

**Sexual Figures of Kerala:
Cultural Practices, Regionality and the Politics of Sexuality**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines discourses of sexuality in Kerala, a “model state” known for successful development, gender equity and literacy rates in India. Kerala’s restructuring in the 1990s era of liberalization has shifted the governmental and political discourses of sexuality. I examine the post-1990s public sphere of Kerala as it changes and yet retains its connection to earlier periods. Through the examination of formative networks of visual and literary cultural practices of the region, I offer a critical understanding of the politics of sexuality.

The domestic woman is foundational to the making of Kerala as a model state. My analysis focuses on how non-normative sexual figures of the prostitute and the lesbian claim subject positions in the post-1990s within the context of complex cultural practices in the region. I move away from a politics of empowerment and progress in order to locate forms of resistance that are tenuous, tactical and marked by affective excess. My focus on the long, ruptured history of sexuality in Kerala troubles the liberatory movement from silence to speech. I focus on vernacular, mass cultural materials produced by the state and activist organizations. I also examine the disorderly circuits of popular texts and public events.

The first chapter analyzes the cult representation of the prostitute in pre-1990s popular media and its afterlife in the post-1990s period in my analyses of the Malayalam film *Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights 1978) and the Kunjibi murder case (1987). The second

chapter focuses on the dual autobiographical project of Nalini Jameela, a sex worker (2005), and its critique of public health and rights paradigms. The third chapter demonstrates that a film from the 1980s can be more disruptive than a recent transnational production *Sancharram* (The Journey 2004), labeled the first lesbian film set in Kerala. A study of the narratives of lesbian suicides recorded by the activist group *Sahayatrika* (Co-traveller), the fourth chapter locates tentative acts and practices that render vulnerable the regulatory norms of heterosexuality. This dissertation thus analyzes the region not as a space of exception but rather as a set of cultural practices that unsettle sexual politics.