of their living together is shown in the novella as a result of the mundane fights between Sumathy and Gaurikkutty; and on one such occasion, Gaurikkutty leaves Sumathy without coming back as she has usually done on all previous occasions. While Gaurikkutty is left Sumathy still fosters her hopes of her return. This leaves the narrative literally with the qualities of subversion where the subjects' feelings

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*; p.no. 44.



and impressions in a same sex relation are narrated with complete disregard for the social attitudes. Also there is a sense of normalcy attached to both Gaurikkutty's and Sumathy's impressions about their intimacy. The reason for their separation is placed outside the circuits of desire. Yet the narrative quickly returns to Sumathy's self-complacency about her "unchaste body" categorizing sex in a same sex relationship as not sex at all<sup>53</sup>. Another element of paramount significance in straightening the narrative is the immaculateness with which it projects ideals considered sacred in a monogamous, heteronormative system.

In fact the main focus of the novella, as several others produced during the period, is on the question of chastity of women placed under oppressive conditions. The anxiety concerning Sumathy's chastity operates as the singular edifice around which the whole plot is organized. Almost all descriptions of sexual encounters in the novella are reserved for Gaurikkutty who is presented as the unchaste other of the chaste Sumathy. Towards the end of the novel when Paraman returns from Bombay they decide to live in a brother-sister relation. Sumathy later discards Divakaran, her husband, who also comes back to her after the long absence from her life. "There is no place for a brother and a husband in this house . . . I have no need for a husband"<sup>54</sup>. Thus the narrative justifies the presence of both Gaurikkutty and Paraman in Sumathy's life in ways that do not in any way challenge Sumathy's moral composure. While the erotic descriptions of her relation with Gaurikkutty is observed as 'no sex at all' the presence of Paraman is resolved by settling them in an asexual relationship. This is primarily because, both these being outside the bond of marital relationship, sex with another woman could easily

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*; p.no. 81.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*; p.no. 96.

have labeled as momentary without affecting questions of chastity whereas sex with a man who is not a husband could invoke serious questions about the very moral base of the text.

However beneath these superficial elements which are evidently put in place for the purpose of eluding the surveillance mechanisms formally and informally circulating in the public domain the text alluded, sometimes even explicitly signified, the possibilities of establishing relations outside the frameworks of both monogamy and heterosexuality. The narrative in the text presents to the common reader unremarkable markers of passage from economic and moral uncertainties to a more progressive and morally binding disposition of the protagonist. In the end it opens the possibility of reading it as a text of women's freedom from the patriarchal oppression by leaving Sumathy without a heterosexual partner. Even though it was not she but Paraman who decides the nature of their relationship Sumathy equally exercises her agency by refusing to give any space for her returning husband. However this resolution of the many uncertainties within a purely heteronormative frame added with the several detours to normalcy enables the text to cleverly avoid the label of either subversive or pornographic.

According to Butler every time an individual, a text or a group practices, thinks or presents sex and gender in such a way as to undermine, erode the heterosexist paradigms then there is a possibility of subversion (Butler 1990). As already stated Thakazhi's short novel *Pennu* possessed all the qualities of a subversive text that evidently described patterns of desire from outside the usual heterosexist perspectives. Apart from all other factors described so far the text does not endeavour to define the relationship between the two women implicitly reading it as

inherent in the daily social intercourses. Thus it does not subscribe to the dominant heterosexist accounts which rely on the very process of defining, labeling and regulating “different” sexualities (Krupat 2001, 45-46; also see Connell 1995, Ingraham 1996, 1999, 2005 and Hacking 2002). However it is noticeable that the novella was still received as a normal realism literature and, unlike *Shabdangal* or even *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal*, *Pennu* failed to invoke much discussion or even debates in the Malayali public sphere. Although the novella captured average readership, and thus not a complete flop, it was neither questioned or challenged for the non normative patterns of desire it depicted nor was any of its thematic concerns openly endorsed. This was not because transgression and/or its representation was being accepted as an essential phenomenon of social existence. Rather such presence was already resolved as having a pedagogic value to the extent it made such ‘social sores’ visible and singled out heterosexual morality’s significance in a modern progressive society. Above all *Pennu* has remained successful in presenting the progressive, heterosexual part in its story as the main plot to the reader even while a substantial part of it remained in depicting the relationship between the two women. Reading *Pennu* beyond the postmodernist disdain for the authorial intentions helps one extricate a solid script of subversion that nevertheless failed to capture wide attention or to stir any discussions about desire outside normativity.

## **Conclusion**

The democratization of body and experience in the field of literature could not challenge, in any considerable manner, the fundamental moral economies and patriarchal structures. Beyond the impact of the democratization condition remained in place that constantly regulated expressions of desire. Nevertheless these restrictions were rather thin to the extent that body was

re-invoked in new terms and phrases in this *genre* of social realism where a shift in morality was visibly taking place. This shift transformed the place of body as the focus of narrations as opposed to describing it as serving the larger social purposes although it still took more time to free itself from the economic concerns as such. The provocative intersections of class, caste, gender, sexuality and representational technologies in the writings of the realists in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century were heavily contested on the grounds of remaining insensitive to the question of reforming the society. It was precisely from the midst of debates around questions of representation in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Keralam that a “disembodied public subject” (Lee 1992, 406) that is outside the frame of any moral challenges was constituted. We see how the erstwhile reform centric notions of body and subjectivity revisited this space of debates that counterpoised, and remained considerably successful in mitigating, the challenges raised by the progressive realists’ camp. However beyond the stark disagreements and the deeply implicit concurrencies that led this space there were also other complexities involved. My analysis has mainly attempted to bring to focus how differently monogamy and heterosexuality were contested in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and onwards.

On the one hand the movement from debates around tradition to representation had resulted in removing completely the question of traditional (non monogamous) practices from debates in the public sphere. This in effect resulted in accepting reform definitions of tradition as true and genuine and considered outside the purview of controversies. The resurrection of Thathrikkutty in the common social imagery and her glorification in the 1930s and 40s was an event that had taken place against this backdrop. As mentioned in the previous chapter new readings of Thathrikkutty had started emerging from this period after the long silence that

followed her trial in 1905. Despite those new readings<sup>55</sup> being radically different from her own statements there was a total consensus in acknowledging the ‘sexual anarchy’ of tradition in opposition to which Thathrikkutty’s image was built. This was primarily because there was a shift in the attention of the public sphere in this period towards other questions concerning the emergence of modernity in Keralam and tradition was already a resolved issue.

On the other hand the attempts made by the leftist, progressive *genre* of social realism to displace body as a locus of sexual discipline replaced the old forms of ‘non-normative’ practices with non-heteronormative ones. The reinvention of reform centric notions of subjectivity, and their clash with *new* writings, in the public sphere resulted in redefining subjectivity in opposition to non-heterosexual practices. This space was critical in determining the modes and forms of representing homoeroticism and same sex intimacies in the subsequent periods. Their capacity to destabilize and subvert the gender and moral regimes was effectively mitigated by bringing them down to the status of subplot. In the critics of *Shabdangal*, and later even *Pennu*, we see consistent attempts to rationalize such practices as forms of deviance and as threats to reform enterprises. The realism’s invention of subject models outside the conventional caste and class equations was quite impactful in Malayalam literature, and in other forms of representations at large, in subsequent periods. There was also a space where non-heterosexual practices were gathering visibility.

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<sup>55</sup> Lalithambika’s and VT’s writings covered in the previous chapter, for instance, which were fundamental in building Thathrikkutty’s image in modern Keralam.

However such visibility was heavily restricted and the reform narratives had succeeded in determining such practices' location outside the frameworks of desire and pleasure and even outside questions concerning obscenity in literature. The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century debates were crucial in essentialising the social exteriority of same sex practices the expressions of which, whether in literature or other art forms, could be negotiated, debated and discussed only with regard to their social implications. The endangering capacity of such practices for the local moral regime and progressive subjectivities was a recurring theme projected against them. The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century debates had far reaching implications in Keralam. I have attempted in this chapter to put the complexities of representing body as an agent capable of subverting and destabilizing the conventional models of sex and desire in an analytical framework. We have already seen the thin lines of distinction between pornography and "natural sex" (between opposite sexes) – a minute elaboration of the earlier scheme of love without sex – revisiting the 21<sup>st</sup> century critics' writings. The complexities involved in assigning positive and negative meanings for sex are however still absent in the context of depicting practices outside heteronormativity.

Such practices are by default categorized as outside the local moral frameworks. In other words both the negative and positive allocation of "normal sex" involving men and women in representations has implications for pleasure at different levels, albeit again defined in terms of social sanctions. Nevertheless there was a level playing field determined commonly for projecting same sex intimacies in representations as well as for negotiating them in the public domain. This was consistently working even behind such groundbreaking enterprises as *Shabdangal*, *Pennu* and later *Sandal trees*. With this I do not intend to argue that open and unconditional depictions can only be counted as subversive. On the contrary, as I have already

mentioned in the chapter, such works were significant and impactful for projecting models of intimacies outside the conventional norms. However their reception in the public domain and the strategies deployed by authors to escape public vigilances help us understand the nuances of postcolonial modernity in Keralam.

In the making of *Pennu* we identify the subtleties involved in representing other forms of desire. The lines of distinction between realism *genre* of writings and pornographic writings are well manipulated in the narrative by adhering to the economies of desire. In the post mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Malayali public sphere there is a near absolute silence about homosexuality despite it being a strong subtheme, sometimes even as the main plot as we saw in the context of *Rantu Penkuttikal* by Nandakumar and novels and stories of authors like Ayyaneth and Johnson. This was mainly because the Malayali public sphere had already arrived at the conclusion that homosexuality was a ‘social sore’ during the contentions that followed the publication of *Shabdangal* in the late 1940s. Later, in the post 1990s, as I will attempt to show in the next chapter, the progressive connotations of economic inequalities in the early realism *genre* were to revisit the public domain with apparent contradictions. I will show that a blend of early reformation concerns and leftist progressive realism is in excess in the contemporary to counter the emerging gay/lesbian identity politics. Simultaneously progressive morality prevails as an overwhelming concept regulating notions of desire.

## Chapter 4

### Canons of Desire: Sexual Morality and Homosexuality in 21st century Keralam

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*I came to know about these places when I was in college. I was not very sure as to what exactly happens in these places although everyone seemed to know of their existence. For us terms like flute and kuntan<sup>1</sup> were part of our daily vocabulary. But then I had my first sexual encounter . . . I then knew what happens there and the implications of those terms. Once you know that this exists and have experienced it then you see it everywhere or you will look for it wherever you go. The feeling of shame shudders through me sometimes. However since then I never missed an opportunity to come here although I know it is very risky.*

Vipin<sup>2</sup>- Interview<sup>3</sup>

#### Introduction

The language of reformation has indeed governed the memory practices where the past often appears as a site never to be retrieved. One immediate outcome of this is that it turns the future into the teleology of progress. Within this frame the contemporary is deliberately kept separate from the past, held accountable for the future and is thus defined as the only site of the

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<sup>1</sup> Common derogatory terms for male homosexuals in Keralam.

<sup>2</sup> All names of interviewees in this chapter are pseudonyms

<sup>3</sup> I have spent three years, from 2008 to 2011, in different parts of Keralam for the fieldwork of my Ph D. I frequented spaces that were used by people to search for same sex partners. I selected, for the purposes of my study, cruising spots in three districts namely Thiruvananthapuram – the capital city and lying in the southern part of the region, Thrissur – located in the central part and Kozhikode in the northern part. My personally belonging to this region was considerably useful, mainly in terms of sharing the same mother tongue, Malayalam, with these individuals.



'real'. Incorporating progress into a daily vocabulary had been an inherent part of the project of colonial modernity. This required intense campaigning that not only idealize progress but also construct a life-world of values and practices. In this chapter I attempt to pitch my arguments on a different level. While the mainframe of the thesis around sexual morality in the public sphere of Keralam is continued in this chapter I also make an attempt to explore how this regulate same sex intimacies and subjects who indulge in same sex practices at the most micro level.

I borrow from Nancy Fraser's observation that participation in the public sphere, which in the modern societies has been gathering the form of a theatre, "is enacted through the medium of talk" (Fraser 1992). The predominant language of sexual morality centered around reformation and progress, while on the one hand, continues to permeate the contemporary modern public sphere, on the other hand, has also has important manifestations at the level of daily language used by sexual subjects. The realm of values, closely associated with body and its representation, is consistently foregrounded in the public domain of Keralam in order to configure its specific regional existence and as a signifier of its regional modernity. This had lent itself to an expanded discourse of morality where the life-world practices are framed and shaped accordingly. The hegemony of this language of morality continues to persist even against the backdrop of globalization and the drastic changes it has been causing in the material realm of lives.

I focus on the deployment of this language on a level that is different from the standard gay/lesbian activism or the transnational same sex subject. Using both critical ethnography and textual readings I make an attempt here to identify how the earlier anxieties concerning the local

moral realm revisit the contemporary both in the form of writings produced in the public domain as well as in the daily vocabulary of same sex subjects. I have focused on clandestine same sex intimacies – practices and relations and the subjects who are involved in such practices; how they make a different use of the language of progressive sexual morality simultaneously deploying the politics of monogamy, heterosexuality and reproductive family in their day to day existence. I also attempt to initiate a discussion of how subversion could assume different forms by not only destabilizing the standard moral norms but also by making non-heteronormative practices a familiar event of cultural existence.

Using critical ethnography<sup>4</sup> of some of the major cruising sites in the region I focus on the middle ground between conformity and transgression trudging by these subjects to pursue their homoerotic desires. The constitution of these intermediate spaces is a symbolically rich field filled with metonyms of sexual acts and subjects outside the normative frame, acts of subversion, resistance and, at the same time, conformation to the dominant gender and moral beliefs. In this introduction I discuss the larger theoretical paradigms charting the general academic understanding of this area. In the next section I explore the use of social semiosis by individuals pursuing hidden same sex desires and examine the space of metonymy and metaphors surrounding these practices in Keralam. In the third section the politics of family and reproduction around the question of homosexuality is analysed in order to understand the larger cultural politics of modernity in Keralam. At this point I shall return to my original discussion

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<sup>4</sup> Critical and reflexive ethnography engages with meanings, social practices and material relations at the same time as accounting for the researcher's positionality (Naples 2003; Madison 2005; Harvey 1990). Critical ethnography disrupts the tendency to objectify and silence, and allows the less visible subjects to become more apparent (Behar 1993).

concerning the deployment of the progressive politics of sexual morality in the public sphere of Kerala.

The abstract continuities between the life-world of the clandestine, male same sex subjects and the sedimented notions of morality not only show the close link that exist between the public and the private but also tell us the subtleties involved in the constitution of their subjectivities. It is precisely through these subtleties that they escape the surveillance apparatus, thus turning their existence into a case of subversion, at the same time as reproducing the hegemonic ideas of heteronormativity. As Johnson stated, “subjectivities are produced, not given, and are therefore the objects of inquiry, not the premises or starting points” (Johnson 1986, 6). Nevertheless coming across the invisibility of these otherwise most visible subjects was the most dynamic moment that led me to engage with this whole research. I realized that their outward semblance is constructed upon the thin lines of distinction between ‘normal’ and ‘deviant’ identities. Their language was filled with tropes borrowed from the standard moral lexicon used in the public sphere. It was precisely this moment that induced me to work through the history of this vocabulary and to engage with this abstract entity called sexual morality that continues to sweep across the cultural spectrum of this region.

My use of ‘subjects’ here includes the anonymous and invisible bodies who come under the recently invented epidemiological term MSM – Men who have Sex with Men – as part of medical efforts to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS especially in Third World countries. Seabrook advocates, in Indian and other similar contexts, the use of MSM over other terms like gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer as these terms are inherently Western. For him “to impose

such categories – except upon a small minority who have been much influenced by Western gay experiences – is to bring alien concepts to the people involved” and it would be “arrogant and disregarding for other cultures” (Seabrook 1999, v). Whereas concerns about reading ‘Indian sexuality’ or sexualities with the help of Western theories are not quite uncommon, to imagine its reverse would be equally problematic. That is, an Indian sexuality or an Indian sexual self that is quite distinct from its western counterparts. As John and Nair articulated, “the very conception of the other of the west as being something to which western concepts do not apply (or only as an act of violation from which one must be redeemed) is itself a western legacy” (1998, 6). Hence attempts to understand subjectivities in the context of same sex desire have to be theorized amidst constructions of transnational homosexual subjects, such as gay and lesbian, informed by cultural differences. While the former results in the “flattening” of categories “erasing the differences and nuances among same-sex desiring peoples” in the non-West (Collins 2005, 182), the latter tends to “lead to dehistoricized and exoticized depictions of the non-Western other” (Hindley 2001, 117).

Further, I situate same sex relations and practices amidst experiences that characterise an ambivalent (Chatterjee 1993) and “uneven modernity” (John and Nair 1998, 7). Using critical postcolonial historiography, I revisit the meanings of same sex desire and its practices as subversion in Keralam. I focus on male deviant subjects in the cruising spaces in Keralam. I argue that the construction of sexual subjectivity implicit in the metaphoric *flute* complicates our understanding of the differences between behaviour and subjectivity. The popular metonyms for homosexual subjects, the essential and pre conceived symbols of deviance and the inside/outside strategies deployed by these subjects are discussed in the paper against the context of the moral

discourse. As Leeuwen has argued that the representation of and the knowledge that it draws upon about some aspect of reality stands within the pluralities of framework that a discourse provides for (2008, 3-8). The site of homosexuality and its representation in Keralam is filled by systems of knowledge that articulate itself consistently through newer technologies of gender. Despite the common parlance which connects *flute* – the passive male homosexual – with oral sex and a passive role in male to male intercourse, the chapter illustrates how the social stigma associated with these subjects cut across the active and passive divide often attributed to non western locales. I identify men, commonly conceptualized as MSM, as subjects who skillfully contrive their own master plans to retain their dissidence from common gender beliefs. I discuss the local social regulatory modes in the form of a politics of reproduction and the strategies commonly deployed by these subjects to straddle the middle ground between spaces of subversion and heteronormative structures.

Theories about the expansion of an “existing Western category” by focusing on “the rapid changes in the lifestyles and an identity politics” (Altman 1996: 8; see also Altman 2001 & 1999; Hall 1994) are usually contradicted with the “heterogeneous understandings” of homosexual persons that exist in non-Western societies (Jackson 1997:55). In the context of the “modern gay” and the “traditional *Kothey*” models in Hyderabad in south India, Reddy argues that the post-Foucauldian distinctions between 19<sup>th</sup> century homosexual and 20<sup>th</sup> century gay, and between subjectivity and behaviour have tended “to elide the receptive/penetrative sexual distinction so common in parts of Latin America and Asia” (Reddy 2004: 48)<sup>5</sup>. Reddy stresses the “trans-local” nature of gay subjectivities that disproves “the universal gay identity . . . and an

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<sup>5</sup> See also Jackson 1997, Hindley 2001, Kulick 1998; Carillo 1999.

explicit non-universal, local particularity” (2004:149). In her work on gay hosts in the tourist district of Mallate, Philippines, Collins argues that:

“[T]ransnational analyses provide an alternative to globalization approaches; they shift the emphasis away from Western mobility and its consequences and consider sexualities as the product of a hybrid reworking of identities, languages, and desires (2005:189).

The dynamics of the interaction between the subject and local social regulatory apparatuses are often ignored in the literature. The implicit subversive potential of certain practices is often replaced by the subjects’ interaction with the transnational citizens – Western, or west oriented, gays and foreign tourists. Whereas the local is inherently located amidst transnational networks it is also a terrain constituted by different social, historical and political processes which merit analysis of its own.

Major contemporary theorists refuse to conceptualise sexual relations in terms of regulatory practices (Glick 2000; Sawicki 1991) in order to stress the freedom of sexual expression (Echols 1992; Vance 1992; Rubin 1992). They argue that “to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate relations of domination”, providing the logical framework to understand “destabilizing practices” (Butler 1990, 30-31). Nevertheless, I argue that an understanding of subversion should account for the local shades, the regulatory modes of which are further stabilized or destabilized as a result of these subversive practices apart from considerably influencing the nature of these subversive bodies and practices itself. It further throws light on the different modalities of power in a non-western cultural terrain rather than re-articulating repression from a different vantage point. Such circuits are still embedded in the postcoloniality of the region, the systems of knowledge and the moral technologies that

consistently produce the ‘normalizing effect’ even against the backdrop of subversive practices. I maintain that unless present practices and perceptions are contextualised against this past its significance in constituting the contemporary cannot be fully captured. Such an analysis is also important to understand bodies and practices that subvert a predominantly unilateral gender order.

Field documentation and interviews with those who regularly visit the cruising spaces are the main tools of my analysis in this chapter. In all three districts my initial contact with them was established through outreach field workers in the local Non- Government Organisations (NGO) engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention activities. Although in a general rubric the subjects I am dealing with come under the category of MSM, I am not using the term in this paper as it brings them under a pre-fixed category and, above all, many of those who I met have never crossed their lines with any NGO mainly resulting from a deliberate attempt to keep their distance from such public activities. My personally belonging to this region was considerably useful, mainly in terms of sharing the same mother tongue, Malayalam, with these individuals. I have mainly followed the theoretical frame and practices associated with critical ethnography in order to establish a closer link with the world of clandestine same sex intimacies and practices in Kerala. Critical and reflexive ethnography engages with meanings, social practices and material relations at the same time as accounting for the researcher’s positionality (Naples 2003; Madison 2005; Harvey 1990). Critical ethnography disrupts the tendency to objectify and silence, and allows the less visible subjects to become more apparent (Behar 1993).

The considerable amount of time spent in cruising spaces in different parts of Keralam with subjects who visit these spaces has helped me to build confidence among them and has resulted in many informal but insightful conversations with them. I have also used participant/non participant methods to observe the field in order to fully understand the technologies of communication between these subjects and strategies that are deployed to escape the social and institutional surveillance methods. I carried out unstructured, in-depth, formal and informal interviews during my fieldwork. Taped interviews were very rare since the presence of any device to record interviews were found to be discomfoting on most occasions. On all occasions I remained open with my interviewees telling them about the purpose of my being there and the nature of my research. Basically the interview schedule was a flexible one and my questions were crafted on the basis of ongoing discussions. Mostly the questions were points of departure to initiate a discussion in order to allow the interviewees to fashion their themes of interest and to talk about what seemed to be relevant for them. The general framework for the themes discussed in the interviews consisted of 1) narratives of same sex experiences, 2) social hostility and acts of violence committed against transgressive desires and practices, 3) their reactions to the metaphors signifying their own body and desires inside and outside the spaces of transgression, 4) understandings of the emerging gay politics, 5) social control, 6) their being at their homes with their family, at their workplace etc., and 7) their modus operandi and relations within and outside the spaces of transgression.

***Aberrant subjectivities: the Flute in local settings and cruising spaces***

*“It is easy to identify them.*



*They will always keep a distance from the crowd. Or they will often imagine the crowd as a wild animal that can turn violent at any moment. Inside their mind they always have to swing a whip for self protection. From their face they would appear as reclusive. But with full of love deep inside...”<sup>6</sup>*

I briefly introduce the social and spatial dynamics of the act of cruising<sup>7</sup> and the trope of *flute* in Keralam. Cruising takes place in public areas within the crowds of the urban-semi urban locales where men with homosexual inclinations come in search of same sex partners. Such spaces are present amidst almost all urban centres in Keralam. These are not places secluded from public use or which lie beyond the reach of surveillance apparatuses. The spaces are crowded, with a specific meaning assigned according to the functions they perform during the busy hours. These could be market centres, bus stations, public parks, public toilets, town squares and *maidans*<sup>8</sup>, areas adjacent to campuses of crowded religious structures like temples and churches and large scale parking places, staircases of large and crowded buildings and dark corners under bridges. The crowd provides ample room for the subject to remain unnoticed while seeking a suitable partner. The knowledge about the availability of such a space remains a secret with men who have initiated the use of it, although their existence, their ‘anti-social’ nature is no longer a secret. These places fall well within measures of social control and are located amidst notions that reiterate the sanctity of moral codes and the dangers of transgressions.

Cruising spaces by their very nature defy spatial categorizations. It transforms the meaning of a public utility to serve one of the most private activities of human life. It converts a

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<sup>6</sup> From the short story *Swavargam* [Same sex] written by V. Dileep. D C books: Kottayam (2008).

<sup>7</sup> This is not meant to be an exclusive analysis of cruising – the act, or even cruising spaces. For an elaborate description of cruising spaces in the general Indian context please see Kuku-Siemons 2008, and Seabrook 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Open places, especially grounds.

space into an intense one where “the excitement of breaking the law converges with a myriad of techniques of social control. . . . [A] leaky vulnerable place where exclusion of the unwanted voyeur, the violent gay basher, the security guard and the policemen is almost impossible” (Plummer 2002, 300; see also Woodhead 1995). In the case of Keralam where there are hardly any sex venues<sup>9</sup> new spaces have to be discovered, identified, explored, and sometimes, generated from the already existing ones towards this purpose. This is especially the case with those entering into same sex relations and/or practices as it is not only not accepted but such practices are resisted, opposed vehemently and sometimes suppressed brutally<sup>10</sup>. Such men use the opportunity afforded by urban spaces to remain anonymous amidst an impersonal crowd.

They have to spend a great amount of time loitering around these places in the evening hours looking for a partner or partners to have sex with. The number of single men in parks and city squares increases around sunset as married couples, families and young cross sex couples start leaving the place. Loitering is necessary and they have to take special care to look detached since that will help protect them against being noticed by policemen, security guards or other outsiders. By their very nature these spaces are used for cruising by people from various

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<sup>9</sup> This is true for both heterosexual and homosexual encounters. Various TV forums (Asianet, *Nammal Tammil*, August 1, 2009; Kairali TV, *Cross Fire*, July 17, 2009) and Malayalam magazines have addressed a rising trend of incidents of sexual violence and harassment against women in public places in Keralam, connecting it to the absence of red light areas. With regard to same sex activities, such debates take a different turn, questioning the moral, ethical, political and scientific correctness of such practices (all editions of *Mathrubhoomi* in March, April and May in 2006 have dealt with this issue. Other main Malayalam magazines include *Pacchakkuthira*, *Malayalam*, and *Deepika*. These magazines are very popular in Keralam. They often consist of writings/discussions by local intellectuals and subject experts on serious issues).

<sup>10</sup> Violence against homosexuals in Keralam goes beyond the regime of law and is more informal than formal in nature. See Deepa (2005) on unorganised and invisible forms of violence against same sex desiring people, especially in the context of lesbian relations, in Keralam.

backgrounds cutting across class, and rural and urban differences. A wide range of men engage in such practices, including migrant labourers from neighbouring districts, people who work in local shops, in factories or in government offices away from the city/township areas, visitors passing by the city from other districts and locales farther from the urban centre and students from local colleges. During cruising the only difference that matters is one's sexual preference.

Male homosexuals in Keralam are widely known under the derogative term *flute*. A *flute* has an inconspicuous existence both within and outside cruising spaces to the extent it refers to a male body who indulges in a particular sexual practice rather than to a specific individual. The word *flute* is both a metonym and a metaphor simultaneously. The association with a musical instrument of this name invokes the metonym of certain sexual practice. Metaphorically this usage refer to abstract desires, pursuits for pleasure, or to deviance (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Kovecses 2005). *Flute* signifies the passive male homosexual who indulges in oral sex. The figure of a *flute* is an abstract imaginary whose attributes are, nevertheless, coherent within a local cultural setting. These attributes are often performed by subjects at defined temporal and physical spaces to communicate their sexual orientation whenever a possible partner is within the vicinity. Outside this time and space and beyond such a communicative purpose these attributes enable the subject to transcend the scope and limits of being a *flute* precisely by abandoning them. The male homosexual subject has the option to stand outside the ambit of a sexual label and to pass in and out of the social corridors without inviting unnecessary hazards through the manipulation of such pre determined attributes.

The epigraph of this section suggests markers associated with men whose 'masculinity', sexual desires and practices are often cast under doubt – that make their identification 'easy'.

Their physical presence, especially in places that are public, can invite hostile reactions from the homophobic surroundings. The circulation and apprehension of these markers – such as the feminine symbols in a male body and vice versa, certain sexual practices etc., – are commonly apprehended as signs of transgression. Such bodies remain outside the standard models of a virile heterosexual and reproductive, masculinity and a passive femininity.

*People have a definite imagination of a flute. I can survive without carrying that label until I demonstrate those featured behaviour patterns or until my sexual act is seen by any of my friends or neighbours. I have to fix a searching look on my face once I am inside this space and that is the first signal to convey an impression about me to one crossing my ways here. Then together with tarrying footsteps, a typical way of walking, a momentary eye contact made in the split of a second and with turning back to see the other's response (a positive response would be the other also turns back to see me) the initial round of making a contact gets over. This has to be repeated two or three times before we exchange smiles and start talking with each other. Outside this space I consciously regulate my habits and I don't give any chance to anyone to have a doubt about me. Even then there were several occasions when I got partners outside this space. This is especially so while traveling in crowded buses. Suppose my hands accidentally touched someone's body and he did not move away, as he was supposed to do, then I take it as a positive response to an accidental invitation from my part and make my initial moves. But then it requires only soft and mild touches on the other's body that would seem both accidental and intentional.*

Sunil-Interview

Reminiscences of previous confrontations, stories of invitations with and without success, descriptions of sexual acts and stories of violence, were part and parcel of our conversations. Sunil's account highlights the manipulation of such nuanced differences that exist between behaviour, action, identity and subjectivity. That there are different ways of expressing same sex

desire and that such hidden expressions are acknowledged and responded to, itself challenges the dominant male scripts and makes gender non conformity a familiar event in daily social life. Same sex encounters in this respect cut beyond public sites used for cruising. Crowded public transportations, empty cinema halls when the shows are in progress, dark corners inside porn movie theatres, all are potential spaces to express and practice their same sex desires. *Flute* as a label imposed on the subject for the deviant sexual acts he indulges in could well be interpreted as symptomatic of a repressive regime. Nevertheless the subjects exercise agency and build relations, sometimes intimate relations, and find spaces to express their same sex desires.

Fox (1995) illustrates a typology of bisexuality in which male individuals who take only the active role during sex with another male consider themselves heterosexuals. A *flute* is the counterpart of these active male bisexuals who assumes a passive role during sexual encounters. Such classifications, on the basis of roles assumed during sexual intercourse, are a well documented area in sexuality studies<sup>11</sup>. Taylor (1978) and Carrier (1995) show how effeminate men – “maricones” – who assume passive roles are heavily stigmatized in Mexican society whereas “mayates” (the active males) are a non-stigmatized identity. In the context of the Dominican Republic De Moya and Garcia (1996) identify a similar relationship between masculinity and bisexuality, where they conclude that bi-eroticism, bisexual behavior, and bisexuality seem to be associated with the social construction of masculinity and gender-role relationships among Dominican males (e.g. a man is a man even if he has sex with another man as long as he is the one penetrating and not assuming the passive role). However the dynamics associated with these local cultural topographies are likely to be missed if one only takes the

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<sup>11</sup> See for instance Carillo 1999, Ligouri et al 1996, De Moya and Garcia 1996, Taylor 1978 and Carrier 1995.

traditional gender-role based interpretations of sexual identities as the basis of one's analysis such as these authors do.

If stigma is taken as a criterion to understand dichotomous distinctions between passive and active in male homosexual expressions in Western and non western locales, the context of Keralam provides a different experience. Whereas the common imagination of *flute* justifies the penetrative/receptive, active/passive dichotomies often attributed to same-sex erotic behaviour in these locales, the larger context complicates such a simplified understanding altogether. *I come here to give [kudukkan], not to take [edukkan]*, or vice versa, is a common expression used to communicate their sexual preferences between two individuals having come across for the first time inside the cruising space. But outside these spaces both of them have to take precautions not to let others know of their activities. Aneesh, one of my interviewees, said that the only reason for his wife to divorce him was that he was found having sex with other males.

*They [wife's relatives] found me having sex with other males on two or three occasions and they told my wife although she never discussed with me about this. On the third occasion she left house and only after two or three weeks when I visited her at my in-law's house did she tell me what her problem was. I never knew that my wife had information about this as she never told me before she left. She was quite adamant about her decision although she never revealed the actual reason to my parents or other relatives.*

Aneesh- Interview

Such stories of divorce cases have a familiar ring in Keralam without a distinction being made between passive and active men; identification with homosexual impulses is enough justification for divorce whether or not the subject husbands assume an active or passive role. Both the *flute*

and his partner, usually called— *kodukkunnavan* (the giver) are stigmatized. This is not to argue against the familiar dichotomy of the giver and the receiver. But such dichotomies are not as simple as they are often imagined. They have different meanings within certain cultural contexts of modernity. Here, in Keralam, for instance, same sex desiring people are stigmatised despite the practice – passive or active – they often engage in.

*Flute* is not a traditional category as the other ones are (such as the maricones and mayates mentioned above). The usage of *flute* representing homosexuals is absent from visual and print records, fiction and stories and when the term came into being is hard to say. The metaphor captures the main form in the local light talks of male gatherings of different age groups. The sissiest mannerisms of speech and other gestures of a *flute* are quite often emulated, mimicked and performed on each other in order to mock, a homophile in the locality whose sexual foibles are widely bruited with a voyeuristic flavour. The simplest understanding of a *flute* signifies the passive male homosexual who has indisposed himself from the modern gender order, its disciplined forms of life and the masculine and feminine etiquettes in order to support his ‘unnatural’ sexual desires. The *flute* is imaginable only through his affectations, wanderings and amorous gestures in public spaces to the pedestrians and the ‘abhorrent’ sexual practices he engages in.

Unlike hijras, a traditional category of transgender/transsexual people in India, *flute* does not signify a way of life. Hijras, also known as Aravanis in Tamil Nadu (Mahalingam 2003, 490) – a neighbouring state of Keralam in South India – have a significant presence in South India, especially in the metropolitan cities of Bangalore and Hyderabad besides Tamil Nadu. A

traditional category of ‘hermaphrodites’ and found in most parts of India hijras are, nevertheless, almost completely absent in the public spaces in Keralam. Jereena- a Malayali hijra living in Bangalore who authored *Oru Malayali Hijrayude Atmakata* (Autobiography of a Malayali Hijra) stated during an interview published in the Mathrubhumi weekly that

*[T]he society of Keralam entails brutal treatment on those who do not confirm to the gender expectations. . . . For one year after joining Hijras here in Bangalore I did not go to my native place in Keralam. I was so scared. . . . I can live in Keralam only as a man which I never can and whose feelings are still alien to me. So I prefer to live in Bangalore only. . . .*<sup>12</sup>

However later Jereena, whose real name is Suresh, also learned to go in and out of the local socialities in Kozhikkode, her home district in the northern part of Keralam. In a film directed by Prem Kalliath in 1990 we see how Jereena transforms herself to a pleasant-looking young man in jeans and with a stylish, long haircut, goes by train to her home in Keralam. He tells us that he comes home every three months. Home is a house he had built two years before, in which his sister resides with her two small children. He continued to maintain this practice of adopting and abandoning his hijra identity at Bangalore and Keralam respectively until his autobiography was published in the year 2005 and his photographs were released in the newspapers.

Thus even hijras have to adopt the practice of going in and out of the normal sociality in Keralam. However as a sexual subject both hijra and *flute* show different dynamics in their construction. The cultural politics of gender and sexuality operate in significantly different ways in their cases. As opposed to the *flute* one important feature of hijras is their visibility in the

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<sup>12</sup> *A Malayalee Hijra Speaks* in Mathrubhumi Weekly October 23, 2005. Also see Pauline Kolenda’s review of the short film on Jereena made in 1991 (Kolenda 1993).



social and cultural environment in the varied contexts within the subcontinent apart from the traditional and religious significance ascribed on them<sup>13</sup>. The counter stereotypic gender patterns of hijras are often openly celebrated as a mark of their identity. They not only bring transvestitism and gender non conformity before the naked eyes of the society but also make alternate sexual ways of being a part and parcel of everyday reality (Nanda 1990; Busby 2000). *Flute*, on the other hand, signify an abstract imagery of both a sexually deviant persona and an abhorrent sexual practice. As opposed to hijras *flute* has minimal visibilities and the very foundation of the cultural imagery is its hidden nature. *Flute* can violate the stereotypes of gender non conformity at any moment despite its ‘normal’ appearance in the immediate preceding moments. Besides, in the case of *flute*, it is associated more with performance and the display of signs at fixed temporal and spatial settings.

As I mentioned earlier the figure of *flute* signifies the dynamics associated with the very process of metonymizing certain acts and practices, and subjects involved in it. Krippendorff (2006) maintains that metonyms provide the basis for a human-centred theory of signs. Thus “the part that is chosen to be a metonym of its whole is not arbitrary. Such a part must be in some sense outstanding, easily recognizable, and play a unique role in the whole” (43). Metonymy in general is considered as a process of association between signs in which a sign symbolically represents an object or a concept of which sign is a smaller part. Recognizing that signs can refer to objects or concepts much greater than themselves can help us to understand that the meanings

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<sup>13</sup> To read more about the ritualistic performances associated with hijras and their traditional significance in Indian society in general see Nanda (1990). The wider connotation of the existence of this group and the gendered semiotics behind the performances are recorded in Busby (2000). Vinay Lal in an article on the cultural politics of sexuality around hijras shows how their construction is still mediated through colonial/oriental categories of sexuality (Lal 1999).

of signs can be complex and varied. In addition to the immediate meaning of an individual sign (“denotative”) a sign may also bear a much wider range (“connotative”) of associations (Krippendorff 2006). Metonyms of an object or a concept emerge from particular cultural dispositions and reflect the social and moral location of that particular object within the given social and cultural order. Flute literally means a musical instrument played by mouth. In Keralam the word flute carries a more familiar ring than its Malayalam equivalent *Oodakkuzhal*. Playing the instrument flute in Malayalam is ‘flute *vayikkal*’. *Vayikkal* – literally meaning reading – is an act conducted through the mouth. Thus the sexual act that the male homosexual indulges in, oral sex/fellatio, is matched, with a lousier connotation, with the act of playing the instrument flute. Here the sexual act, the most abhorrent in the popular imagination of body and sex, becomes the main sign to mark the deviant persona. This sort of association blends the subject with the sexual act both becoming a synonym for each other.

The term *vayikkal* has a special connotation in this context. As already mentioned, the trope *flute* doesn’t have a familiar presence in visual or print media in Keralam yet it is widespread. Nevertheless wherever references are made, particularly in the visual media and mimicry and comedy shows, to the effeminate gestures of the male homosexual the term *vayikkal* is invoked to remind the spectator of the ‘abominated’ sexual practice. In fact expressions of physical desires – both homo and hetero – under, sometimes vulgar, terms by comedians are quite common in films, mimicry shows, dramas and other stage performances in Keralam. Although the term *flute* does not figure in this *genre* of comedy, hints, sometimes including the sexually explicit term *vayikkal*, or actions of playing flute etc., are provided to remind the spectator of the actual figure referred to. Comedy in this respect reduces ‘the

homosexual' to sexual behaviours, acts and practices, denouncing and quarantining it substantially in the society.

Nevertheless the metonymic space of *flute* and its representation in comedies opens the possibilities for a counter reading wherein such representations could be understood as an implicit interrogation of gender and its pervasive influence over social systems and individuals. The comedies allow the spectator to be familiar with behavioural patterns which deviate from the gendered associations of the performer. The mockeries, both during the local male banter and in the comic representations, articulate the breaking of links between the “biologically determined categories and socially constructed conceptions of sex” (Scott 2005:74-75). However in Keralam, these comedies are merely passing gestures and, more importantly, statements of a deviant persona. In his study on homosexuality in modern Japan, McLelland (2000) concludes that its visibility in Japanese media such as comic books, women's magazines, TV dramas and talk-shows, movies and popular fiction has not created the space for individuals expressing lesbian or gay identities to come out in actual life. Such a reading, however, is again oriented towards imagining explicit identity categories as essentially subversive and tends to discount subterranean practices that exist regardless of available spaces. The social imaginative of a *flute* does not only make gender non conformity part and parcel of a local common sense but it also generates its own space by challenging the rigid regulatory settings.

The figure of a *flute* cuts across the parameters of male sexual subjectivity and signifies a deviant morphology incited by, and reproducing and popularizing in turn, notions of deviant sexual acts, gendered behaviour, and what is masculine and feminine. Halperin in his analysis of

pre modern texts in ancient and medieval Greece identifies a deviant morphology in terms of anatomical descriptions of the male body that displays overt feminine characteristics and does not fit within the dominant versions of masculine behaviour (2002:41-43). Deviant sexual acts can exist in society practiced by subjects who do not come within the purview of such deviant morphologies. The distinction that Halperin provides between deviant morphology and subjectivity is by exploring the difference between the narrativisation of experience and anatomy in a given context. Thus the seemingly masculine 'straight' male who indulges in homosexual behavior considerably disappointing his own wife signifies a deviant subjectivity whereas a *kinaedo* who displays in open 'the effeminate male' is a deviant morphology.

Thus, according to Halperin, morphology and subjectivity are two different things (2002:42). The site of *flute* combines morphological, and also physiognomic, characteristics to construct a deviant subjectivity. Such descriptions emerge from perceptions already available and popular knowledge invariably constructed out of essential understandings of the body and its desires and ethical and moral desirabilities of (gendered) personal demeanor. *Flute*, in other words, constitutes the imagined body where the stereotypical perceptions about (male) gender deviance in the society are celebrated. It represents the dynamics behind the transmission and circulation of such stereotypes without the help of sophisticated technological mediums. It functions as a typical illustration of transgressive desires, the inept and feckless male persona unfit for leading a family life which runs counter to, and functions as the *other* of, the notions of the ideal masculine. The figure, symbolic and imaginary at the same time, is an un-systematic representation of the deviant subject unable to retain itself within the spatial and temporal order of the socio-cultural system. It brings together the possible negative elements in the male body

and conceptions of the ideal masculine being contaminated by the former. As Edelman puts it in his account of narratives on male homosexuality in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe “the presumptively heterosexual spectator’s unobserved surveillance of a sexual encounter between men” could be one source for the production of such metaphors (1993:167).

### **The politics of family, reproduction and progress**

The social imaginative of *flute* has also spatial connotations. The subject’s expressions of same sex desire are largely invisible and not easily identifiable in the local surroundings. Inside the cruising spaces most visitors, if not all, who are searching for a partner from the same sex do not carry an explicit homosexual identity. It includes people who are married and with children, those who plan to marry; I found few men resisting marriage as an option in life. Regardless of their bisexual nature and, sometimes, a fixed ‘non-deviant’ identity – and this applies to most of them – they get in and out of their hetero and homo relationships and desires. This is more a strategy to avoid social surveillance mechanisms, than that it must be seen as making a choice between the two types of desires (or objects, in terms of gender) at different points of time. The lives of these individuals revolve around strategies of camouflage, acts of conformity, the performance of and giving life to the deviant interior other at definite spaces and times. The inside/outside locations of the self reflect not only adherence to the social norms but also resistance against them. These shifting locations signify the “mechanisms of meaning production” and the “exterior or outside that defines the subject’s own interior boundaries and corporeal surfaces” (Fuss 1991:3).

The inside/outside locations of these subjects refer to their lives in the familial and subversive spaces respectively. Outside the cruising spaces their daily lives involve negotiations

of different kinds with their immediate environment. Most significantly these involve a reassuring of their heterosexual identity. Despite the pluralities in strategies deployed and negotiations engaged with, they reflect an enthusiastic dodging of any expressions of same sex desire. Thus the socially constructed stereotypes of same sex desire are also equally violated by subjects indulging in clandestine intimacies. These stereotypes are converted into a language of signs and body gestures to be deployed inside a safe place in order to communicate what desire motivates them. However outside the safeness of these spaces they wear a heterosexual identity. They strive to head a familial space which apparently is the most popular sign of ‘manhood’ in Keralam<sup>14</sup>. Being married and leading one’s own family is a primary condition to remain unnoticed. On several occasions the respondents said that marriage provided them the veil behind which they could pursue their homoerotic inclinations<sup>15</sup>. This brings us back to the now familiar repercussions of closeted same sex desires. Nonetheless such an unmarked and forgotten existence is the first step towards entering the corridors of ‘normalcy’ and to prove one’s worth in life.

Sajju is aged 32, married and has a child. He works as a construction labourer for a daily wage of two hundred rupees. He is a regular visitor to the *Thekkinkadu maidan*, a famous cruising site in the middle of the city in Thrissur.

*I am not quite happy with this which is more like an addiction and I have always felt, and still feel, like I am violating all basic moral principles. But I am helpless. I was caught on*

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<sup>14</sup> For a thorough examination of what is commonly considered as the common and idealized life cycle trajectories of men in Keralam see Osella and Osella (1999 and 2000)..

<sup>15</sup> My respondents included subjects who were open activists and despite their activism also tried to remain unnoticed in the society.

*three occasions by the police when I was brutally tortured and they kept me inside the lockup for whole nights. Once I was also caught by the temple guards who man this place. They chased me until the main road outside the maidan. They caught me there and then dragged me amidst the public who thought that the local youngsters have caught a pickpocket in action. They too joined the authorities and I was cruelly beaten. Fortunately for me there was no one who identified me and my face was saved. Back in my home I felt ashamed to face my wife and child and I decided to abandon my deviant thoughts and not to come to this place again. But I couldn't resist my temptations and I consulted a psychiatrist. But all his efforts to straighten me produced no result and at last he advised me not to think too much about what I do not wish to be a part of mine (that is my homosexual fantasies) since that can even harm my mental balance. Now I think only about my family.*

Sajju- Inteerview

Sajju still comes to this place, has partners or finds one from the crowd, and they leave searching for dark spaces within or outside the city. But, according to his own definition, he is no longer concerned about his desires.

*I have to take enough precaution so that my family and my friends in my locality [a remote village which is far from the urban cruising area that he visits often] do not come to know about this. In my village we have regular jokes that often include those about flutes and I indeed participate in such enterprises. Whereas I know I myself am one, such participation helps me keep my identity underground. . . I know I am not fully normal although I appear to be one and that is precisely what is needed.*

Ibid

Most of those who visit cruising spaces belong to the lower and lower middle classes. With the emergence of modern technologies such as computers and internet, educated men belonging to the middle or upper classes can avoid the hassles involved in being physically present in a public space. Joseph is a medical representative working in Cochin. A constant presence in the cyber chatting spaces under a pseudonym he searches for partners mainly in these chat rooms and other

virtual spaces. He calls himself a bisexual although he said that is just a secret and he can't let his family, friends and colleagues know about this.

*I know I have to marry and in fact my marriage is fixed with a girl with whom I have been in love for the last three years. I can't disclose 'this' to her either and as long as I am not indulging in sex with another woman I am faithful to her. Having sex with a man is not something she needs to be bothered about, although I know, I can't reveal these things to her for that can harm our relation and I indeed love her very much. . . [W]hen I have sex with another man that gives me the utmost pleasure. But pleasure is not life and there are other more serious considerations that we need to account for.*

Joseph- Interview

If for Sajju homosexuality is the hallmark of abnormality for Joseph it stands as a symbol of pleasure. Nevertheless both feel obliged by the dutiful aspects of heteronormative standards of the society. Sajju and Joseph are not exceptional in this regard. Throughout my interviews and conversations with subjects this oscillation between pleasure and duty, faith and deviance, normal and abnormal were quite apparent. This applied to men from all classes. Such a wavering between conflicting values is part of a common parlance whenever the topic is discussed. Shaji, a teacher in a local engineering college in Kozhikkode – a district in the northern part of Keralam, who is a frequent visitor of these spaces, puts it thus:

*Our society need to be developed a lot before it can accept homosexuality or bisexuality as just another choice that is open to anyone. In the West it is possible because they are fully developed and there is no need for them to bother about such issues. On the scale of progress they have reached the other end whereas we are not even half way through it.*

Shaji- Interview



Thus for Shaji, sexual freedom and material progress are linked to each other in a close knit relationship. Apparently his statement was a justification for adopting a heterosexual identity outside the cruising space. The location of these subjectivities is embedded in a law- medicine-moral circuit that functions through the multiple paradigms of criminalizing and normalizing the deviant subjects. The melting pot of heterosexual morality connects these diverging links through ideas of sex and gender, family and marriage, normal and abnormal, pleasure and deviance, progress and moral decadence. The subject has to very often adopt the shield provided by the semiotics of the display of same sex and heterosex desire in order to shift between hetero and homo desires and practices. This also helps in affirming a non ambiguous identity. Simulation of cross gender features becomes the mark and sign of a body with same sex desires. It displays the unique assembly of biologically driven desires and socially constructed norms of gender.

### **The contemporary textual space**

As we have already seen print has a privileged role in the cultural context of Keralam and in building the regional/ national space from the very beginning of its modern times. This is the very reason I chose to build this thesis on texts in print form more than anything else as they literally access every nook and corner of social existence and, most importantly, are simultaneously equally accessed by a huge section of population. Within the region itself this predominance of print is often discussed both as a matter of pride as high subscription to print media is also a mark of higher literacy rates and as a specific cultural disposition unique to Keralam while comparing with other Indian states. In an article on the history of development debates in Keralam the authors bring out this point thus:

Does 'Keralam' and the 'Malayali' define themselves through printing blocks? . . . As the neighboring state which invokes the jealousy of Tamilians, as the model that can be emulated by Latin America, as CIA's persistent nightmare do we weave ourselves again and again through print? In short are we a paper-country?

(Sreekumar and Sanjeev 2003: 2).

Print definitely is a site where the sphere of moral is *prima facie* addressed as the most significant element in constituting the progressive and nationalistic space of the region. This have produced and been reproducing the orientalist versions of sexual discipline. At the centre of this discourse lie notions of monogamy and heteronormativity, progress and cultural decadence. Within this frame homosexuality is exoticised and is made a symbol of cultural degeneracy. While the contemporary is flooded with literature produced to address homosexuality as a central issue it is precisely the age old categories of heterosexual morality that regulate clandestine same sex subjectivities. The metonymy and the discourse of signs directly translate, deploy and manipulate, sometimes with subversive effect, the public and common understandings of sacred and profane. They attempt to subvert, and reproduce in the process, the system of binaries that sustains the discourse of progressive heterosexual morality. These binaries broadly include those that exist between masculine and feminine, normative and non normative, homo and hetero, normal and abnormal, and between civilized and degenerated.

In this section I return to print in the current social settings to understand how the subjective notions, that we have already seen in the previous section of this chapter, of sexuality are those that have already become a central element of the regional moral discourse. There has been an unprecedented boom in the production of literature in the contemporary settings that

directly addresses homosexuality as a central issue. As opposed to literature produced at the heights of the movement towards social realism in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards the new text is framed more in a political form than in cultural- fictional form. Thus while the political language of realism is continued in the current writings there is a radical change in terms of producing theoretically and politically informed commentaries to both oppose and sustain the colonially constructed regional moral sphere.

This has literally brought the older concerns of reform movement back to the centre of cultural contestations in the contemporary. The perennial concerns around reproductive, monogamous family and of ensuring sexual discipline on the part of the citizen subject revisit the site of homosexuality in the current context. In other words the configuration of region in the language of morality has confronted a crisis situation with the emergence of the gay/lesbian discourse. The transnational nature of this discourse and its influence on sexuality activism in Keralam have brought questions of degeneracy back to its cultural sites. Whereas depicting liberal sexuality in the language of decadence goes considerably uncontested in the current context the source of this new discourse, that is the west, becomes that hallmark of that degeneracy. Thus there are certain circularities involved in this space of argumentation, a point to which I shall return later in this section.

The construction of a superficial layer of identity by the clandestine homosexual subject in the cruising spaces is rooted within popular perceptions concerning family and gender. It is precisely within the dynamics of the shifting morphologies and sexual identities of these subjects that gender stereotypes and questions of progressive morality are inserted. They establish a direct

link with popular expressions concerning gender non conformity and non normative sex. In fact, in Keralam, it is not uncommon to find popular expressions relating homosexuality forthrightly with medical disorders, unnatural relations, and with questions of culture. In a book, claimed to be a pioneering attempt to investigate the rising trends of lesbian suicides in Keralam, the author has conducted interviews with people from different walks of life including local feminist leaders, writers, medical practitioners and advocates (Sebastian 2004). The book was a collection of articles published by the same author in the year 1998 in a weekly newspaper called *Sameeksha* that was published and circulated in the central region of Keralam. There was a stark similarity in the interviewees' statements concerning homosexual. Most of them shared the view that homosexual desires and practices are unnatural, immoral and abnormal (Sebastian 2004, 28-37).

A recurrent theme was the identification of local culture as distinct from Western culture where homosexual relations are possible because of that culture's degeneration. In one of the interviews a well known feminist activist Prof. Sarojini Devi remarked that the presence of homosexuality "in Western culture indicates the problem with those cultural milieus . . . which do not identify sex as divine as we do" (Sebastian 2004, 29-30). Here there is a reverse movement in terms of assigning west as the other of sexual disciplines and civilized modern sexuality that are often celebrated as characterizing the local moral sphere. Nevertheless such a characterization in itself is a construction in the past resulted from the regime of colonialism and reformation enterprises. Foregrounding sexuality through the binaries of divinity and deviance and in the language of cultural degeneracy was a product of the earlier colonial politics. This oriental knowledge is reassigned in the current context effectively reproducing in the process

another major division that eventually work as the driving force in the global grids of sexuality – the division between the east and the west.

Sebastian, the author of the book, foregrounds the different levels of experience associated with class, gender and urban/rural differences of homosexual subjects in Keralam. All the instances of lesbian suicide in Keralam referred to in the book have taken place in the rural geographies of the region and in most of the cases the subjects were financially poor and without much education<sup>16</sup>. According to the author the reason suicides are rare among male homosexual subjects and lesbians living in urban places is because of the physical mobility allowed for the former and the availability of spaces to hide in the urban settings in the latter case (2004, 24-36). The question is not as much pertaining to similarities of experiences of these subjects cutting across class and gender differences. Rather it pertains to the contestation for spaces to pursue same sex practices and intimacies within the socio cultural realm; that such contestations have to address a wide range of issues that remain close to individuals' consciousness at the broader and micro levels.

The statements of interviewees in Sebastian's book are embodiments of the discourse of cultural degeneracy and sexual discipline. Articulating same sex love and homoeroticism in the language of decadence, unnatural and abnormality draws considerably from previous accounts of progressive sexual morality. Drawing from the earlier accounts of representations and contestations around sexual morality and homoeroticism in the public sphere of Keralam narratives in the contemporary reconfigure homosexuality amidst concerns largely touching upon

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<sup>16</sup> This remains the same in yet another path breaking analysis of lesbian suicides published in the year 2005. See Bharadwaj 2005.

questions of cultural decadence and reformation. Raghunathan Nair whom we discussed in the previous chapter in the context of Basheer's novelette *Shabdangal* observes that

Only the term unnatural can characterize homosexual practices and relations. If it was natural god would have created another male, instead of Eve, to resolve the Adam's solitude. . . Homosexual instinct could be innate or acquired. The one who has that innate instinct always takes the initiative for same-sex intercourses. The one who is [thus] persuaded acquires that instinct for same sex love . . . But their desire will always be oriented towards the opposite sex.

Nair 2003, 201.

Nair, in his earlier account on *Shabdangal* specifically and Basheer's stories in general, observes that "Basheer's stories and fictions are filled with descriptions of desire that are disgusting . . . [H]owever, it is precisely the legacies of this abhorrent sexuality that many intelligent newcomers, in the field of Malayalam story writing, have adopted in their stories . . . including Madhavikkutty in her *Chandanamarangal*" (Raghunathan Nair quoted in Scharia 1990, 58). This line of argumentation revisits the contemporary terrains retrospectively by looking back upon representations produced in the past. The meta narrative of heteronormativity, under the wrap of which same sex practices were very often depicted in those fictions gets to be redeployed as a lucid ground to logically insert the 'unnatural' paradigm into the local frameworks. Raghunathan Nair regenerates the common derision in the past for fictions that centered on homosexuality as their theme by focusing on certain generalized points that they simultaneously evoked. That all these works, with the exception of *Shabdangal*, focused on women as their subjects whose sexual discontentments within a heteronormative frame were often projected upon as a major driving factor towards seeking intimacies in same sex relations.

The association of homosexuality with sex/gender non-conformity is visible in the case of female homosexuality as well. Addressing similar questions an author writes that:

[A] close observation of a lesbian team (couple) . . . will definitely tell you that one always assumes an active role and the other a passive role during sexual intercourse. . . . “[T]he one who plays the dominant role, that is the one who is masculine than feminine, definitely has biological problems and is helpless by nature under whose constant pressure the other person agrees for a relationship. Once it starts then this other person will find no escape from it for the “man” in this lesbian relation will often threaten to commit suicide or may respond aggressively to any suggestion for separation.

Koottummal. 2005, 58-60.

The ‘man’ in question here carries that tag because s/he displays the masculine qualities of dominance and aggression and assumes an active role in a sexual relationship. The predominant feminine qualities of the woman in a homosexual relationship save her from being labeled as an ‘actual homosexual’ (Koottummal 2005, 63). The intrusion of femininity into a masculine body and *vice versa* is considered harmful in the view of this author who prefers to locate them in mutually exclusive realms. He argues that “the basic concerns of these movements (including lesbianism and rights for homosexuals) are . . . pleasure and pleasure alone” (Koottummal 2005, 61). These unlimited material pleasures have been made possible by globalization, the author maintains. In its wake bodily pleasures and experiences are extolled (Koottummal 2005, 69). Beyond the diminishing social concerns around class, caste and differences between the rich and poor the author is more unsettled with the unlimited opportunities for sexual pleasure unleashed and envisaged by the discourses associated with globalization. In the context of his discussion on AIDS he states that “AIDS actually is a creation of unlimited sexual desire and lust. The only

way to save oneself from it is to sustain a healthy sexual morality in his/her life. That is, monogamy which has evolved out of the history of sexual transactions should be recognized as a social reality and as the only cultural and sexual backdrop for avoiding this disease” (Koottumal. 2005. 62-63).

There is a shift in the signification of sexual desire in the current critiques from that of admitting it as coherent in the context of male-female relations only to the contexts of same sex love. However such a shift in assigning coherence is deployed to project same sex desire as a case of deviance. There is a definite circularity here in terms of the concerns invoked and how sexual morality is reframed against the emerging queer discourses and discourses of globalization. For instance progress and reformation revisit the contemporary as major concerns reproducing the colonial notions of sexual discipline and non normative sex as the essential framework within which only a discussion of homosexuality is possible. In a recently published edited volume, homosexuality and the emerging queer voices in Keralam are contextualised within an emerging liberal-global paradigm where the economic realm has gained full control over the social and the moral (KEN 2005). The volume opens with the translated version of a chapter about “healthy sexual morality” from Bertrand Russell’s 1929 book “Marriage and Morals”. The volume includes articles from such widely respected and well known (some of them feminist) intellectuals in Keralam as Sara Joseph, Ramanunni, and Dr. Pocker, apart from the main editor KEN himself. The book, as the editor claims in the introduction, is an attempt to problematize the influence of the market on sexual relations and sexuality (KEN 2005, 1-3).



The world of pleasure in this edited volume is exclusively associated with the changing trends of the market within a neo liberal economy (2005, 9-10). Homosexuality is a phenomenon sprung from the material affluence that privileges corporal desire over moral values. Alternative sexual desires are equated in the book to immoral trafficking, pederasty and molestation; all premised upon the endorsement of flesh and (animal) instincts over and upon the social obligations. The pursuits of sexual pleasure beyond the means already provided and accepted by society amounts to transgressing the conditional relation between freedom and progress at the cost of the welfare of the whole society (KEN 2005; 5-10). In yet another account Viju Nair, the author, displaces questions of reformation and pursuits of material pleasure with questions concerning the ethicality of accepting same sex practices. Borrowing from a range of theories including feminism, Marxism and questions about pre modern sexuality Viju, nevertheless, ends up questioning the freewheeling of desires in an age when “sexual discipline is most important” (Nair 2006, 126). According to him

A system which refuses to admit individual tastes, desires and choices for sex should definitely be rejected as meaningless. But should politics of sex be confined to such individual imaginations of sex? In which case how would it deal with such obviously false sexual desires and acts (like pederasty, rape etc.)? (2006, 145).

These texts are embedded in the global grids of body politics when sexual progress and economies of desire clearly violate the older schemas of heteronormativity. The present narratives are mainly intended to produce counter narratives to the transnational discourses of alternative sexuality. In the process the colonial/ orientalist schema of sexual restraints and its direct connection with cultural nationalism, regional identity and moral discipline is

reproduced in the contemporary settings. According to this genre of literature<sup>17</sup> homosexuality brings to sight the freewheeling of sexual desires, and the pursuits of unnatural intimacies, confining individual bodies to carnal pleasures. The authors' positions in these books are marked by a conflict constituted by a humanitarian consideration for the subjects they discuss, as well as an uneasiness in shifting away from the current moral conditions. These texts articulate a site replete with thick descriptions of body, sex, pleasure, natural and unnatural relations. Homosexuality occupies a pivotal place both as a presage of total erosion of the local value structures and as an instance of hedonism.

Most importantly these texts, most of them produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and post 1990s' liberalization era, symbolize a sudden rupture from the tradition of social realism in Malayalam literature and a return to the 19<sup>th</sup> century reformers' dialectics. It is notable that there is a significant absence of materials produced in the form of fictions that deal with same sex desire in the society during the contemporary. The short story *swavargam* (same sex) by Dileep whom I quoted in the previous section was one among the rare exceptions. *Sancharam*, a short film directed by Ligy Pullappally and released in the year 2004, on the other hand dealt with an open lesbian theme that countered the progressive narratives in

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<sup>17</sup> Due to concerns of space I have limited my analysis to these texts; such positions are constantly articulated especially in the context of homosexuality. This has continued even while gay and lesbian discourse and the global discourse of rights have gained considerable momentum especially in the urban geographies of the region. However such advances are highly restricted to the language of rights. In the more common cultural platforms within this public domain writers still struggle to articulate views beyond the colonial binaries between pleasure and duty, progress and degeneracy and so on.

representations in Malayalam<sup>18</sup>. *Sancharam* which literally means journey was a film that attempted to foreground the political side of same sex intimacies and the violence unleashed upon it by the society.

Openly affirming lesbian desire within the cinematic space of Malayalam films *Sancharam* however faced with huge opposition during its screening. Although the film was made in Malayalam it was not commercially released and thus was not available for public viewership inside Keralam. However the film was released and captured wide attention in the first world countries including US, UK, France and Spain. Within India it was available for viewing only at the film festivals and the few public screenings conducted in the different parts, mainly metropolitan cities, of the country. As Ligy, the director of the film and a social worker and lawyer based in US, in an interview states that an occasion of public screening of the film in Keralam itself turned out to be a venue where “there was a lot of vocal opposition to the subject matter of the film. Not necessarily whether it was a good film or not but just heckling along the lines of “You’re trying to turn our kids gay””<sup>19</sup>.

But at that same screening there was actually a large number of the queer community who came. Although they were vocal . . . during the question and answer period after the film, the interesting thing is they came up to me in private to say they were members of the community and thanking me for making the film<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> *Sancharam* (The Journey). Malayalam Short film. Produced and Directed by Ligy Pullappally. Released in October 2004. Distribution by Wolfe Films. [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0470913/?ref\\_=fn\\_tt\\_tt\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0470913/?ref_=fn_tt_tt_1).

<sup>19</sup> “Interview with Ligy Pullappally” conducted on July 12, 2005 by Shauna Swartz and published on the website <http://www.afterellen.com/archive/ellen/People/2005>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

The film, which was apparently an emblem of the radical desire to openly challenge the moral discourse within the region, was widely euphemized as a product of economic materialism and the emerging global language of unfettered desire. The film was definitely restricted to foregrounding the significance of gay/ lesbian identity politics and did not in any way address the multiple ways in which politics of sexuality operated in the region. Even then the film that could have been an inaugural attempt to introduce and familiarize the language of body politics in the cinematic space of Malayalam film industry could not invoke much response due to the label of embodying ‘transnational gay/lesbian desire’ and ‘sexual liberation’ with which it was already received. Also there was not much response to the film on behalf of either the film critics or the local intelligentsia as it was not released in the theatres in Keralam. This had aggravated the common perception that the film (or even such films) was merely an offshoot of metropolitan instincts which evidently lacked any sense of regional sentiments. Such a discourse effectively exoticizes not only efforts to break the silence and make visible unconventional sexual forms but also patterns of same sex desire and same sex subjects.

The locally produced texts have been literally reproducing the progressive narratives of fear of cultural degeneracy in their opposition to the identity discourse and forms of alternative sexuality. What emerges out of these texts is not a common theme but a plurality of concerns that gives rise to questions related with the market and the economy versus the realm of moral values which are seen diametrically opposed to each other. These are not texts meant to reproduce the common social understandings of deviance. They are

part of a wider debate among the local intellectuals on questions involving sex, body and the social, as well as the modern and post modern culture and economics. While their common grounds of departure is the local common sense and while they position the local within the global cultural and economic transactions these writings lay emphasis upon the cultural specificity of their local context. The body emerges as the prime locale for an immediate reflection of these anxieties. The structural associations of the body in the form of family and gender relations are perceived as symbols of the local values structures that contain its essence. As one of my respondents, Ajith in Thiruvananthapuram who works in a local automobile shop, said, that

*I have to confess that for me these things (marriage, masculine behaviour etc.,) are just superficial although this superficiality not only protects my whole life but it provides me with the necessary emotional support. This (having sex with a male partner) gives me temporary pleasure although I can't help being allured towards it almost every day. I can't live with a man, I just want to have sex with one and that's it.*

Ajith- Interview

## **Conclusion**

The opposition to global forms of materiality has reintroduced in the current settings the colonial language of cultural degeneracy. The questions of desire, body and pleasure are accounted as inevitable forms of that materiality where resistance to the language of sexual liberation and identity politics assumes the form of protecting the local against the global. Narratives of progress, reproduced in the contemporary under the belief that they provide better logical frameworks than those in the past, in effect have circumvented the language of realism and engage in redefining the region through the language of sexual morality. Attempts to counter the hegemony of this moral language have resulted in the production of representations and

narratives using standard gay/lesbian vocabulary like in the case of the film *Sancharam* and/or restricting such movements to the sphere of law and NGO activism. While both these *genre* of texts raise their claims in the building of a progressive society they both equally leave behind the possibilities opened by social realism in the past to inaugurate a new language of subversion in the world of representations in Malayalam.

This situation has led to the production of two predominant layers in the regional public sphere those are mutually opposing but simultaneously claiming for more progressive. However those who support alternative sexual forms still continue to be a minor section in the society. The homophobic narratives of progress and cultural decadence have considerably succeeded in labelling those proponents as upper classist, metropolitan aliens. There is also a significant absence of any attempt to explore the heterogeneous sources in the society that reproduce notions of sexual morality as a standard apparatus to regulate subjectivities. While both these narratives mostly assume non-fictional forms narratives of same sex desire and/or alternative sexuality seldom finds any space in the popular media. Hence articles that support legislation of same sex relations, resist the hegemony of the discourse of morality, that contemplate on the rising incidents of lesbian suicides and so on often appear in intellectual elite magazines such as *Mathrubhumi* and *Pacchakuthira*. On the other hand narratives of morality appear in all possible forms of media besides its recurrence through the infinite sites of social interactions.

It is precisely against this return of colonial categories to the contemporary realms of sexuality that the inside/outside paradigm and the life - world practices of the hidden same sex subject open the different possibilities of reading. One has to admit that the transit between the

familial and subversive spaces is an arbitrary project of the subject with same sex desire, intended towards deceiving the moral eye. However in doing so he reproduces the same conditions that he violates so often. A major part of this emerges from the subject's understanding of himself constituted through a set of meanings concerning moral and amoral, gender and identity; this is compounded by ideas of deviance and a sense of alienation. The subject constantly negotiates the different configurations of these elements which he experiences as exterior to his existence. They articulate the political, economic, cultural, religious and scientific perceptions that substantiate and regularize the moral, gender order in the society. The transgressive practices, embedded within the larger politics of modernity, challenge the dominant gender regime by synthesizing the abnormal with the normal in daily social life. According to Zarilli practices present an active and embodied doing and are

. . . intersections where personal, social and cosmological experiences and realities are negotiated. To examine a practice is to examine these multiple sets of relationships and experiences . . . Practices always exist within and simultaneously create histories. Likewise a practice is not a discourse, but implicit in any practice are one or more discourses and perhaps paradigms through which the experience of practice might be reflected upon and possibly explained (Zarilli 1998, 5-13).

The textuality around deviant desires re-articulates the commonsense binary between tradition and modernity. The daily life experiences of the homosexual subject articulate the depth of this commonsense. Nevertheless the narrators in my research exercise their agency by simultaneously resisting the local hegemonies as well as transnational ideas, especially those of an emerging gay identity politics. The subjects' indispositions to admit same sex practices as part of their life should be seen as evolving from their subterranean life. Hiding this from social surveillance apparatuses should be seen as an agency rather than as an expression of

“powerlessness” (Seabrook 1999, 126). The problematic and elusive location of these subjects within progressive discourses allows one to segregate their experiences and bodies from the local frameworks of self and subjectivity. Such frameworks are rooted within culturally idealized life trajectories, common perceptions of femininity and masculinity and the monogamous heteronormative family, constantly feeding into the dominant versions of sexual morality.

The *flute* and the anonymous male subject with same sex desire in cruising spaces in contemporary Keralam articulate a complex site loaded with meanings afforded by the meta-narratives of family, reproduction and progress as also with counter positionings of body and desire. They simultaneously enact and violate the predominant and preexisting social narratives about body and space. The acts of transgression afford symbolically decoding exercises mediated by the regulatory power of these discursive spaces. The male subject with same sex desires assembles in his body the predominant markers of gender, while simultaneously subverting their social and spatial boundaries. The performativity associated with *flute* is primarily linked to the simulation of feminine qualities. The constant shifting of the subject’s body between subversive and normal spaces makes gender an imitating process – imitating the masculine, through duties and obligations, as well as the feminine, in its sexual passivity and forms of behaviour. Rather than cloning gender archetypes, such practices collapse the gender regimes, loosen their rigid boundaries and explore the possibilities of body and desire. Their location reflects the ambivalence of being in and out of the local regulatory apparatuses. By conforming to local gender norms and moral expectations such bodies and practices constitute at the same time a parallel and ulterior world of deviant sexualities that are embedded within the local trajectories of modernity.



## Conclusion

### **Modernity, Sexual Morality: Knowledge Networks and Genealogies of Desire**

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While attempting to understand how homoeroticism is framed within narratives of progressive sexual morality this project has had to take on board several elements those were missing from its initial layouts. There was also confusion in the selection of the time frame for embedding the thesis. The most obvious questions pertained to including within the scope of the project narratives and discourses those primarily addressed non-normative nevertheless heterosexual practices. However as in the case of several other similar projects engaging with subjects through live interactions was one of my main resources for settling the confusions. Such engagements, besides my engagement with the academic and intellectual world, often worked like travelling back to where the project actually started from and helped in reestablishing the connecting links and in reworking the methodologies. It was quite an uneasy task on several grounds. Dealing with subjects who often prefer anonymous existence was fraught with a number of uncertainties that even included my own identity as a heterosexual male with one foot placed in the academia and the other in the cultural composite of Keralam.

However it was precisely through those engagements that the potential of discourses seemingly disconnected from the homophobic cultural practices started unraveling before me. The shield of heterosexuality was engrafted in a complex episode of narratives that was

compelling for anyone to look at their genealogies. The language used by the clandestine homosexual subject quite contradicted to the language of rights often deployed by the gay activist. Rather than reflecting on the violence inflicted upon their body by the police and the other state regulatory apparatuses the hidden subject was more eager to share their own reservations about an open gay identity thus justifying their inside/outside existence. On most occasions these turned out to be a reproduction of mainstream narratives of a progressive morality. I preferred to read it as forging a resistance on two fronts, one against the hegemony of heteronormativity in the local and the other against the transnational discourse of gay identity, chiefly inspired, in the popular narratives, by the ideology of the first world and supported by their corporate funding, rather than merely assuming it as wearing a pseudonymous heterosexual identity (Calhoun 2000, 76).

The study about the subjectivity of *flute* was one among the course papers I produced during my coursework when my attention was drawn to the dyspeic acknowledgement of morality (*sadacharam*) as a term and concept encapsulating the cultural geographies of Keralam. Whereas this evidently had serious consequences for subjects in same sex intimacies – both male and female – I was more attracted to the epistemes and historical linkages that sustained *sadacharam* as a central idea of subjectivity in Keralam. Breaking down this was an exercise that demanded considerable amount of elucidation of issues which remained at the centre of the heteronormative matrix. The homophobic elements invariably spring from those centres which together were often represented under the guidance of the term *sadacharam*. The weight of this term signifies the regional modernity of Keralam both as a cultural artifact entrenched in the production of narratives of progress and social welfare and as a set of formal and informal

regulatory frameworks that consistently situate individual body at the centre of such narratives. While notions of morality are at the heart of the regional sentiments it is often represented within the twin frames of linguistic nationalism and progressive modernity.

I started by focusing on the role of the contemporary discourse of morality in both constructing homosexual subjectivities and in reproducing the hegemonic narratives of progress and a reproductive, monogamous sexuality. This was deeply embedded in the local discourses of Keralam being a specific region and the development narratives that swept its terrains. However as the project developed exploring the genealogy of the very relationship between the conceptual entities of morality, region and progress became the main task around which the project was organized. I found it quite useful to shift from fixed categories of identity and politically charged assertions towards the mundane cultural practices, representations and their historicity through which sexuality is consistently reproduced as the nerve centre of social existence. The thesis does configure the contemporary as embedded in the past. It travels through the various moments in the modern history of Keralam when body was positioned deeply within narratives of progress.

The thesis challenges any designation of sexuality as a silenced sphere. On the contrary sexuality remains at the centre of the cultural constructions which together constitute the regional experience of modernity. Such an evaluation also problematises the claims forwarded by the radical sexuality politics of the post 1990s India of breaking the long silence and embarking on an era of openly challenging the moral regimes. Such a rendering obviously discards the long

and complex histories where the very definition of modernity was arrived at by engendering a language of sexual discipline. Just as the language of rights and politics of visibility spread across the globe this thesis has attempted to unravel how non-normative and homoerotic sexual practices in Keralam were consistently contested and rebuked even resulting in faked representations in order to consolidate this language of discipline and morality. Thus my analysis besides disturbing the depictions of a clean progression from silence to exposition also points at how significant the contextual specific structures, systems of representation and metaphors are in reproducing the socio-sexual hegemonies.

They remain outside the realms of policing and other forms of direct violence and regulation, and are positioned at the centre of the process of constituting subjectivities. The thesis foregrounds multiple circularities in the argumentative space around questions of body, sex and pleasure in the modern history of Keralam. These spaces are replete with the production and circulation of knowledge systems and systems of representation. My analyses of early Malayalam magazines show that unlike in the context of Bengal and similar other locations reformation in Keralam was not in complete opposition to effect the same through laws by the colonial state. The huge propaganda favouring the enactment of different marriage bills in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the unleashing of deep seated anxieties against non-modern systems of conjugality, the construction of a new subjectivity where both science of hygiene existence and science of morals assemble, all were premised upon a blind endorsement of the oriental systems of knowledge.

However my attempt in the thesis has been mainly to go beyond the sites of this knowledge production and to see the different circuits where the knowledge thus derived is circulated and reproduced. More often than not this is postulated as foundational in the construction of a progressive society. This is visible in the construction of Thathrikkutty and in positing pre modern society as embedded in sexual anarchy. The definition of Thathrikkutty's subjectivity along the lines of victimhood and/or vengeance connects networks of knowledge scattered across the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. My analysis reflects upon the fact that the politics behind the huge distortion of her narratives still await in the archives for new methods of transcriptions and cryptographies to decode the language of pleasure, desire and the erstwhile dynamics in the gender and caste relations. The sexuality politics in Keralam, and in general, will have to undertake such rescripts since that will not only deal with the rigidity of the language of morality but will also challenge the epistemes through which such discourses survive.

The thesis shows that the regional configuration of morality in Keralam works through invoking the linguistic sentiments reflected in such commonplace expressions as *Malayaliyude sadacharam* (Morality of Malayali). The sites of contestations around moral subjectivity foreground Malayali as a category trying to establish its identity in the global registers of progress and modernity. The construction of Malayali was a main theme of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reformation agenda that in one blow obscured the heterogeneity of the local population. This linguistic and cultural construction was at the heart of the prescriptive writings in the magazine literature. The rendering of non-monogamous and exogamous conjugal practices as non-normative and non-paternal systems of inheritance as non-modern were largely registered onto the moral edifications that usually accompanied this construction. We see the twin construction

with Malayali and *sadacharam* or morality at two ends of the scale resurfacing time and again at moments when questions of progress, modernity and ethics of representation are raised and contested in the public sphere.

During my discussion of some of the theoretical underpinnings of this project in the first section I have discussed about the relationship between commemorative practices and technologies of subjectivisation. The mobilisation of past events has a critical role in reconfiguring the contemporary. The excess of sexual morality is a feature consistently registered into the constructions of Malayali sociality through such mobilisations. Except the chapter on early Malayalam magazines the rest of the thesis deals with how contestations in the past are consistently made a point of reference from which elements are selectively drawn and presented through the dominant frameworks. There is an imagined continuity in this discourse of progress sustained through knowledge paradigms between each moments of crisis. It is precisely a configuration of this common perception that is reflected in the arrangement of chapters in this thesis. However this imagined continuity is in fact a perpetual stagnation where the colonial forms of subjectivities are revisited and reproduced in the public sphere to keep subversion on the margins.

The title of the first chapter – blueprints of progress – is a signification of this embeddedness of the present in the past. The syntax of the reformation language of transforming the local moral subjectivities remains more or less unchanged despite the emphatic and induced appearances of moments and even movements to subvert its hegemony. It is this frozen time that

the thesis has attempted to take a snapshot of. In fact there is a stark similarity in the language of excuse deployed by the *flute* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the prescriptive language of the 19<sup>th</sup> century reformer. The syntax of both these languages is determined by the local networks of power and knowledge that configure the dominant frameworks of progress and regional modernity. We have already seen how the oriental knowledge of pre modern subjectivities and local ‘amoralism’ are identified as highly serviceable in the contemporary rhetorics. The intervening periods of troubles and disturbances, despite opening space for representing transgressive desires and bodies, nevertheless flushed it to substitute the dominant language of desire.

The regional mechanisms of sexuality can be mapped by digging deeply into the common interests and epistemic foundations that configure the local public sphere. The textual/literary practices and questions of reformation get connected in the public sphere through knowledge networks, memory practices and obsessions with progress. Sexuality is placed at the centre of this interconnectedness. The regional history of modernity in Keralam is also the history of the hyper visibility of heterosexual morality in its public sphere. There are different cults that together sustain and vindicate this excess. These are drawn consistently from figures and images produced through narratives of reformation and embedded in colonial and postcolonial projects of building a progressive modern society. The thesis does not analyse the images and their multiplicity in Keralam as much as it focuses on the discourses that permeate its socio cultural spaces. The discourse of sexual morality is also a discourse about non normative sex. In fact I analyse non normative sex and homosexuality as categories objectified by the reformation narratives.

The thesis takes note of a transition from the former in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century to the latter in the second half. There was a whole shift in the definition of subjectivity that accompanied the rather abrupt disappearance of traditional non monogamous practices from the focus of narratives of reformation. As already pointed this was least because such practices ceased to exist in the society altogether. But all the paraphernalia required to counter such practices and their continued existence was already in place by this period. The emergence of social realism in the early forties brought to the fore a different set of questions and brought the heterosexual foundation itself under challenge. However we see narratives and counter narratives at this point equally raising claims to being more progressive and settling on a common opposition to practices outside heterosexuality. The mid 20<sup>th</sup> century contestations over progressive social realism and literary practices in general were critical in finally defining heterosexual, monogamous morality as the mainstream model in Keralam against which all other versions of sexuality were compared and categorized as uncivilized and/or transgressive.

The debates over literary practices quickly changed its tone to make it a debate about social responsibility of the text and the author, bringing back questions of reformation and progress to the centre. The thesis shows circularity of arguments in this space and the epistemic base of such repetitions. I have analysed texts as standard scripts that defy an existence in vacuum and rather addresses the prevailing hegemonies either by countering or going along with them. The thesis also invites attention to certain strong but unsystematic attempts to challenge and subvert heteronormativity in the society. However underneath there are substantial resemblances in structures which re energise the progressive discourse of sexual morality. Nevertheless I do not discard such productions as *Shabdangal* and *Pennu* as merely becoming



unruly scripts. On the contrary I have analysed them for the significant role they have played in creating space for subversions in Malayalam literature and for discussing homoeroticism as a realistic practice in the Malayali public sphere.

The notion of morality as an ineluctable component of a modern, progressive society works through myriad sets of apparatuses and forms of governance that are critical in mapping the history of regional modernity. There are parallel discourses and multiple publics existing in the same space together contributing to the hegemony of sexual discipline. The image of Thathrikkutty, the social censorship imposed on cultural practices, the contained but subversive figure of *flute* all remain within the same temporal and spatial limits in Keralam. The analysis of *flute* in the last chapter shows how deeply subjectivities are embedded in the discursive politics of morality. The distances between the world of daily practices and the world of representations invoke serious challenges in terms of subsuming both within the singular space of a thesis. What is labelled in conventional social science language as ideal and real world are connected through the dense networks that consistently subject the individual's desires to the test of morality. In the context of Keralam these networks are defined by practices of representation rooted in principles of social and moral pedagogy.

The different epistemes that underlie these networks are specific to the regional histories and are bound to reflect upon the varied forms of subjectivities. The inside/outside strategies deployed by the *flute* during its daily existence are embedded in the politics of reproduction and the adroit manoeuvre of masculine forms to pass as a heterosexual male. Notwithstanding this it

makes gender non conformity an inevitable part of the social existence. Thus subversion is not merely an underground activity or covered with pseudonymous identities. On the contrary it has great amounts of visibility at the level of a practice becoming part and parcel of certain geographies. The intemperance of heterosexual morality in Keralam thus works by including within its grammar space for transgression and dissent. Above all, it is continued to be held as normative.

A central axis of this project is identifying the core networks of knowledge and power that often position heterosexual morality as a central concern of regional modernity in Keralam. The thesis mainly intends to recover sexuality projects in this part of the world where it is identified predominantly through the standard lexicon of liberalism, language of rights and the overwhelming NGOisation. Rather sexuality projects are knowledge projects with considerable amount of investigation required to unravel the regional meanings of body and sex, desire and pleasure. I have exempted myself from focusing on how the region is shaped amidst various transnational discourses. But I have focused on how the local has responded to the various situations in its modern history and how this has critically influenced the regional imaginations of sexuality.

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