

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Sexual Figures of Kerala

In the last two decades, with economic liberalization and the cultural impact of globalization, there has been much celebrating of India's new status as an ambitious, confident nation ready to take on the global stage. Both in the national and global realm there have been debates on the many markers of India's 'progress'. The agreement that post-90s India has finally moved from the era of the "prohibition of the kiss" to the era of sexual liberation fits into this progress narrative. Many well-known Indian news magazines and newspapers reiterate that the new generation of globalized India is sexually permissive and does not share the prudery of the pre-90s period. Nivedita Menon and Aditya Nigam in *Power and Contestation: India Since 1989*, argue that the new economies of desire and fluidity of sexuality are linked to the "unshackling of the imagination" (Nigam and Menon 2007: 85) due to the economic, technological, political and media-related shifts in the post-90s period.

A 2006 print advertisement for tourism projects Kerala, a state in Southern India, as the ideal backdrop to kindle the fire of passion. This glossy packaging of sexual desire participates in the new liberatory aesthetics of sexualized images in global India.



Figure 1. Kerala Tourism Development Corporation advertisement: “Showers of Passion, Monsoon Honeymoon Holidays” (<http://adoholik.com/2008/02/18/kerala-tourism-monsoon/>)

‘Kerala, God’s Own Country’, as the blurb in the right-hand corner proclaims, beckons the urban tourist to discover sexual passion within its scenic landscape. The couple in the advertisement, their ‘cool’ clothes and intimate body language, mark them as part of a mobile, global economy. A consumable form of heterosexual romance is transposed onto a picture-perfect landscape. Here the regional is packaged in such a way that it can travel and appeal to a global audience through the trope of conjugal passion.

I disrupt the broad brushstrokes of narratives of globalization and sexual progress by demonstrating that regional contexts in India have long and complex histories of sexuality. In this dissertation, I undertake an in-depth examination of regional cultural formations. This disrupts the homogeneous packaging of ‘India’ and shows how different sexual histories co-exist in the space of the nation. The cultural sphere is a site of sedimentation where traces of the past remain and haunt the present. In analyzing it, I

illuminate a more enmeshed, non-linear relationship between the post-90s and pre-90s period. Kerala came into existence as a political entity in 1956 with the passing of the States Reorganization Act. That act brought together areas where Malayalam was the dominant language.¹ My dissertation looks at cultural production from the late 1940s, when the regional identity of Kerala begins to get consolidated, to the present.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey in the introduction to a special issue of *GLQ*, titled “Thinking Sexuality Transnationally,” criticize the tendency of scholarship on globalization “to read social life off external social forms – flows, circuits, circulation of people, capital, and culture without any model of subjective mediation” (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999: 445). Contrary to this tendency, my project takes on the task of examining cultural circuits within a regional context and how this is central to the ‘subjective mediations’ by non-normative sexual actors. Cultural practices such as reading and viewing films create the public sphere of Kerala, a public sphere in which sexuality is formative. Through governmental processes, mass cultural production and political movements, sexuality is central to the production of Kerala as a region. This dissertation argues that one can arrive at a critical understanding of its politics of sexuality by tracking the mobile trajectories of cultural representation in Kerala and how it is interlinked to technologies of subject formation.

I argue that for non-normative sexual subjects to claim embodied presence in the public sphere, they draw on the long, complex history of cultural practices in Kerala. While the state attempts to produce a rational, self-governing subject through sexual health discourses, what are the everyday vocabulary and tools through which sexual

¹ Most of the texts I analyze in this dissertation are in Malayalam. All the translations from Malayalam in the dissertation are mine, unless otherwise mentioned.

subjects negotiate their life-worlds? What is the relation between sexual figures as idealized, sedimented forms and the technologies of subjectification? How are these processes embedded and shaped by the specific history and politics of Kerala as a region? Let me begin by answering the last question. For that I need to introduce the reader to aspects of Kerala as a region that are central to my analysis.

Public Imaginations

Whenever I travel by train in India, one of the noticeable features that mark railway stations in Kerala is a wide-ranging, exhaustive selection in the bookshops on railway platforms. These small box-shaped bookshops are packed with different kinds of publications and magazines dangled before us in an enticing fashion. Recent Malayalam fiction, high-culture magazines such as *Mathrubhumi*, sensational Malayalam weeklies such as *Fire*, film magazines and screenplays, Malayalam translations of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Milan Kundera, writings by Communist leaders – multiple genres and eye-catching book covers jostle for one’s attention. You do not have to go in search of a well-stocked bookshop; it meets you on your way and becomes part of the journey itself. The routine practice of train travel is inter-woven with cultural practices of reading, pointing to one of the significant aspects of Kerala as a state – its avid, everyday consumption of print and visual culture.

Kerala has the largest per-capita circulation of newspapers and magazines in India (Parayil 2000: ii) and The National Family Health Survey-3, conducted in 2007, ranked Kerala as the state with the most media exposure in India.² As proof of Kerala’s public

² Information from http://www.nfhsindia.org/NFHS-3%20Data/ke_state_report_for_website.pdf. Accessed on May 27, 2010.

alertness and political involvement, cultural historian Robin Jeffrey offers the statistics of Kerala's passion for newspapers, unrivalled in India:

In the mid-1980s, though Kerala accounted for only 3.5 per cent of India's population, 8.5 per cent of all daily newspapers were in Malayalam language. After English and Hindi, the national language, Malayalam ranked third in the number of newspapers produced each day (Jeffrey 1993: 3).

He provides us with ethnographic accounts of community reading practices in teashops where people read newspapers aloud and discussed the contents (Jeffrey 1992: 210).

Other scholars have pointed to how the establishment of reading rooms and libraries in multiple locations in the state had happened well before Kerala became a political unit in 1956 (Menon 1994, Radhakrishnan 2005). This pervasive reach and saturation of media forms has continued in post-90s Kerala.

The state has a thriving film culture with the first film production studio being established in 1948. Ashish Rajadhyaksha draws attention to how "Malayalam film production reached 123 in 1978, exceeding the Hindi cinema, partly because of Kerala government's Chitranjali film studio and other subsidies" (Rajadhyaksha 1999: 28). This is still a highly popular cultural form, in spite of some of the drawbacks the film industry has faced in the last two decades.³ There has also been a boom in regional television channels in the post-90s period. The public in Kerala is a unit bound together by ties created through cultural practices like reading newspapers, fiction and viewing films. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observes that print in Kerala, along with other cultural forms such as theater and cinema "at once made possible a spatially organized public and a

³ T. Muraleedharan (2005) provides a historical analysis of the regional concerns of Malayalam cinema as distinct to the national framework.

narratively constituted one” (Radhakrishnan 2005: 190). Udaya Kumar argues that since the late nineteenth century “*Janam* or people are transformed into *pothujnam* or public through a process of address and education” (Kumar 2007: 417). The public is often created through an interpellative hail by being addressed as the ‘people’ of Kerala in governmental campaigns or by the media. Michael Warner conceptualizes the public as a formation mediated through cultural forms and by being addressed in discourse: “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). Visual and literary cultural forms circulate widely and provide the fabric for a shifting, contested public imagination. This dissertation looks closely at the web of the production, circulation and reception of cultural texts and events and how different modes of accessing cultural production are crucial to technologies of subject production.

Shadows of Progress

The cultural practices of Kerala are linked to its status as an ‘advanced’ state in India. Jenny Rowena and Carmel Christy argue that the notion of Kerala and its culture as always/already progressive, in comparison to other states of India, is often used both to undercut and initiate discussions on caste and gender in this region (Rowena and Christy 2007). The developmental framework is one of the primary ways in which Kerala has been framed since the 1970s. Kerala has been projected by scholars as a symbol of development, modernization and gender equity in the developing world. Kerala was celebrated as a “model state” within the developing world in the 1970s and 1980s

because of the high level of “quality of life” for people in the region even when economic development is low.⁴ This model referred to the high social indicators of development in the state, the “near First world levels” which were achieved without the usual trappings of rapid economic-growth (Parayil 2000: viii). Kerala’s list of achievements such as successful family planning through voluntary means and the highest literacy rates in the nation are celebrated by economists such as Amartya Sen (Sen 1995; 1997). This model of “development through modernization” (Lukose 2009, Sreekumar 2009) is linked by scholars to its political profile as a Leftist stronghold.⁵ The elections to the first legislature of the newly formed state in March 1957 made Kerala the first place in the world to freely elect a Communist government. The politics of redistribution and reform advanced by this government has “persisted and become an important terrain for postcolonial democratic policies” (Lukose 2009: 31).

Since the 1990s, because of globalization and the impact of changing economic⁶ and political factors, the Kerala model of development has come under much criticism. Today, we see a Kerala mired in multiple crisis narratives, even as the ‘utopic’ self-construction of Kerala co-exists with the more ‘dystopic’ visions (Sreekumar 2009: 82). The 1990s saw the liberalization of the Indian economy and its opening up to global market forces that marked a shift from the earlier model of state-regulated development. With India adopting economic restructuring through Structural Adjustment Programs

⁴ In 1975 the United Nations published a case study with reference to Kerala, *Poverty, Unemployment and Development Policy* and since then there has been a significant amount of debate about the “Kerala Model” which is presented as an exceptional phenomenon of human development without the corresponding economic advancement or industrialization.

⁵ Many other historical reasons are noted as contributing to the profile of Kerala. This includes caste reform movements since the late 19th century and the impact of Christian missionaries in the field of education and health during the colonial period. (Sreekumar 2009: 73)

⁶ The profile of Kerala as a state in the post-90s period is embedded in its investment in industries such as IT (Industrial Technology) and tourism. These are ways in which Kerala situates itself within the post-90s economic shifts.

(SAP) in 1991, there has been an increasing push towards privatization and the positioning of individuals as viable, economic agents (Desai 2002: 16). Lukose observes how the shifting context of India's liberalization is enmeshed with regional trajectories of development and migration⁷ to mediate the particular impact of globalization in Kerala. Because of Kerala's long-standing commitment to a state-regulated model of development, the economic and public policy shifts brought about by globalization are heavily contested issues in this region. But the expansion of consumption and mass media forms in the last two decades has impacted everyday life in Kerala (Lukose 2009: 25). This has also resulted in anxious debates about the changing norms of femininity and masculinity and the need to protect the 'Kerala Woman' from corrupting influences.

Disrupting the 'Kerala Woman'

The Kerala state often deploys the dominant caste, middle class woman as emblematic of its progressive status. Robin Jeffrey in one of the most influential studies on gender and development, argues that the 'Kerala woman' has a status that is superior to the larger category of the 'Indian woman', as one "who has retained a position of autonomy unique in India" (Jeffrey 1992: 4). The markedly lower gender gap in terms of basic capabilities in Kerala such as education and health facilities has been interpreted in scholarly and official state discourses as an indication of greater well being among women in the state.

⁷ Kerala has long-standing international linkages since the precolonial period. In postcolonial Kerala one of the significant migration patterns has been to the Persian Gulf since the 1970s. Keralites make up a disproportionate percentage of the three million Indian migrants in the Gulf. Remittances sent back to Kerala from the Gulf in the form of cash and commodities support the Kerala economy in a huge way (Lukose 2009: 41). Studies have shown that in the post-90s, after the Kuwait war, the patterns of migration to the Gulf have also shifted (Rajan and Zachariah 2004). The labor pool has shifted more towards those with greater educational and professional skills. These high-profile non-residents make direct contributions to the growing infrastructure of globalizing Kerala by investing in shopping malls and Information Technology hubs.

There are multiple developmental indices used to measure Kerala women's 'empowered' status. Kerala is the only state in India where women outnumber men in terms of the population ratio. The female literacy rate in Kerala is 87 percent, according to the 2001 census, while that of India is 54 percent. A developmental news website states, "nine out of every 10 women can read and write and the state produces the largest number of women post-graduates in India."⁸

Countering these celebratory accounts, feminist scholars Praveena Kodoth and Mridula Eapen argue that Kerala's example shows how access to modern resources can be made available while maintaining dominant norms about femininity and domesticity, "there seems to be a generalized social commitment to female domesticity in Kerala." (Kodoth and Eapen 2005: 3285). Both historically and in the present, the conjugal family and the domestic woman occupy a central position in scholarly, state and popular self-narratives about Kerala. In histories of the formation of Kerala as a state, studies about significant regulatory processes of sexuality often mention the legal abolishment of the matrilineal system. For instance, there is a rich body of scholarship on the abolishment of the matrilineal system in the late 19th C, as a 'deviant' kinship structure that had to be recast to construct the patrilocal family for Kerala to enter into modernity and the nation space.⁹ Feminist historian J. Devika provides a detailed, historical account of the engendering of the dominant woman in late twentieth century Kerala, as one who will carry the markers of 'Womanliness' in the public sphere (Devika 2007a: 11). The balancing act of elite women claiming the public sphere but being suitably domestic,

⁸ http://www.indiatogether.org/women/health/ker_depn.htm. Accessed on May 1, 2010.

⁹ The matrilineal system was practiced by many communities in Kerala, but in the popular imagination it is mainly connected to the upper caste Nairs. The reconfiguration of matrilineal system of property and family structure has been the focus of study by many scholars. For a discussion of matrilineality, see Jeffrey 1975, 1992; Arunima 2000, 2003; Kodoth 1998, 2001 and Nair 2000.

continues in a different fashion in the developmental discourse of post-independence Kerala.

In the “model Kerala woman” discourse, the ideal woman is one who enters into the public sphere and actively participates in the welfare of the state, even as she continues to be the anchor of the ideal family. Non-coerced acceptance of family planning through active participation by women is hailed as one of the markers of Kerala’s ‘model’ status (Devika 2008a: 4). But Devika argues that family planning through voluntary means, from 1930 to 1970s, is connected to the increasing domestication of Kerala society and the solidification of the role of the modern woman as mother/homemaker (Devika 2008a: 22). Thus there are complex ways in which Kerala’s narrative of progress is achieved through the disciplining of women’s bodies and sexual practices. As J. Devika and Mini Sukumar state, “patriarchy in Kerala rests upon the agency of the ‘Kerala Model Woman’ – the better educated, more healthy, less fertile, new elite woman” (Devika and Sukumar 2006: 4472).

In the post-90s context, there is greater public recognition of the “paradoxical”¹⁰ situation of women in the state, who in spite of certain markers of gender equity, face a high rate of physical and sexual violence, both in public and domestic spaces.¹¹ The significance of the post-90s era is not just that the changing economic policies resulted in an overhauling of the Kerala model of development, but it also produced a critique of the workings of the developmental discourse of the state and the exclusions embedded in it

¹⁰ Sreekumar (2007) discusses the implications and inadequacies of the use of paradox as a theoretical framework for the discussion of gender dynamics in Kerala.

¹¹ According to a study conducted by the International Clinical Epidemiological Network and the International Centre for Research on Women, domestic violence in Kerala is very high. While nationally, 37 per cent women are subjected to physical torture and 35.5 per cent to mental harassment at home, in Kerala the figures are as high as 62.3 and 61.61. Statistics with the State Crime Record Bureau reveal that the occurrence of rape, molestation, dowry harassment and eve-teasing is growing by the year. (http://www.indiatogether.org/women/health/ker_depn.htm, Accessed on May 10, 2010)

from the onset.¹² In the current period of flux the contradictions which were papered over by the Kerala model discourse becomes available for analysis.¹³ An example of this greater public recognition of paradox in the post-90s context is that a sustained body of scholarship has emerged in the last two decades which examines the elisions in Kerala's self-production as an emancipated state. Feminist activist and thinker from Kerala, Rekha Raj, has argued how Dalit and Tribal women have been excluded from Kerala's history of development as upper caste women's issues are codified in Kerala public discourse as "women's" issues (Raj 2005: 29). Jenny Rowena's study on "Laughter-Films" in 1980s Kerala points to the erasure of non-dominant caste women in representational practices and the cultural public sphere (Rowena 2002: 2009). She argues that in the popular genre of comedy films the crisis-ridden masculinity of the lower caste man is shaped through his tortured desire for the unattainable upper caste woman, "this is a masculinity that is built on the denial of the women-selves in their own communities" (Rowena 2004: 15). Ratheesh Radhakrishnan has used the debates on the sexual harassment case of P. E. Usha in 1999 and its relation to a discourse of masculinity to examine the complex, performative structures of gender in Kerala (Radhakrishnan 2006). He demonstrates how the dominant figure of the "emancipated Kerala woman" informs the discursive formations of masculinity in the public sphere.

Sharmila Sreekumar in *Scripting Lives: Narratives of 'Dominant Women' in Kerala* (2009), an analysis of how dominant women's selves are shaped in relation to the divergent self-descriptions of Kerala, observes that the shadowy 'others' against whom

¹² Post-90s Kerala has witnessed political struggles and mobilizations by groups who have been historically excluded from the Kerala model of development. This includes Dalits, Tribals, Muslims and sexually marginalized communities.

¹³ Sharmila Sreekumar discusses the pitfalls of the utopic self-presentation of Kerala, "this self-conception of Kerala as a successfully executed project enforces a stasis upon it. It freezes the state as a 'model', as 'God's Own Country', as 'India's most advanced society'" (Sreekumar 2009: 95).

the domestic woman defines herself is the working class woman, often from an oppressed caste background, and the prostitute. Sreekumar states that her project “will not pursue these figures except as shadows that are vigorously othered by the dominant-ordinary women” (Sreekumar 2009: 247). I follow the post-90s trend toward greater sensitivity to the relationship between the ideal Kerala woman and its others. My project approaches these ‘shadowy figures’, not tangentially, but as the central subjects of analysis. In post-90s discourse, the domestic woman is the dominant emblem, who is central to Kerala self-narratives, against whom the sex worker and the lesbian are pitted. By reading them in relation to each other, I examine the cultural processes through which both dominant and marginalized sexual figures are produced.

At first, the positioning of the sex worker and the lesbian in alignment with each other might seem like a problematic move, particularly to adherents of liberal feminism. The lesbian is often positioned as a threat to heterosexuality, the ultimate sign of seceding from the heterosexual order. The prostitute, on the other hand, in liberal and Marxist feminism, is the symbol of patriarchal exploitation and oppression. But, for my analysis, I believe that as the domestic woman is the dominant figuration that all women are called on to adhere to, it is important to see how both these figures disturb and speak back to the edifice of the domestic woman. In political activism in Kerala there have been important alliances between sex workers and sexual minority groups. There is an active conversation in place about the connections between individuals and groups who are not entrenched in the structure of the reproductive family. Queer politics in Kerala and sex worker’s mobilizations are aware of the complex linkages between caste, class and sexuality and the differential positioning of women’s bodies. My project points to the

need for scholarship on sexuality to engage in more depth with the points of convergence between the hyper-visible sex worker and relatively less visible lesbian in postcolonial India.

My study of configurations of sexuality in Kerala points to how women's class, caste and community status are crucial to the operation of sexual morality and respectability. The discourse of protectionism and chastity is primarily built around the bodies of privileged women, while lower-caste women are positioned as sexually available (Rege 2006, Jalli 2004, Margaret 2005). My analysis foregrounds the intersections of minority status and sexual marginalization and how multiple axes of exclusion create fraught forms of struggles and everyday negotiations. The domestic woman who is positioned as the ideal Kerala woman is also normed as upper caste, Hindu and middle class and her 'others' are marked not just by sexual non-normativity, but also other structures of marginalization.

In this dissertation, I do not read the sex worker and lesbian as fixed identity categories. My focus is on the processes of their cultural sedimentation as figures in the public sphere. As lesbians and sex workers struggle to claim a subject position in the public sphere, they draw on and critique these figurations. I am wary of the risk of celebrating and romanticizing either the sex worker or the lesbian as emblems of pleasure and rebellion. My aim is to examine more carefully how processes of subjectification, as enacted by women, are inextricably entangled with ways of imagining and addressing sexual figures in the public sphere. So I examine modes of representation in popular cultural texts, and governmental mechanisms that position the domestic woman, the sex worker and the lesbian in different ways.

One of the struggles of the feminist movement in Kerala has been to carve its own agenda in a structure in which the state actively lays claim to women's issues through a developmental framework. Scholars have asked whether "there is a space for a feminist articulation of women's sexual/working rights within contemporary mainstream Left politics in the state" (Devika and Kodoth 2001: 3170). They critique the paternal attitude of the mainstream Left towards women and its narrow, economistic understanding of women's liberation and gender justice. State endorsed discourses of feminism are primarily concerned with the Kerala woman as domestic woman whose presence in the public sphere should be policed for their own protection and welfare. In such state discourses, there is a seamless alignment between the family and the state as the caretakers of women's bodies. In light of such developments, Devika has argued that Kerala remains immune to the new, open expressions of sexuality put into place by processes of globalization in other parts of India:

The 'opening up' of the sexual, a possibility inaugurated by liberalization and globalization for India's middle classes (John 1998), seems nowhere in the horizon in Kerala. However, the very possibility has sparked dystopic visions of sexual chaos and the breakdown of social order, resulting in differential, though equally regressive, consequences for women variously located within Malayalee society (Devika 2009: 40).

This anxious state policing of female sexuality enters into my analysis, but I point to circuits of cultural production where norms about sexuality are constantly destabilized. In these cultural circuits, possibilities of disruptive sexual practices in contemporary Kerala co-exist simultaneously with a discourse of protectionism and moral policing.

By examining the cultural practices of contemporary Kerala and the diffuse formations of sexuality within it, I go against a linear narrative trajectory in which sexuality in the post-90s has "opened up." I am in no way suggesting that Kerala is a

space within which polymorphous sexual practices were tolerated from the time of its formation. But I argue that there are mobile cultural circuits in which sexual figures surface to disturb the dominant icon of the domestic woman who is perpetually in need of protection. I demonstrate that it is productive to locate those circuits. The policing of sexuality is never a finished project and in focusing on the instabilities of cultural practices, we can access the vulnerabilities of these regulatory norms.

A focused attention on the local or the particular which is an imperative in the Foucauldian framework for the study of sexuality, shapes this project in significant ways. Though his investigations are primarily located in the West and has its own limitations,¹⁴ his call for an examination of the productive, “imaginative” (Foucault 1978/1985: 86) processes of power that are not embedded solely in regulatory state apparatuses has deeply influenced theorizations of sexuality in India. The introduction to one of the founding anthologies on sexuality in contemporary India, *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, points to the need for the study of “specific and historical mutable sites” (John and Nair 1998: 9) through which discourses of sexuality in India can be tracked. Nair and John call for “a historical and political mode of conceptualizing sexual economies that would be true to our experiences of an uneven modernity” (John and Nair 1998: 7). Because of the dispersed terrain of the Indian nation and stark differences in the linguistic, political, cultural and economic profiles of different states, the region is a mutable site which demands a dense account of the workings of sexuality in contemporary India.

¹⁴ Laura Ann Stoler’s argues that by short-circuiting empire Foucault’s history of European sexuality misses key sites in the production of that discourse (Stoler 1995).

The regional functions as a fragment¹⁵ that interrogates the national narrative of a linear trajectory towards sexual liberation. Gyanendra Pandey in his influential article, “In Defense of the Fragment,” argues that the importance of a fragmentary point of view is “that it resists the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggles for other, potentially richer definitions of the ‘nation’ and the future political community” (Pandey 1992: 28). The regional provides me with an entangled network through which I challenge the homogeneity of the nation and centrality of metropolitan contexts which often becomes metonymic of the nation. Vernacular cultural practices put forward a complex, non-linear relationship between the past and the present that question assumptions about progress, visibility and gendered agency. While it is beyond doubt that the post-90s mark a greater recognition of sexual practices outside the realm of the conjugal family, the relationship between the post-90s and the pre-90s is not a neat transition from silence to speech, violence to pleasure, but a more complexly interpenetrated one.

Constitutive Figures

The domestic woman, the sex worker and the lesbian are the central figures around which the dissertation is organized. The figure is a representation that acquires iconic value within a public sphere. For example, the domestic woman is an idealized figure in the public imaginary of Kerala, and this foundational figure is constructed through repeated tropes of representation in cultural productions. I analyze public events and cultural circuits that provide a visualization of the process of sedimentation through which such

¹⁵ The fragment has been an important concept in subaltern historiography because it has the power to re-imagine the whole and challenge the grand narrative of the nation.

emblematic figures are made. These figures are recognizable because of their reiteration in the public sphere. But I must also caution readers that the reason these figures lend themselves to analysis is because they are never completely solidified and are always in-process and open to contestation. The process of figuring through cultural practices retains a level of instability that can be used to question norms of femininity and domesticity.

The importance of the concept of the figure and why it lends itself to my investigation lies in its formulation through the public imagination. A shared register of iconic figures of masculinity and femininity welds together an 'imagined community'. While the domestic woman occupies the privileged position in Kerala, other sexual figures such as the prostitute have a long, shifting history of representation. Those marginal sexual figures are also constitutive of the public sphere. It is in the mediated zone of contact between viewing and reading publics and cultural events that figures take shape. Thus the material, affective process of circulation and reception of cultural texts is central to the formation of figures. There are intertextual and intermedia linkages both at the level of production and reception of cultural texts that form the crucible for the making of sexual figures of Kerala. My analysis demonstrates that processes of figuring are connected to technologies of subject formation. Thus the relationship between the subject and the figure is a negotiated one that anchors this dissertation.

The post-90s is marked by the emergence of the sex worker and lesbian as political actors in Kerala society through collective mobilizations. This has produced texts and events that enact the process of embodiment and styles of self-fashioning by sexually marginalized communities. In these networks of cultural production, for political

purposes, such as in the publication of the autobiographies by Nalini Jameela, the sex worker enters into representation by critiquing the recognizable tropes through which a prostitute is addressed and configured by the state and other cultural practices. There is no original story that Jameela tells, no new picture she paints; the power of her project of self production is in its reiteration. In chapter three, I examine how she deploys the familiar modes through which the prostitute is figured in Kerala and points to the ruptures and conflicts within it, to articulate her demand for a different imagination of the sex worker.¹⁶ I analyze Jameela's autobiographies and the oral narratives of lesbian suicides documented by *Sahayatrika* to show how these projects of self-composition are staged in the precarious, unruly public sphere. The public sphere's tensions between excess and containment in the circulation of texts and events are also mirrored in the compositional practices of subject formation in these texts.

Discourses of sexuality are crucial to my investigation because they are central to the mechanism of subjectification, which is the technology through which "individuals constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject" (Foucault 1985: 6). Udaya Kumar argues that literary texts in Malayalam at the turn of the 19th century produced a discourse that "sought to make it possible for the subject to recognize itself as a desiring subject and to act upon this recognition through various modes of agency" (Kumar 2002: 132). Thus Kumar identifies cultural discourses as one of the primary realms to examine technologies of subjectification. Kumar's readings are mainly concerned with the formal and aesthetic codes of foundational texts of Malayalam literature and their role in producing the desiring subject. My dissertation looks closely at the web of the production, circulation and reception of cultural texts and events in post-independence

¹⁶ For an overview of the dissertation chapters see page 56.

Kerala, and how different modes of accessing cultural production materialize the horizons of subjectivity. Through different sites of analysis I show how technologies of subjectification, such as a sex worker recognizing herself as a subject through autobiographical writing, are fragmented processes that draw on existing representational practices.

Events in the Making

I argue that what the post-90s makes possible is a vantage point to track the trajectories of sexual figures and events, how they travel and become embedded in public memory. By exposing the regulatory mechanisms of excess and containment in these cultural networks, I put forward a theory on the workings of sexuality and the possibilities of resistance embedded in it. A detailed, participatory interpretation of texts and events, the ways they travel and get interwoven into everyday life-worlds, becomes the means to access the workings of sexuality at a local level. More than laws and state-produced policies about legitimate or illegitimate sexual practices, I argue that cultural representations, their production and reception, become the mediated screen through which norms about sexuality are maintained and disrupted. I identify the cultural as *the* critical realm in which the public imaginary is shaped. It is here that struggles for political and social recognition are staged.

The looking back and tracking of cultural circuits on sexuality is productive because it shows the tensions created by texts and events and the attempts to control their circulation and reception. It is in the incompleteness of such processes of control and the perverse re-enactments and transpositions of cultural texts and events that sexual norms

are disturbed. The afterlives of certain texts and events have the power to question the foundational narratives of Kerala as a region, not merely because of the representation of desire in these texts. Indeed some of these texts, such as the Malayalam film *Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights, dir: I V Sasi 1978), that I discuss in chapter two, are not per se celebrations of transgressive desire. But the messy trajectories of the production and circulation of these texts and events give us access to the shifting contours of a regional public sphere shot through by erotic tension. The affective excess and spillover in the making of sexual events and texts disturb the neat ordering, in foundational narratives of Kerala, between the domestic women and her others.

Since ‘event’ is a term that has multiple usages and theoretical implications let me explain in what particular ways I invoke it. The sexual events I examine can be mainly classified into two groups (1) political events that have at their center the question of sexuality, such as the murder of the prostitute Kunjibi in 1987, which led to a feminist mobilization in Kerala and (2) cultural texts which become events because of their tumultuous circulation in the public sphere. The second category includes the publication of the dual autobiographies by Nalini Jameela that grabbed national attention due to its pioneering status as the first published autobiography by a sex worker. Thus ‘event’, as I use it, does not refer to a spontaneous, mass-scale occurrence that changes the trajectory of a nation or a region, like the partition of India. Nor does it refer to a staged performance for an audience, as the term would be used in Performance Studies. My use of the event refers to texts and ‘real’ happenings that circulate and get sedimented in the

public sphere.¹⁷ They have an illuminatory power to show the process of containment and excess at work within discourses of sexuality. These events are valuable because they provide a node through which I can explore how possibilities of difference and resistance are kept alive in spite of violent, regulatory mechanisms. Subaltern Studies historian Shahid Amin has done crucial work on the processes through which one event becomes written in and out of nationalist history, “I write about the riot as an event fixed in time (early 1922) and also as a metaphor gathering significances outside this time-frame” (Amin 1995: 3). While the riot, like Kunjibi’s death, is a factual event, my analysis is mainly focused on the process through which such events accrue meaning as they circulate and become part of public memory. Tracking the trajectories of the making of these events, the multiple ways in which they come to acquire significance in the public sphere, enables me “to rediscover the ruptural effects of conflict and struggle that the order imposed by functionalist or systematizing thought is destined to mask” (Foucault 1980: 82). Thus it interferes with the “smug, smooth tracing of a familiar line” (Wexler 2000: 56).

My account of both the pre-90s and the post-90s track the excesses of events that are often erased in the dominant retelling. By ‘excess’ I refer here to that which has to be excised in order to create a neat, sanitized account of a region. For example, the second chapter of the dissertation examines the popular and critical reception of a cult Malayalam film from the 1970s, *Avalude Ravukal*, which has a sustained presence in the public memory of Kerala even today. This film was labeled soft-porn at the time of its release, but in the last decade there have been critical attempts to reclaim the film as a

¹⁷ Mrinalini Sinha examines how the controversy over the publication of the book *Mother India* (1927) and rival appropriations of it in a global schema marks it as a global, public ‘event’. Her focus on the dense sites of “semantic struggle” as crucial to the making of an event is useful for my analysis (Sinha 2006: 6).

realist text about the life of a subaltern prostitute. The traveling of this film text, the differing ways in which it is embedded in popular memory and the debates it triggers about the conventions of representation, provides a ruptured map of the anxieties about sexuality in Kerala, especially around the figure of the prostitute. Instead of fixing such texts in any particular category or naming it as progressive, my analysis deploys the *Avalude Ravukal* debate to point to the blurred boundaries of the norms of sexuality where the prostitute is both the object of desire as well as the spectacle of suffering. These debates point to anxieties about how a film on a prostitute can tarnish the good name of the region and also trigger uncontrollable responses from the viewing public. This volatile, affective conception of the regional public shapes my argument in this dissertation in significant ways.

The Public as Pornographic

My dissertation's reading practice is centered around a public sphere that is both volatile and mediated. In dominant conceptions, there is a bourgeois public sphere that works on the principle of universal rationality and presupposes a "disembodied public subject" (Lee 406: 1992). However, a recent event from Kerala challenges this conception. I will now analyze it in order to illustrate what I mean by the Kerala public sphere. It provides an essential framework for understanding my interventions in this dissertation. On March 7th 2008, a group of cultural activists organized a night vigil outside the secretariat in Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala. This night vigil was in solidarity for the Chengara land struggle, a struggle by landless populations, especially Dalits in Kerala in the last two

years, demanding ownership of cultivatable land against a state-supported private firm.¹⁸ During the night vigil a group of men and women, laughed and chatted. One woman smoked a cigarette; a man and woman hugged each other. Media cameras recorded this event without the knowledge of the protestors. The Kairali People's Channel, a regional television channel supported by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the ruling party of the state at the time, and *Deshabhimani*, the newspaper which is a CPI (M) mouth-piece, published photographs and showed footage of this event, criticizing the 'immoral' activity going on in the name of protest. The *Deshabhimani* report titled "The Masala-filled Night Strike", described how "in the night vigil scenes were staged which were more steamy than scenes from masala films" (March 8: 2008). In contrast to the *Avalude Ravukal* debate, where soft-porn is re-appropriated as realism, here the actions in a political protest are derided as 'pornographic'.

On March 8, International Women's Day, which was the day after the vigil, members of the state unit of AIDWA (All India Democratic Women's Association), the women's wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), went with brooms and water and enacted a ritual cleansing of the space of the strike.¹⁹ This was controversial because the norm of suitable gendered behavior in the public is disturbed when women and men intermingle freely in a space of protest. This is heightened in the case of the night vigil because the protestors challenged the accepted grammar of protest as a solemn, revolutionary activity where there is no time for love or laughter. The ritual purification

¹⁸ In 2007, people from marginalized communities camped in the Chengara Harrison Malayalam Estate, seeking ownership of cultivable land for all 5,000 struggling families. This massive agitation for land rights launches a sharp attack on the Kerala model of development.

¹⁹ This ritual of 'adichuthali' is an act embedded in practices of caste hierarchies, a purity/pollution ritual. Kerala has a history of an extremely rigid caste structure, with pollution rituals such as 'distance' regulations between different castes. Former slave castes were not only regarded as untouchable, "but they were even supposed to make themselves 'invisible' as the mere sight of them were considered polluting to higher castes" (Lindberg 2005: 21).

conducted by the AIDWA women further complicates this picture and shows how the historical boundaries between purity and impurity, inside and outside are constructed through vectors of caste and gender operating simultaneously. The night vigil and its repercussions produced a spur of debates in the print, on the internet and in public forums about *how* women's bodies function as the site of sexual anxiety within the 'progressive', public sphere of Kerala. This occurrence became a public event because of the multiple, mediated responses around it. The night vigil as an episode demands detailed analysis because it provides a microcosm of the regional public as it is mediated through visual and print networks, and introduces the reader to the anxious struggle between rational containment and pornographic excess. It is this tension and indeterminacy that is reenacted in the political representations by sex workers and lesbians who are my objects of analysis in this dissertation.

One of the influential debates around this episode took place between J. Devika and the association secretary of AIDWA, Shailaja, in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*.²⁰ Shailaja uncritically endorsed the AIDWA response to the night vigil, while Devika used this episode to gauge the norms in Kerala about gender, public conduct and sanctioned forms of protest. Shailaja is critical of the activists who used a public space of protest as a 'pleasure camp'. Let me quote her:

The AIDWA do not think that women and men should fight for the oppressed by smoking cigarettes, drinking in bars, and embracing on public streets. We do not think that our culture will collapse if men and women stand close to each other, or become overcome by passion and kiss each other. But in public stages, protest grounds, public transport, if you get overcome by passion and indulge in such acts it is not suited for a modern society (Shailaja 2008: 29).

²⁰ This is a well-respected magazine in Kerala, which has functioned as a space of literary and cultural debate since the 1930s.

She stresses how self-discipline and restrained bodily conduct are essential for any protest to be taken seriously. It is not the acts per se that offend her, but staging those acts in a public place. She sees all public places including buses or trains as spaces where men and women should behave as rational beings, not “overcome by passion”. Rationality and self-control are central tenets of Shailaja’s criticism of the out of bounds behavior of the night vigil participants.

Devika defends the participants by using historical events to show how women’s bodies have been seen as out of control. They function in the public sphere as a sign of resistance. A ‘topless’ struggle is Shailaja’s dystopic imagination of feminism gone wild. But Devika argues that when women knowingly bare their bodies in public the act can take on dimensions beyond the sexual:

The only topless struggle that has happened in Kerala is a CITU (Center of Indian Trade Unions) struggle. In the beginning of 1960s in a cashew nut factory in Kollam, the owner unilaterally withdrew all welfare and benefit measures for the workers. Enraged the laborers blockaded the factory. When armed policemen came in and tried to disperse the crowd, a young woman laborer came to the front of the protestors, removed her blouse and told them to shoot her on her bare breast if they were brave enough to do so (Devika 2008b: 55).

This incident is Devika’s clinching historical evidence against the criticism by Shailaja about the improper behavior of the night vigil protestors who were imitating Western modes of politics. Devika draws on the historical memory of another woman’s body to question conventional assumptions about women’s bodies, propriety and political protest. In her account of the 1960s struggle it is the bare body of a working class woman that becomes the symbol of organized, labor protest. Thus she shows how women’s bodies have become emblems of protest within the Marxist movement itself, which ironically is the tradition of protest that Shailaja struggles to preserve.

The distance between the cashew-nut laborer and the women in the night vigil is not merely historical. One of the concerns that came up in debates around the night vigil was how the bodies of privileged women who conducted a solidarity protest for a marginalized section of Kerala society became the center of media attention. Some Dalit feminists were concerned about how the night vigil debate diverted attention from the issue of the land struggle. Devika in her critical response to Shailaja circumvents this question of the difference in women's bodies and attaches significance to modes of protest used by women when a radical coming out - what can be more out than the bare breast - makes possible a resignification of the female body as a threat rather than an erotic object. Though there is an erasure of the differences in the women involved, Devika does point to how violently questioning regimes of looking, i.e. the eroticization of women's bodies, can become a political gesture. The question remains as to which woman is called upon to enact such a radical act. This dramatic moment of a woman's topless body, as the surface of resistance to state power, draws attention to the process of embodiment and how women inhabit spaces so as to claim presence. The radical edge of this act is that the common sense meanings of the nude female body as erotic are challenged when it is repeated in a different set of circumstances for a political purpose. The positioning of the nude female body as an object of desire is complicated by the violent baring of the body that occurs here.

The night vigil and the debates that followed bring to the fore the volatile, mediated public sphere in which events are created and are ascribed meaning. For example, the voyeuristic gaze of the camera was criticized by the night vigil participants and their supporters. Feminist activist C. S. Chandrika in her support statement for the

protest says how deplorable it is that newspapers and television channels will “even secretly peep into the bedrooms” of those who support a struggle for survival (Chandrika 2008). Gargi and Hasan, participants in the night vigil, in a short theatrical piece, “Love in the Time of Chengara,” a collaborative response to the uproar caused by their show of public affection mourns how, “Those who viewed our public behavior through perverse eyes have become the moral guardians of society” (Gargi and Hasan 2008). Describing this gaze as ‘perverse eyes’ marks it as a hidden non-sanctioned way of viewing. The space occupied by the protestors is a public one but it acquires a closed quality here because the camera peeps into it. It is not a bedroom, not are the acts staged here sexual per se, but the peeping camera has the power to saturate the space with the sexual. The footage circulates when it is played on TV and at that level it becomes available for public viewing. Thus there are two levels of mediation through which this event is seen. The first level is the recording stage and second, the stage of transmission.²¹ At the second level, there are codes of looking that are characterized in the debate as ‘pornographic’. “Look when we walk on the street I feel people recognize us, it seems like we have walked out of the blue films they saw last night” (Gargi and Hasan 2008). The remark suggests how the TV news clip was viewed by the public as if it were a pornographic film. Here there is a conflation of the ‘peeping’ gaze of the camera and the ways of viewing it calls for and both are characterized by their erotic overtones.

In an informal conversation I had with one of the participants of the vigil, my conversant observed that the grainy, shaky footage made even the act of walking look ‘pornographic’. Her comment draws attention to how a covert camera operation and its

²¹ See Vincent (2008) for a discussion of Kerala’s burgeoning television and news media industry and the slippages between picturization and transmission.

codes of looking get tied to what is assumed to be codes of looking that operate when watching pornography. I would like to pause here and attempt to unravel what is meant by a pornographic gaze. Is it marked by voyeurism? Viewing pleasure? Eroticization of bodies and acts? I would argue that what emerges in this debate is a conception of the pornographic gaze as a gaze marked by excess that is not rational or controlled. What happens when the pornographic ceases to be the particular instance of the hidden camera recording the night vigil and becomes the everyday gaze through which the 'public' watches TV? In that case, the pornographic gaze becomes ubiquitous. It is not a marker of the 'perversity' of the peeping camera; rather, it signals a modern way of regulating bodies in space through constant, non-clinical surveillance. By pushing this argument we can question the assumption that looking is a rational, controlled activity. The gaze that controls is not necessarily a controlled gaze; it can be an anxiety-ridden, emotional gaze and that is why there are always instabilities in this gaze.²² The significance of the night vigil is that it draws attention to an all-pervasive overt, yet covert gaze over bodies in the public sphere. This gaze is not a momentary aberration or a fall from the rational gaze through which the social should be organized; this is the constant gaze that orders modern spaces. The distaste of the camera's pornographic gaze is founded on its purported emotional excess, but I point to how the gaze that structures the public is affective to begin with. By acknowledging the affective excess that nestles within all acts of seeing, the event of the night vigil makes it possible to question dominant feminist assumptions

²² Here it is useful to turn to theorists like Wendy Brown who have pointed to the problem of the conceptualization of pornography as a mirror of heterosexual violence. She rather sees it is a symptom of the cultural crisis around the erosion of gender subordination in the late twentieth century in the US and the representations of heterosexuality as violence as an attempt to shore up or stabilize eroding gender dominance (Brown 1995).

about visibility and women's agency.²³ If coming out into the public sphere entails negotiating gazes whose meanings cannot be fixed in advance, then visibility is a risky enterprise. This is one example of my larger claim in the dissertation that 'coming out' or claiming visibility as a political strategy is complicated because of visibility's contradictions.

But we cannot simply read this gaze as a policing gaze out of which there is no possibility of escape. The reference to the pornographic brings in elements of fantasy and pleasure whose meanings cannot be fixed in advance. Laura Kipnis states:

A culture's pornography, becomes, in effect, a very precise map of the culture's borders; pornography begins at the edge of the culture's decorum [...] carefully tracing the edge gives you a detailed blueprint of a culture's anxieties, investments, contradictions" (Kipnis 2006: 120).

Kipnis's call is an important one because it asks for a serious engagement with the pornographic gaze, not to dismiss it as 'perverse' or 'obscene', but explore it to mine the anxieties and contradictions at work in a cultural context. The incessant watching of men and women in public spaces can be read as a sign of crisis, gesturing towards the anxieties caused by bodies out of control. Thus it signals the unruliness and unpredictability of the public sphere, which is not organized through a rational gaze. These conceptions of the public sphere as a volatile space, of frictional looks and texts, frame my analytical reading of cultural texts and events. Arguing the 'pornographic' gaze is one that operates ubiquitously and orders the public sphere can have important

²³ The linear movement from inside to outside, invisibility to visibility is troubled by the history of reform movements in Kerala. The upper caste, Nambudiri (Brahmin) women as subjects of reform in the late 19th and early 20th century were motivated to move out of the home and shed sartorial markers of seclusion. In contrast to this the Shanar *Marumarakkal Samaram* (Breast-Cloth Revolt) in South Travancore, was a campaign to secure for Shanar (a lower caste group) women the right to wear an upper garment to cover their breasts (Hardgrave 1993). The revolt, which broke out in the 1820s, continued in various stages for about fifty years. Thus the history of women's bodies and public exposure is markedly different according to caste, class and religious status.

implications in understanding how different women's bodies are framed in the public sphere. This will help us rethink the limits and possibilities of a politics of visibility which is so central to a global feminist and sexuality rights movement.

Though people of different age groups participated in the vigil, public attention was focused mainly on the younger people who were disapprovingly described as products of a "neo-liberal" economy. The *Deshabhimani* news report narrates how as the dusk darkened into late night only the younger people were left and it is then that they staged their "love scenes". But, these are clearly individuals who belong to the privileged strata of society and are therefore worth saving. Shailaja's writing is an attempt to bring this misguided youth back to the mainstream of the Kerala model of social development. Shailaja marks the distance of these younger people from the 'other' women who occupy the city mainly in the cover of the night: "In the cover of the night, in bus stands and other public spaces, organizations involved in flesh trade are in the business of commodifying sexual immorality. Even the small gestures in a protest area would give license to such people" (Shailaja 2008: 28). If 'domestic' women do not behave in a controlled manner in the night and in public, then there is the risk of slipping into the other category of the public woman on whom the pornographic gaze is a sanctioned one.²⁴ Shailaja sees the sex worker's visibility as a sign of moral degradation and victimization and blatantly ignores the political discourse around sex work that has emerged in the last two decades in Kerala. Her feminism actively marginalizes the political claims of the "public woman". I argue that in thinking about the dominant Kerala woman and the modes of politics available to her, it is essential to engage with

²⁴ Here it is useful to note the etymology of the term pornography from the Greek term *pornographos* "writing of prostitutes". <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pornography-censorship/> Accessed on May 15, 2010.

sexual others like the sex worker whose relationship to the night, the city and visibility is markedly different than that of privileged women who are the subject of Shailaja's writing. Reading these contemporary struggles side by side enables us to produce a more complex picture of the processes of visibility and the construction of the gendered public sphere in Kerala.

My analysis of the night vigil as a mediated public event is crucial to an understanding of the negotiations, risks and possibilities of sexuality politics in contemporary Kerala. The strategies for claiming political representation in a pornographic, mediated public sphere are not ones of stepping out of it, for there is no outside to step into. Political activism on sex work and lesbianism produces texts and practices in which cultural tropes are re-membered, re-enacted and transformed. The practices of accessing cultural texts and events are not captured entirely by the acts of reading or viewing films. These events and texts circulate spatially and temporally and become interwoven into the fabric of vernacular life-worlds. There is an intimate, quotidian and shifting relationship between texts, events and the regional public. They provide the vocabulary to organize the everyday and shape the gestures that constitute subjects. For example, romantic love, as it is enacted by lesbian women in a marginalized community in Kerala, is named *Painkilli* (a reference to a vernacular genre of sentimental, sensual fiction) by a journalist who investigates lesbian suicides. Here the aesthetics of pulp fiction is seen as shaping the enactments of romantic love between women. Thus romantic acts and sentiments in fiction are cited in a 'real life' context and acquire different implications. In this dissertation I map the process through which

sexually marginalized subjects appropriate and deploy cultural forms such as the autobiography or sentimental fiction for ‘political’ purposes.

Forms of cultural production whether written or visual involves a process of reiteration. There is openness to this process of reiteration. If they can fail or be used for other purposes than the reconsolidation of norms, then there is a radical instability to the cultural sphere. As Susie Tharu observes, the “hazard of performance” is central to the alchemy of citation-reiteration (Tharu 2007: 28). The multiple possibilities and affective responses triggered by cultural production cannot be completely streamlined or controlled. Resistant political expressions often make use of cultural forms that are delegitimized such as soft-porn cinema or sentimental fiction. The “dissemination, transformation and proliferation” (Tharu 2007: 28) through which cultural texts come alive and become imbued with multiple meanings is crucial for a vernacular politics of sexuality. When the sex worker and the lesbian stake claim over representation, they expose the excesses that push against the regulatory myths of femininity and domesticity that ground the regional imaginary of Kerala.²⁵ Butler argues that the aim of radical inclusivity in terms of representation is not to create a singular discourse in which every marginal position is included. For this would also mean that all differences are domesticated to forge a singular discourse that does not meet its limits anywhere. What is more challenging is to locate the “disruptive site of linguistic impropriety” which illuminates the violent and contingent boundaries of the normative regime (Butler 1993: 53). The post-90s in Kerala are a time of flux due in part to economic restructuring and new forms of political struggles. As the shadowy others of the domestic woman claim

²⁵ “The important point is that hegemony is also a form of power that is structurally equipped to address and attempt to contain the ex-cite-ment of performance, its risk. Of course it is precisely this risk that also opens up possibilities for the undermining and disruption of hegemonic authority” (Tharu 2007: 19).

representation, the limits and contingencies of the boundaries of the vernacular public are exposed, “for if the copies speak, or if what is merely material begins to signify, the scenography of reason is rocked by the crisis on which it was always built” (Butler 1993: 52).

The movement in this dissertation is not that of marginal figures who burst into speech and visibility, but about how these claims for presence and struggle for representation can render visible the already existing crisis of the rational, contained ordering of the social. The key task of this dissertation is to track the cultural practices that ‘rock’ the neat organization of the public. By paying careful attention to representational processes, I rethink the dominant paradigms of feminist and sexuality politics. The significance of the autobiographical project by Nalini Jameela is not a simple coming into voice or claiming of visibility. She first writes *Oru Laingika Thozhilaliyude Atmakatha* (The Autobiography of a Sex Worker) with her collaborator I. Gopinath and then in the span of six months produces another autobiography in collaboration with another group of activists and intellectuals. The stuttered processes of the writing and rewriting, her negotiated relationship with the figurations of the sex worker in public health campaigns and rights-based movements, becomes a network through which I analyze how giving an account of the subaltern self exposes the crisis ridden, sexual landscape of contemporary Kerala. Recognizing the pornographic excesses of the public sphere makes possible the imagination of models of politics in which the rational, rights bearing subject is not taken for granted. This will allow us to access what Gayatri Gopinath describes as “mediating and constantly shifting” (Gopinath

2005: 150) negotiations of public cultures, instead of working within the regulatory logic of “categorization, visibility and enumeration” (Gopinath 2005: 151).

Sex in the Time of AIDS

My analysis of cultural circuits is embedded in the changing modes of governance in the post-90s period and the corresponding shifts in the regulation of sexuality primarily through the global AIDS discourse. Unlike countries in the West, where AIDS was characterized in its primary phase in the 1980s as a disease that infected the gay male body, in India it has been associated mainly with heterosexual unprotected sex, especially outside of the conjugal bond. Vincanne Adams and Stacy Leigh Pigg reflect on the increasing reification of sex in international health development programs,

The AIDS era has thus ushered in a critical shift in how sex is framed. What was once indirectly targeted as a matter of civility, population control, family planning, and public health is now targeted directly as a set of sexual practices, sexual identities and sexual risks (Pigg and Adams 2005: 19).

The commercial sex worker is a crucial population category in the management of AIDS in India and this has impacted Kerala’s public health machinery too. The transnational flows of AIDS funding²⁶ and a globally circulated language of sexuality, with identity categories such as Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) and Commercial Sex Worker (CSW) inform the configurations of regional struggles by sexual minorities.

Foucault makes the highly influential hypothesis that as neoliberalism seeks to extend the rationality of the market and its methods of operation to areas that are not

²⁶ Because of funding from international agencies such as WHO and UNICEF, philanthropic organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and multinational organizations such as USAID, the AIDS awareness and prevention programs is one of the most well-supported public health endeavors in India today.

primarily or exclusively economic like family and birth policy, the mode of governing human behavior is through a management of population for strategic, economically effective ends. (Foucault 1994a: 207). His inter-related conceptualizations of governmentality and bio-power refer to government as tactics of management of a population, not for the “common good” but by directing the flow of population into certain activities through mass campaigns “without the full awareness of people” (Foucault 1994b: 241). Partha Chatterjee observes how in the Indian context “the postcolonial state deployed the latest governmental technologies to promote the well-being of their populations, often prompted and aided by international agencies and NGOs” (Chatterjee 2004: 37). The political mobilizations by sexual minorities in post-90s India are intertwined with the workings of “bio-power” (Foucault 1978/1985: 144), where sex becomes the crucial target for “the management of life” (Foucault 1978/1985: 147). ‘Figure’ as a term also means numbers and thus signal to the process of enumeration through which populations are produced as categories to be managed (Chatterjee 2004: 37). My analysis examines changing modes of address by the state and multinational aid agencies that produce sexual figures for governance and deploy them to maintain the health of the social body. But as Pigg and Adams point out, “the relations between mainstream health development and social activism are complex, working themselves out at regional, national and international levels” (Pigg and Adams 2005: 14). The contingencies of a regional context shape the reception of these global programs in many ways.



Figure 2. National Rural Health mission poster: Instructions for a “Breastfeeding Mother” (Photograph by author)

Figure 3. Kerala State AIDS Control Society poster: Featuring Mohanlal, one of the super stars of Malayalam film industry (Photograph by author)

These are two posters of public health campaigns that I photographed, in the Shoranur railway station in Kerala in 2008. The first poster, both in its visual aesthetics and modes of address, has much in common with modes of governance from the early phase of state-regulated development in India. The object of concern is a ‘breast feeding mother’ and instructions on how she should take care of her physical and mental well-being. The focus is on the woman in the reproductive unit of the family who has to be healthy in order to nurture the next generation. The AIDS awareness poster is more interactive in tone and visually sophisticated. “There are No Retakes in Life: Keep HIV AIDS Away”, is the catchy slogan. The word ‘retake’ is in English and the addressee is all-inclusive. The face of the poster is that of the Malayalam film star, Mohanlal, whose appeal cuts across all sections of people. While both these posters co-exist in the space of the same

railway station, the second one in its use of English and glossy aesthetics marks itself as an artifact of globalizing Kerala. This is a cautionary call to individuals so that they take responsibility for their sexual acts and practices. A grim reminder that, unlike a film-shoot, life does not come with the luxury of retakes. Thus it captures the post-liberalization push towards the positioning of the governed as individual, responsible actors who have to make rational choices for progress and empowerment.

The post-90s context denotes a shift in the centrality of the domestic woman and the state's focus on the conjugal, reproductive family as the primary unit of sexuality.²⁷ In the public health discourses around the AIDS pandemic, the government has moved beyond the conventional approaches to women's health based on the mother and child welfare paradigm. The setting up of multiple NGOs that work on AIDS, funded by national and multinational organizations, have made the global language of sexual identity politics pervasive in India. Pigg and Adams describe the international humanitarian and political institutions that include NGOs, multinational aid agencies and activist networks as the "most pervasive, influential and mundane arenas in which sexuality is at issue" (Pigg and Adams 2005: 11). Ashley Tellis comments on the current configurations of sexuality in India:

the most important phenomenon that frames sexuality is globalization: it affects every area of sexuality – from sex practices to social work on sex and sexuality, from sexual identities to sexual health (thanks to the global AIDS phenomenon), from sexual rights to academic research on sexuality (Tellis 2003).

Some feminist and sexuality scholars look upon this new, global discourse on sexuality as a radical and progressive breakthrough. Nivedita Menon argues that from the late 1980s growing awareness about the AIDS epidemic made it increasingly legitimate to talk about

²⁷ Pigg and Adams observe that an "earlier era of development did not discuss sex itself as a target of intervention: rather, sex was subordinated to concerns about fertility" (Pigg and Adams 2005: 19).

sex outside the realm of law, demography and medicine and not only as violence against women or in terms of population control, “although AIDS is a disease which also fits into medical discourse, its source made sex itself speakable” (Menon 2007: 5). Menon’s contention that sexuality suddenly becomes visible in the post-90s context follows a narrative teleology of progress where only representations of sexuality that fit into a globally recognizable rubric are valued. Other commentators have pointed to the violence of the indiscriminate mapping of universal sexual identity categories and practices due to the global public health and rights discourse.²⁸ Ashley Tellis minces no words when he states, “globalization in the field of same-sex politics actually produces cultural categories and gendered identities dictated by the logics of global funding from the North more than any need on the ground” (Tellis 2003). Pigg and Adams argue that there is a need to be more critically aware of how the medical and hygienic language of sexuality can mask “covert political and moral ethnocentrism” (Pigg and Adams 2005: 20) and also to look more closely at divergent, fragmented and contradictory actors in complex social fields to disrupt biological universalisms (Pigg and Adams 2005: 21).

My dissertation contributes to this debate by demonstrating that regional contexts in India have long, complex histories of sexuality in which power and resistance, pleasure and violence, excess and containment coalesce and get entangled. Such situated knowledges are essential to produce more nuanced accounts of regional contexts that are at the interstices of national and global linkages. In order to imagine and forge a politics of sexuality that is sensitive to regional differences it is necessary to map these trajectories of vernacular discourses of sexuality. To counter the hegemony of global

²⁸ Arondekar (2004) argues that the intersectionality of gender and sexuality is not only crucial to but also a function of geopolitical formations.

categories of sexuality and rights that is marketed and circulated widely and carries the authority of modernity and rationality, regional accounts of the formation of subjects through discourses of sexuality have to be studied in detail. The textured, regional mappings of sexual subject formation that I undertake in this dissertation interrogate the uncritical endorsement of rigid, abstract identity categories that are deracinated from ground realities.

Sexual Sites

The primary mediums I take up for analysis in this dissertation are print and visual culture. I analyze a selection of public health campaigns, pedagogic tools and documentaries produced by state agencies such as KSACS (Kerala State AIDS Control Society) and documentation and interviews by activist groups such as *Sahayatrika*. I also examine a wide range of printed texts such as novels, autobiographies, film reviews, literary criticism, screenplays and newspaper reports. The visual materials I investigate are popular Malayalam films, film posters, news photographs, public health posters and documentaries. As I discussed earlier, I also reconstruct certain significant public events and their mediated reception. In order to track the process of the production of sexual figures, it becomes essential to navigate a wide cross-section of cultural, political and governmental realms and the interconnections between them. Mary Poovey's *Making a Social Body* provides a useful methodological model because she draws on literature, social reform texts and economic documents in order to show how the "registers of representation and of materiality are not actually separate" (Poovey 1995: 5), and how we need to bring these domains together to understand cultural formations. The intermedia

and intertextual readings of different realms such as governance, politics, and creative production are essential to map the relationship between iconic sexual figures and the process of subjectification.

In conventional approaches to literary or filmic texts the object of study whether it is a novel or a feature film is the primary document of scholarly analysis. Other factors such as the historical setting in which the novel is produced, the identity of the writer, the political significance of the text or its geographical location are significant frames through which the novel is approached. But the hierarchy between the text and its context is still maintained in most literary criticism. My project in contrast, is primarily concerned with the cultural networks in which texts are produced and circulate. I also select texts in which the notion of the author is undermined and revisioned. For example, both versions of Nalini Jameela's autobiography were collaborative projects that question the basic premise of the autobiographical form, which conventionally hinges on the conception of a unitary subject who narrates his or her life story. Similarly, the interviews conducted by *Sahayatrika* reconstruct the lives of two women who committed suicide through the memory of the community. But it is mediated at one more level as the oral interviews are transcribed and edited for publication. Thus the binary relationship between author-text is dismantled as I track how cultural production occurs in a larger network of interconnected actors.

Film and literature are the two main mediums that recur in this dissertation because reading and viewing films are social acts that help produce the public sphere of Kerala. As I discussed earlier, because of the regional investment in literature and reading, print culture is vibrant and accessed by different sections of society and the

heightened investment in print culture plays a formative role in Kerala's self-production as a progressive region. To repeat the rhetorical query by the editors of *Katha Ithuvare* (The Story So Far: Kerala Model of Development):

Does 'Kerala' 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 perennially through print? Are we in short a paper-country?" (Sreekumar and Sanjeev 2003: 2).

This place of privilege given to print in Kerala is one of the primary reasons why it becomes such an important medium to track the specificities of discourses of sexuality in Kerala and its links to the regional imagination.

Cinema in Kerala shares some of the anxieties this mass medium evokes in the nation space. Film critics have argued that the specific history of the cinematic form is marked by its ability to draw an audience from all sections of society and because of its appeal to the 'masses,' it is seen as a lower art form that could have a corruptive influence.²⁹ Theaters are often characterized as seamy spaces where unregulated contact between different classes and sexes are possible.³⁰ Recent studies on early Hindi cinema have argued that commercial cinema's historical status has been that of a guilty pleasure and therefore it is "an unacknowledged cultural force in public life, and a site of public and government disavowal" (Majumdar 2009: 9). Contrary to this position, because of the interlinkages of the political and cultural trajectories of Kerala, there has been a demand on the cinematic medium to fulfill a pedagogic function, even as it entertained.

²⁹ The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru captures this sentiment, "I think it is perfectly correct to say that the influence in India of the film is greater than the influence of newspapers and books all combined. I am not at the moment talking about the quality of the influence" (*Film Seminar*, 1955 quoted in Ramachandran 1981).

³⁰ With globalization and the coming of the multiplex, movie-going experiences have been redefined in urban India. But the anxieties about the sexual excesses of the cinematic medium and its viewing practices are still prevalent.

The historical accounts of Malayalam cinema emphasize that unlike other parts of India where Hindu mythologicals were the basis of early cinema, the first sound film in Malayalam, *Balan* (Boy, dir: Nottani 1938), was a social melodrama about the exploitation of two children. In the history of Malayalam cinema, the seventies and eighties are defined as the ‘golden age’ because of the success of art cinema in that period to take on ‘meaningful’ issues. “The viewers in Kerala enjoy the films comprehending the reality in it. They possess high insight in distinguishing reality from fiction in the themes of experimentalism.” The statement on the Kerala Government Website reiterates the link between good cinema, realism and the discerning audience of an ‘enlightened’ Kerala.³¹ My analysis in this dissertation points to how this reified characterization of Malayalam cinema is actively undermined by the production of films noted for their sexual content. A significant body of work on queer bonds between men in popular Malayalam cinema, by T Muraleedharan (2002; 2005) locates “less rigid textures of bodies, desires and pleasures” (Muraleedharan 2005: 84) within the representational codes of mainstream cinema and its viewing practices, in order to undermine the hegemony of the normative sexual order.

The intertextual and intermedia linkages between cinema and literature are also strong because of the specific history of the development of the Malayalam film industry in close contact with literature.³² The specificities of print and filmic forms in Kerala and the representational trajectories of both these media inform my readings of cultural networks. In my discussions of cinema, I examine the formal devices and codes of

³¹ Information and Public Relation Department of Kerala Website. <http://www.prd.kerala.gov.in/cinemahome.html>. Accessed on November 10, 2009. See Vijayakrishan 2004 for a standard historical account of Malayalam cinema.

³² There are many film-makers in Kerala who are also writers and literary fiction is often adapted to films. The screenplay of most films are brought out and sold in book shops across the state and thus claim the label of ‘Literature’. This is not such a common practice in other parts of the country.

representation. This shot by shot analysis of cinema and close readings of literary texts are linked to an exploration of how specific genres and mediums are positioned in a regional public sphere. These close readings contribute to my analysis of cultural circuits because I place cinematic and literary codes in relation to a larger network of vernacular cultural production. For example, in my interpretation of a Malayalam film from the 1980s, I draw on existing codes in Malayalam cinema about romantic couplehood and show how this film adopts these conventions in order to disrupt them. My analysis of formal devices enables me to place cultural forms in the field of aesthetic judgments in the region. Depictions of a heroine writing a love letter with literary flourishes and nature imagery in *Sancharram* (The Journey, dir: Liji Pulappally 2004), can be understood only if we read it in the regional cultural milieu where poetic expressions of interiority and romance are valorized. Instead of taking for granted categories like soft-porn, romance or realism, I give them substance and specificity by interpreting them locally, placing them in relation to the configurations of those categories in the Kerala public sphere.

This is a useful addition to models of scholarship on popular culture put forward by scholars like Gopinath who turn to cultural practices in order to locate a “range of oppositional practices, subjectivities, and alternate visions of collectivity that fall outside the development narratives of colonialism, bourgeois nationalism, mainstream liberal feminism and mainstream gay and lesbian politics and theory” (Gopinath 2005: 20). My project shares Gopinath’s aspiration to move away from a fixed notion of identity politics and use the cultural to track modes of embodiment and resistance. But unlike Gopinath, I demonstrate that the analysis of representational practices and formal readings has to go hand in hand with a mapping of the particularities of the vernacular public spheres in

which these texts circulate and get materialized. Paying attention to how each of these formations has their own histories of production and circulation allows me to expose the uneven terrains of the national and transnational. The focus on a regional archive of sexuality and its networks of containment and excess challenges the current dominant teleological narrative of sexual progress in the time of globalization.

The Labor of Return Journeys

In order to track how cultural texts and events are mediated and sedimented through popular memory and access the local contours of political struggles around sexuality, I returned to Kerala in 2008 and 2009 as a researcher and spent sustained periods of time observing and participating in political meetings such as the ‘Idam: Convention For Sexual Minorities in Kerala’ (September 2008) and the Feminist Kerala Network meeting in Varkala (2008). I also went to campaigns organized by the Kerala State AIDS Control Society (KSACS) such as the Red Ribbon Express campaign. The posters of soft-porn films pasted on the walls of busy streets and the family planning and AIDS prevention messages in railway stations were familiar sights that I recorded with more alacrity on my research visits to Kerala. I had informal conversations with outreach officers and other members of NGOs who worked with sexual minorities. I also connected with feminist and sexuality-based groups and conducted interviews with media persons and activists who were involved with the campaigns and events that I analyzed. For example, to reconstruct the Kunjibi case, I interviewed feminist activists who mobilized against her custody murder, the photographer who recorded her death and the sex workers who were her friends and supporters. To provide a thick description of how this case and the

political mobilization surrounding it animates the present, I found it useful to juxtapose print and visual media accounts with oral narratives of people who were involved in this event. In this dissertation I examine all these different media as ways in which events are constructed and kept alive, and how history making is a transitive and quotidian process.

During my research in Kerala, some of the people I interacted with asked me, “Why on earth did you go all the way to the US to study your home state?” Some others saw me as a political ally whose investment in the region had not waned. But there was also a legitimate anxiety about the unequal balance between them and me in terms of funding, mobility and access to structures of knowledge production. “We are ready to help everyone, but there is no one to help us,” Sanjesh, a sexuality rights activist in Kerala observed when we met for the first time. The KSACS media manager was reluctant to give me access to their campaign materials. He feared that my US location would affix a stamp of authority to my interpretation of their campaigns. This process made me more reflective about the different realms of knowledge production that I mediated - the regional, the national and the transnational - and the need to question the “naturalized hierarchies between these sites of knowledge production” (Lukose 2009: 14). My travel between the two locations that I straddle, the US academy and the public sphere of Kerala, was not in any way a smooth, fluid one. Each location made different demands on me and forced me to undertake different acts of translation, while resisting some of the labels under which I could be easily slotted, whether it is that of the ‘detached US based researcher’ or the ‘native informant’. Tejaswini Niranjana observes that: “the importance of moving in and out of languages, of being always between languages, indeed the importance of translation, needs to be acknowledged as a way of

keeping open the space of criticism,” especially in the postcolonial context (Niranjana 1998: 144). She argues that to simultaneously hold on to and negotiate different sorts of languages, linguistic as well as conceptual, is a necessary condition for feminism in the postcolony. My positioning in the US academy heightened the awareness of “existence in-translation” (Niranjana 1998: 135).

Unlike conventional anthropologists who go to the ‘field’ to conduct research and base their project on this intensive period of participatory observation and ethnography, this dissertation is in many ways a return journey to a landscape that is familiar and formative. What changes when one returns ‘home’ as an academic researcher? Returning ‘home’ as a researcher based in the US demanded a critical distance from a familiar set of discourses. As a researcher I occupied a negotiated space between familiarity and distance, straddling the interstices between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. Feminist postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Trinh Minh Ha, Chandra Mohanty, Kirin Narayan and Kamala Visweswaran have examined the limits and hierarchies of projects of knowledge production in which the postcolonial researcher is positioned as a ‘native informant’³³ who is also an ‘authentic subject’. Often researchers who work on unfamiliar parts of the world or marginalized cultures have the inordinate burden of being completely identified with their research projects. While acknowledging personal investments, how can we practice reflexive kinds of knowledge production that trouble the binary divide between Self/Other and between the West and the rest? Feminist scholarship has questioned the authority of the unitary, knowing subject and has pointed to how all projects of knowledge production are located and function through modes of

³³ Spivak provides a philosophical investigation of the position of the ‘native informant’ (Spivak 1999).

identification and distancing³⁴. Kirin Narayan's "How Native is a Native Anthropologist?" argues that the extent to which anyone is an "authentic insider" is questionable. In this historical moment she says that the insider/outside paradigm is too reductive and it might be more apt to view anthropologists in terms of shifting identifications (Narayan 1993). Thus rather than fix the researcher as an 'authentic' subject whose autobiographical investments lead to a project of self-discovery, I propose that a reflexive, feminist methodology of knowledge production would require shifting modes of identifications and critical reflection on the familiar. This is the situated, ethnographic method that I work towards in this dissertation.

Unlike ethnographers who conduct their own interviews and thus produce new material for analysis or a historian who might unveil unseen materials from the archive,³⁵ this project is concerned with circuits of cultural texts and events. Contrary to conventional anthropological practice, in my final chapter I analyze interviews conducted not by me, but by *Sahayatrika*, on a particular case of lesbian suicide. My methodology and theoretical interests makes it possible for me to use interviews conducted by an activist group, for my aim is to examine how 'lesbian suicides' get framed and mobilized in the public sphere. I am asking, how do they circulate and produce a recognizable lesbian subject? I analyze the framing of these interviews in a published format and how

³⁴ Donna Haraway argues for the necessity of a feminist theory of situated knowledges that "require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of 'objective' knowledge" (Haraway 1991). Thus she foregrounds the contingencies of all acts of knowledge production and the recognition of that as necessary for a feminist epistemology.

³⁵ Anjali Arondekar observes that the coupling of archive with minoritized knowledge formations has led to some simplistic and triumphant forms of empiricism. She argues for the need to be aware of the "*politics* of the archive [...] because it is rarely a simple matter of revealing secrets waiting to be found" (Arondekar 2009: 20).

the circulatory context makes this suicide a crucial event in the history of sexuality in Kerala.

There are many intermediaries in my plotting of the Kerala public sphere. These include activists who document and investigate lesbian suicides, journalists and academics who comment on texts and events, reviewers who categorize films and frame them for an audience or film-makers who see themselves as interventionist. I position myself amidst an array of commentators, but I also try to be aware of the particularity of my own position and how it differs from other actors in the scene. For I am a participant, who is interpreting these cultural circuits and thus has to occupy a critical distance from the events on the ground. While the activist has to resolve the political problems that they are confronted with and work on their feet to come up with strategic moves, the cultural theorist can step back and provide a view of the situation that retains the tensions around irresolvable issues. The aim is not to come up with quick solutions, but to intervene in discursive formations so as to forge new models of thinking about the political. This ability to occupy a third position, which involves a suspension of quick judgment, is a valuable one that I try to retain in this dissertation. My position as an interpreter of cultural networks allows me to participate in the process of revising the sexual geography of Kerala. But I see this writing as a collaborative process. I am in conversation with other political and cultural actors who constitute the Kerala public sphere. Through this awareness I try to undermine my position of author-ity.

Interventions of the Project

One significant way in which my dissertation differs from other scholarship on sexuality in Kerala is that I move away from their frequent nostalgic return to a matrilineal past in claiming that Kerala is a space of exception. Drawing on T. Muraleedharan's article,³⁶ Gopinath argues that Kerala is a space that exists as a tangential "other" in relation to the Indian nation and therefore a film like *Sancharram* can draw on the effaced histories of a matrilineal past that "stubbornly refuse to reconcile themselves within a national present" (Gopinath 2007: 352). In this dissertation I point to the risks of valorizing and holding on to the colonial past and to matrilineal practices as a liberatory history that makes Kerala always already different. This setting up of Kerala as a space of exception, using the memory of an upper caste pre-colonial past, results in an erasure of the challenges faced by sexuality politics in the present. My analysis is grounded in those challenges. It is focused on post-independence Kerala and the formative and volatile cultural practices that make the contemporary public sphere of Kerala a sexually charged space. Rather than erase the violent, regulatory mechanisms of sexuality by resorting to a matrilineal past, I believe it is productive to locate tentative, fleeting gestures of resistance that push against these norms in the postcolonial period. By focusing on the present and the recent past, I also critically intervene in the dominant tendency of sexuality scholarship on India³⁷ to return to the pre-colonial period in search of more fluid representations of sexuality. I point to how this nostalgia for the pre-colonial era might result in an erasure of the seething sexual tensions in postcolonial India.

³⁶ Muraleedharan 1998.

³⁷ See Thadani 1996.

From the haunting power of oral narratives on lesbian suicides to the ambiguous affective responses evoked by a photograph of a murdered prostitute, this dissertation is orchestrated through texts and events that are marked by their irresolution. It is in this back and forth between the past and the present, action and passivity, life and death, that I locate a discourse of sexuality that questions many of the assumptions of dominant modes of identity politics and human rights language. Analyzing the instability of the cultural realm illustrates that the policing of sexuality is anxious, and it is an ongoing process. It also makes us aware of the power and possibilities of incomplete gestures and twilight zones of resistance. Naisargi Dave argues that *Fire* (dir: Deepa Mehta 1996) was a critical event for lesbian politics in India, but the constitutive exclusions of the public sphere are weighed in favor of existing moral hegemonies and work against formations of new political imaginations (Dave 2006: 293). In this inaugural moment of lesbian politics in India, the lesbian had to suture herself to the already existing narrative of nation and culture, “Indian and Lesbian” being a telling placard. Dave explains her analysis on the risks of celebrating visibility as follows: this is “not an argument against public activism, or political visibility, this argument is meant to complicate certain truisms about the teleology of activist engagement, from shadows into light, from unnamed to the named, from the rightless to the holder of rights” (Dave 2006: 293). The instability of the cultural sphere is crucial in this dissertation, because it allows me to question simplistic celebrations of teleological visibility.

One of the interventions of this dissertation is to critique the process of making “legible across borders” (Nair 2009), which often means translating texts and events into

a dominant register that evaporates the specificities of time and space.³⁸ In a global gay identity discourse, developments within the Global South are often seen as derivative. On 2 July 2009, the Delhi High Court delivered a landmark judgment reading down the colonial era Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, thus decriminalizing private same-sex relations between consenting adults.³⁹ This historic judgment was described in the national and international media as “India’s Stonewall”. According to this narrative, India in 2009 has finally caught up with the epic event of 1960s New York City. By using the Stonewall reference the ruling is rendered globally legible. My intervention troubles the teleology of development that is key to the unidirectional globalization of sexuality in which “the West, Western cultures and the English language stand in as the ‘origin’ of cultural exchanges and non-Western societies occupy the discursive position of ‘targets’ of such exchanges” (Cruz-Malave` and Manalansan 2002:6). I contribute to current debates in the field of sexuality studies and transnational feminism by engaging with the historical and cultural specificities of discourses of sexuality in a regional context in India.

My project examines the risks of celebrating visible bodies and liberated voices who, according to liberal models of politics, walk the path of empowerment and agency. I track cultural practices which critique the rational, universal subject which is at the core of discourses of liberal feminism, identity politics, human rights and developmental health programs. I point to the risks of such well-laid paths to empowerment and agency; they have resulted in multiple exclusions and erasures. What resistances and everyday

³⁸ Yasmin Nair. “Why India’s Section 377 Ruling is Not Stonewall” (August 7, 2009) <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=21779>. Accessed on Oct 7, 2009.

³⁹ Within academic and activist debates on sexuality in India, the legal question has been extremely significant. For a discussion of the links between law and queer politics, see Bhaskaran 2004; Kapur 2005 and Bhan 2005.

struggles go unmapped when we look only through the liberal lens? In my discussion of the oral narratives about lesbian suicides, if we apply a linear trajectory of progress and empowerment, these women whose struggle ends in suicide can only be seen as victims crushed by social pressures. But my reading of the interviews aims to tease out the political stakes of retaining the space of tension between agency and passivity, visibility and invisibility, through the spectral figure of the lesbian. My discussion of the interviews conducted by *Sahayatrika* extricates “serious contradictions that disable linear narratives of desire and doom, identity and self-fashioning” (Tellis 2003). In my analysis, modes of embodiment that draw on tropes of melodramatic and pornographic excess become significant in imagining a new horizon of politics which is not seamlessly linked to human rights and identity politics.

My dissertation examines the close links between social death and literal death in Kerala, the danger of social questioning that literally pushes individuals to self-annihilation. Discussing how markers of *streetvam* (feminine essence) is a pre-requisite for women to acquire legitimacy in the public sphere, Sreekumar observes: “with it the ordinary woman gains the worth and dominance of respectability. Without it she endangers her social self” (Sreekumar 2009: 21). Life narratives of sex workers and lesbians point to the proximity of death when certain lives are rendered illegible. Debates and reports in the last two decades on the recurring suicides of young women in lesbian relationships and the ‘family suicides’ in which a family commits suicide as a result of sex scandals, point to the thin line between life and death in contemporary Kerala. When the social self is devalued, life itself becomes a questionable zone, literally and metaphorically. Women who are marginalized through multiple vectors such as class,

caste and religion are more vulnerable and many of the reported suicide cases are of marginalized women. In order to forge a locally relevant sexuality politics, it is essential to engage with how sexual norms and possibilities of mobility are radically different for under-privileged women.⁴⁰ The fourth chapter of the dissertation “Shifting Spaces, Frozen Frames: Visions of Queer Politics,” examines the risks of drawing on mythologies of caste to produce a radical lesbian subject. In the attempts to make a transnational lesbian film, set in the lyrical beauty of picture-perfect Kerala, *Sancharram* valorizes the matrilineal Nair tradition which becomes the axis through which the central protagonist stages her rebellion.

A Small Place?

For many of the readers of this dissertation, located in the US, Kerala will be a world apart from the immediate realities of their lives. There are many ways in which ‘small places’⁴¹ can be unmoored and made mobile in this global economy. We are in an age in which diversity is valorized, as long as the center remains unshaken by the predicaments of the periphery. As Stuart Hall succinctly puts it, “to be at the leading edge of modern capitalism is to eat fifteen different cuisines in any one week” (Hall 1997: 181). As a focus on globalization and its structural impacts replaces Postcolonial Studies in the Euro-American academy today, many cultural theorists explore the possibilities opened

⁴⁰ Rowena and Christy’s (2006) study on the violence against Chithra Lekha, a Dalit woman who entered into the traditionally male profession of autorickshaw driving, examines how allegations of immorality and sexual promiscuity were raised in order to delegitimize Chithra Lekha’s protests against the oppressive structures of caste and gender.

⁴¹ Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (Kincaid 1988) is a powerful exposition of a world in which some places are populated with people whose mobility is severely restricted. I draw on her usage of the small place and also the term fragment to pull together the multiple ways in which a region might get frozen even as it circulates in the global economy and the power of the fragment to disrupt homogeneous narratives about the nation and the global. I look for discourses in which the region is not appropriated as just another ‘local/e’ that fits into the global umbrella.

up by global flows and new ‘media-scapes’ (Appadurai 1996). In the midst of such celebrations of fluidity and permeability, it is all the more important to emphasize how ‘small places’ run a greater risk of being frozen or co-opted under a global umbrella.

Within the national schema Kerala has a place of privilege because of its political, cultural and economic history. But in the transnational economy it is a ‘small place’ that runs the risk of being framed in a snapshot fashion, with all of its complexities bled out. For example, *Sancharram* circulates transnationally as a lesbian story from an exotic, faraway land of lyrical charm. ‘In a Land Steeped in Tradition...A Secret Love’, says the blurb of the film. When activists and academics ‘discover’ resistant texts or lives and translate them for circulation in a global economy, they risk freezing these texts so as to fit them within the dominant registers of what agency or resistance should look like. When scripts of liberation, such as that of the gay lesbian movement, become indiscriminately mapped onto all parts of the world, they lose their power to affect change and become hegemonic instead.⁴² Mary John’s note of caution, that “postcolonial and feminist theorists need to become more aware of the partial and composite characteristics of the theories they depend upon” (John 1996: 2), has only acquired greater significance in the last decade. She observes that emancipatory programs such as that of feminism have not been immune to a configuration in which the West has the “ability to project its influence beyond its geopolitical borders” (John 1996: 2). The flow of knowledge forms is also controlled by the flow of global capital. But a project such as the one I undertake, especially because I am positioned in the US academy, does give me a limited power to critically intervene in global networks of knowledge production.

⁴² “As avant-garde as queer politics in the US imagines itself to be, it must stay anti-universalist. Other queers are not a local derivation from a Queer,” observes Cindy Patton in her analysis of sexuality politics in Taiwan (Patton 2002a: 199).

Rather than package an ‘incredible’ or ‘forever oppressed’ India for the academic marketplace, my attempt is to invite the reader to undertake with me a journey to spaces that disturb the certainties of a liberal humanist politics.

This is a risky task of cultural translation I undertake as a researcher; I make available for transnational academic analysis the cultural world of Kerala. In writing about an all too familiar/familial world, but approaching it through the critical lens of a dominant academic discourse, I have struggled to point to the limits of translation, to reflect on what is gained by foregrounding incommensurability. “To pass through what is difficult and unfamiliar is an essential part of critical thinking within the academy today, an academy whose dedication to ‘comparative’ work is not a field or subfield of its operation but a fundamental and irreversible condition of communication itself,” writes Butler in her commentary on the power of encountering knowledge that is estranging and not quickly translatable into familiar forms (Butler 2003: 199). Encountering a project on a different context can be intellectually productive when the field of investigation has the power to point to the limits of one’s tools of analysis. The challenge of my return journey was how conscious I could become of my own knowledge formations and how they are rendered insufficient by what I initially assumed was a familiar world. These moments of vulnerability, when the dominant paradigms of the public and of agency, of rights and resistance, are reconfigured by regional discourses are productive tensions in this project.

Researchers who take on projects on burning political issues are often asked: how will your analysis change things on the ground? Will it reduce AIDS? Will it stop lesbian suicides? These are not merely questions that are imposed from outside. Embedded in

structures that valorize clear paths of action and strategies for empowerment, there have been moments of crisis when I have asked myself these questions. But then I tell myself that the value of an intellectual project is not in producing blueprints for action or setting applicable targets. In a global economy that is so entrenched in a desire for clarity, for data and numbers, for target population and behavioral change, for progress in forms that can be recognized as progress, it is important to produce local accounts of sexuality which open up rather than foreclose models of political action. This dissertation passionately believes in the need to muddy the ground, the need to strive for an academic practice in which cultural and political practices is not neatly packaged through key words like agency or empowerment. But what it demands is a suspension of quick judgment, an ability to “turn the critical gaze on ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other” (Mahmood 2005: 37). The labor of this project is to move away from a world that demands strategic action and political foreclosure, to assert the value of a nuanced narrative of subjectivities suspended between action and passivity, resistance and submission, life and death. These are fragmentary⁴³ accounts of a region that hopes to render vulnerable the certainties of dominant theories and paradigms of action.

Dissertation Overview

The first chapter, “Remembering the Prostitute: Trails of Excess,” analyzes cult representations of the prostitute figure in pre-90s popular media and its afterlife in the post-90s period. I show how human rights documents and events, couched in the

⁴³ “To make a claim on behalf of the fragment is also, not surprisingly, to produce a discourse that is itself fragmentary. It is redundant to make apologies for this” (Chatterjee 1993: 13).

language of realism, often slip into the territories of melodrama and pornography. I argue that the anxiety to fix the gaze on these texts is also a struggle to maintain the foundational narratives of Kerala as a rational and moral region. I examine how these figurations of the prostitute that straddle seemingly oppositional registers disturb the ideals of femininity and sexuality. The second chapter, “Claiming the Day: The Sex Worker as Subject,” is a critical analysis of the dual autobiographical project by a sex worker and activist, Nalini Jameela, in 2005. State-produced scenes of address are integral to Jameela’s account of her subjectivity in an era when the sex worker is positioned as an agent in the AIDS discourse. Jameela’s multiple attempts at wrestling with narrative forms can be read as a complex response to the stateist attempt to represent the sex worker. I argue that these fraught narratives of self-composition point to how a marginalized subject has to engage with public discourses of rights and sexual health, but must also critique it in order to give an account of the self.

The third chapter, “Shifting Spaces, Frozen Frames: Visions of Queer Politics,” moves from the hyper-visible figure of the sex worker to that of the lesbian, a less visible presence in the Kerala public sphere. I read *Sancharram* (2004), labeled as the first lesbian film in Malayalam, in conversation with another Malayalam film from the eighties, *Deshadana Kili Karayarilla (The Wandering Bird Does Not Cry* 1986), in order to mine the multiple sexual imaginations within the Kerala public sphere. My aim in this chapter is to push against this narrative of progress where current forms of representations on sexuality are easily assumed to be more progressive than in the past. The comparative reading in this chapter points to the dangers of valorizing a singular model of sexuality politics as universally applicable and the only available mode. In the

fourth chapter, “Living Together, Dying Together: The Politics of Lesbian Hauntings,” I argue that the ‘lesbian’ as a mobilizable figure haunts the public sphere of Kerala and that it is necessary to examine this process of haunting to understand the complexities of sexual minority politics. I mainly analyze the interviews on lesbian suicides conducted by *Sahayatrika* as part of a Fact Finding project. These regional interventions draw on a transnational LGBT discourse, but also raise new challenges that cannot be addressed through the rights-based model of politics. Multiple slippages and excesses surface when acts and bodies that cannot be easily classified become the basis for claims for justice and my analysis tries to retain these tensions instead of rushing to consolidate a stable identity.

The conclusion reflects on how the dissertation points to new horizons of possibility offered by cultural practices that do not foreclose and define modes of being a political subject. In the era of globalization, as blueprints for sexual and cultural liberation are mapped onto all corners of the world, a critical analysis of cultural production in a regional context makes us pause and reflect on the limits of universal categories of rights and agency. The local or the regional here is not a space of exception, but makes a demand for new forms of analysis that take into consideration the centrality of cultural practices in flux as a key site of politics.

Chapter 2

Remembering the Prostitute: Trails of Excess

Two Sexual Events

A film poster of a young woman dressed only in a flimsy white shirt that clings to her body. Wet hair scattered around her face as she pulls up the shirt to examine a scratch on her thigh. Glass bangles on her hands. Bend eyes that do not meet the viewers gaze.

A black and white news photograph of a woman's dead body in a police lock-up. Her rope-like sari forms the noose around her neck. The camera is positioned behind her body. A long strand of plaited hair and dangling feet meet the viewer's eyes.

These are two images that have an iconic value in the public sphere of Kerala. They are controversial visual texts that become the center of two foundational events on sexuality in pre-90s Kerala. This chapter brings together and analyzes the representation of these two events that occupy opposing positions in the common sense of the regional and national imaginary. The film poster is from I. V. Sasi's cult film *Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights, 1978) on the life of a struggling prostitute. This film was a huge hit at the time of its release in Kerala and there are multiple, contentious circuits through which it has lived on in public memory. My analysis demonstrates its status as an event in the media-tem public sphere of Kerala. This is one of the most notorious films produced by the Malayalam film industry, perceived as being responsible for launching soft-porn cinema as a genre in the nation. But the film undergoes a dramatic transformation in its public

positioning as it is recouped as a realist depiction of the life of a struggling prostitute in the post-90s period. The news-photograph is of the death of a prostitute, Kunjibi, under police custody in 1987. The Kunjibi case resulted in organized feminist protests in Kerala that resonate in Kerala history. *Bodhana* (Awareness), the feminist organization that lead this protest has been renamed as *Anweshi* (Seeker), and is still one of the prominent feminist organizations in Kerala. The Kunjibi case is also a milestone because it is one of the first events in the history of Kerala that positioned the prostitute as the subject of rights.

I examine the *Avalude Ravukal* debate in conjunction with other pre-90s political and cultural events on the representation of the prostitute, specifically the death of Kunjibi in 1987, to raise these questions: Why is it that in the last two decades there is a revival of interest in a ‘pornographic’ film on a prostitute and attempts to recoup it as realism? How do cultural circuits that coalesce the prostitute figure challenge norms of morality that are central to regional identity? How does this process of remembering that I undertake produce a history of Kerala marked by erotic tensions? Realism and human rights are two of the forms in which representations of the prostitute can gain legitimacy. But I show how human rights documents, couched in the language of realism, often slip into the territories of melodrama and pornography. I examine how these events that produce the prostitute figure disturb the ideals of femininity and sexuality that are foundational to the regional identity of Kerala.

The diffuse networks of circulation of a cult film and a political event on the figure of the prostitute both signal the anxious attempts in the public sphere to control ways of seeing cultural texts. There are contradictory affective responses and textual

codes that are straddled by the representation of these two public events. But, for the normative order, it is essential to sanitize and control these codes of representation and modes of reception. This chapter exposes the unruliness in the modes of circulation of political and popular representations of sexuality. My analysis troubles the standard categorization of the *Avalude Ravukal* debate and the Kunjibi case as disconnected narratives. The ambiguities and contradictions in the circulation of *Avalude Ravukal* and the Kunjibi case makes it productive to read them in conjunction with each other. These are both cultural occurrences from the past that have afterlives in the present and I examine the political significance of the process of remembering; a process I also participate in as a researcher. It is the contradictions and anxieties around these events that make them productive sites to track the uneasy terrains of sexuality in India.

The Walls Feel Ashamed

“As this film became a major hit in theaters in Kerala it was also released in the big city of Madras. The walls of this major city were adorned with posters of Raji examining the scratch on her thighs. [...] At that point I wrote that this girl who came from the Kerala coast is destroying the respectability of the walls of Tamil Nadu. Malayalis there have to bend their heads in shame. If these walls had life they would have shoed this girl away” (Sreedharan 1999: 3).

At the time of its release, *Avalude Ravukal* was lampooned as a disgraceful film that soiled the name of Kerala as a region. Journalist and film critic, E. V. Sreedharan’s comment captures the anxiety about how this film tarnished the good name of Kerala in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, whose capital was Madras. It was labeled as a film about a prostitute that aims to titillate and gross money through the indecent exposure of the female body. But since the late 1990s, the film has been recouped as a bold,

progressive portrayal of the subaltern prostitute.¹ In 1999, E.V. Sreedharan backtracked and critiqued his own hyperbolic report on the film, “The Walls Feel Ashamed,” written in 1978. Realism as a category is central in the attempts to recoup this film as a cultural artifact. The *Avalude Ravukal* debate is a significant event in the figuring of the prostitute in the public sphere of Kerala.

Actress Seema as Rajamma (Raji), the seductive and outspoken prostitute in this black and white film, is one of the most memorable characters in Malayalam screen history.² A Hindu woman from a working class background loses her parents at a young age and enters into prostitution as a means of survival. Raji uses her earnings to support herself and her younger brother. The film shows her everyday struggles as she works as a prostitute who has sex with men in hotels and other semi-public spaces. During the course of the film her younger brother dies through police torture. The school teacher, who is indirectly responsible for her brother’s death, tries to have a sexual relationship with her, but she refuses his advances. Her object of love is Babu, an MA English literature student, who lives close to her house. She seduces him, but also refuses to have sex with him without romantic involvement. Throughout the course of the film he does not reciprocate her declarations of romantic love, but towards the end of the film in a dramatic turnaround he decides to marry her. The film ends with her entry into an upper-caste domestic setting, but the narrative focuses on her life as a prostitute.

¹ Christine Gledhill in “Rethinking Genre” argues how genre analysis is productive because it examines the cultural work of producing and knowing films. She observes that there is a need to rethink genre “in its triple existence as industrial mechanism, aesthetic practice and cultural-critical discursivity” (Gledhill 2000: 223). My analysis of *Her Nights* is concerned mainly with the aesthetic practices in the film and the cultural critical discourses that it engenders.

² Film reviewers mention how this was a controversial role that none of the established heroines in Malayalam were willing to take up (E. V. Sreedharan, 1999: 6). So it became the launch vehicle for a new heroine and Seema went on to become one of the most successful heroines of Malayalam cinema. Her entry through a film like *Her Nights* did not restrict her acting career. From action films to family drama, Seema was noted for her versatility and range.

Manjunath Pendakur in his article on the role of censorship in Indian cinema mentions *Avalude Ravukal* as a film that could “push the limits of allowability by providing morally acceptable endings” (Pendakur 2003: 76). He quotes the director I. V. Sasi’s comment that he had to reshoot the ending of the film because the censors refused to give the film a certificate “unless there was a happy ending. They wanted the hero to marry the prostitute, even though it went against the grain of the film and the prostitute’s character” (1980: 65). My analysis of the history of circulation of the film and its textual codes demonstrates how the film retained its moral ambiguities in spite of the censor board’s attempts to control the diegetic flow of the film. Pasting a ‘happy ending’ did not erase the excesses in the film, nor did it streamline its contradictory modes of reception.

The prostitute as a figure has a long history in Kerala and there are accepted modes through which this figure can be represented in literature or on screen. Often the prostitute is positioned as an emblem of exploitation, a victim of social inequality who deserves sympathy and not chastisement. For example, P. A. Bakkar’s *Chuvanna Vithukal* (*Red Seeds* or *Seeds of a Revolution*, 1977), a story about two sisters caught in the net of prostitution and police harassment, won much appreciation in the state. The main actress, Shantakumari, was given a State Award in the best actress category and this film was seen as a testament of P. A. Bakkar’s leftist ideology. The moral anxiety that *Avalude Ravukal* evoked is linked to the commercial success of the film and its huge popularity in states outside Kerala. The film was decried as a titillating, skin-show at the time of its release and given an ‘A’ (Adults Only) certificate by the censor board.³

³Official film censorship in India started with the Cinematograph Act of 1918. The certification system was introduced in 1949 with two kinds of certificates, ‘U’ (Universal) and ‘A’ (Adults Only). A Central Board of Film Censors was also established during this period. After independence, a committee was set up to

Shereef, the screenplay writer, recalls the opposition the film encountered during the time of its production:

When the film was completed and previewed in Madras all the reigning kings of Malayalam cinema predicted that people would tear apart the seats in the theater if we took this film to Kerala. The film was banned by the censor board. Then it was after much difficulty that [the producer] Ramachandran got permission for exhibiting the film (Shereef 1999: 4).

Thus during the preview the prediction was that the enlightened audience of Kerala would violently disapprove of a titillating portrayal of a prostitute's life. But contrary to such expectations, the film was a big hit in Kerala and in other states in India. The film is consistently mentioned in discussions about Malayalam cinema's investment in the production of soft-porn films.⁴ In 1978, an article in the popular, national film magazine *Film Fare* uses *Avalude Ravukal* as an example of how Malayalam cinema was becoming increasingly sex-oriented.⁵ It mentions how this film was a box-office hit in the neighboring state of Karnataka and how it changed filmgoers' taste to such an extent that even people who could not understand the language flocked to the theater to watch the film ("Show All, Tell All" 1978: 10). In the *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* the editors describe it as, "originally a poignant if sexually explicit love story featuring an orphan brother and sister, notorious in a dubbed version titled *Her Nights*" (Rajadhyaksha and

look at the state of the film industry and the Cinematograph Act of 1952 was enacted. The name of the committee was later changed to Central Board of Film Certification.

⁴ Questioning the quick assumptions that soft-porn is a 'regressive', 'anti-woman' genre Radhakrishnan argues for the need to examine what the category of soft-porn is, "if we were to maneuver outside accepting the genre as a given, we will have to start with defining the genre" (Radhakrishnan 2010: 196). He observes that it is through the process of circulation, labeling and modes of reception that a film gets slotted as soft-porn more than whether the state has given it an A certificate or not. The absence of a separate pornographic film industry, as in the case of Western countries, also complicates the category of soft-porn in India.

⁵ Malayalam cinema since the sixties has produced directors who played a significant role in the development of art cinema in India, mainly distinguished by realist aesthetics. But it is also perceived as the state invested in the production of sexually explicit films which are dubbed and circulate in all parts of India. Thus it is a film industry that oscillates between what is perceived as two extremes.

Willemen 1994: 192). This notoriety that the film gained in the first two decades, mainly through its national reception, plays a significant role in its cult status in public memory.

These sentiments are reflected also in 1978 Malayalam film journals, but the debates are more nuanced and at the time of release the film had mixed responses. In the late seventies and early eighties there was concern about the sexual overtones of this film; but there were also attempts to reclaim the film on the grounds of the innovative way in which it handled a sensitive theme. Malayalam film star, Prem Naseer in a discussion titled, “Why does Malayalam Cinema have this Bad Name?” says that the “sex wave” in Malayalam cinema began after the success of *Avalude Ravukal*. But he goes on to explain that this was because of a misreading of the film’s popularity: “many people mistook the reason for the success of *Avalude Ravukal*. They thought it was its depiction of sex. [...] But that was not the reason for the film’s success. It succeeded because of the novelty of the theme and the enjoyable way it was depicted” (1981: 28). Some of the reviewers granted an ethical impulse to the film in its commitment to lay bare the economic inequalities in society: “*Avalude Ravukal* is the story of a girl who is pushed into prostitution because of circumstances and by being orphaned at a young age. [...] These artists show how a commercial film can be made artistically” (*Nakshatrashala* 1978: 27). I. V. Sasi’s ambiguous positioning as a director who made commercially successful films, but also had a commitment to political issues, contributed to the contested positioning of *Avalude Ravukal* in Kerala’s public sphere at the time of its release. But these complications were erased as the film gained notoriety in the national context and until the late 1990s, even in accounts of regional cinema, *Avalude Ravukkal* was seen mainly as a sexually titillating soft-porn film.

Since the late 1990s, there is a renewed interest in the film *Avalude Ravukal* and attempts have been made to retrieve it as a bold portrayal of a prostitute that was far ahead of its times.⁶ In 1999, two decades after the release of film, the screenplay of *Avalude Ravukal* was published for the first time by Imprint Books. In the preface to the book, screenplay writer Shereef reminisces about apprehensions concerning the making of a film on a prostitute's life, a film "that was not suitable for a family audience, sex, anti-sentimental" (Shereef 1999: 2). But the publication of the screenplay was to him a testimony that the film had outlived such fears and found a place in the public sphere of Kerala. E.V. Sreedharan, the journalist who attacked the film tooth and nail at the time of its release, wrote the preface for this edition of the screenplay in which he regrets his earlier lack of judgement: "when *Avalude Ravukal* was released in 1978 I did not have any faith in that film. But today not only do I have faith in the film, but I also believe that we should seriously examine the human-interest issue put forward by the film in 1978." (Sreedharan 1999: 1) In 2004, almost twenty five years after the theater release of *Avalude Ravukal*, Mathrubhumi books, a publishing house run by an established newspaper, released a new edition of the screenplay.⁷ "This film was the story of a *thevadisi* (prostitute) in the language of those days, in today's language it would be described as the life-story of a sex worker," observes film critic Premchand in the introduction to this edition of the screenplay (Premchand 2004: 9). This shift in

⁶ I must qualify this statement. *Avalude Ravukal* is still seen as responsible for unleashing a series of soft-porn films in Malayalam by many film critics. In a recently published article on the female body and Malayalam cinema, C.S. Venkiteswaran writes, "the watershed film that turned the tide was I.V. Sasi's *Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights, 1978) which virtually opened the floodgates of a soft porn genre that went on to capture a national market for a brief period of time" (Venkiteshwaran 2010: 46). The notoriety that the film has because of its national circulation co-exists with more recent attempts to recuperate the film.

⁷ *Mathrubhumi* is a leading cultural institution in Kerala and so being published under that umbrella gives a stamp of legitimacy to this film which was initially dismissed as a "*tharapadam*" (trashy, low-class film).

terminology points to the changing position of the prostitute⁸. From the vantage point of the present, *Avalude Ravukal* is recouped as a progressive text. The two screenplays showcase the critical attempts to re-vision this film as a valuable cultural product in the post-90s context when the sex worker has a new position in the Kerala public sphere.

Notably, all attempts to recoup this film, whether in the past or the present, have emphasized its gritty, realist aesthetics. This is linked to the historical configuration of Malayalam cinema. It has acquired national and international recognition through its art cinema productions since the 1970s. Malayalam cinema is marked by its commitment to producing films that portray down-to-earth social realities. This definition of realism in Malayalam cinema has been influenced by the Progressive Writer's Movement in 1940s and 1950s when the aim of art was to capture the raw, realities of life.⁹ Thus art's real mandate was to depict the life-worlds of the masses, their sufferings, joys and struggles. More than a singularity of aesthetic form what defines realism in Malayalam cinema is a commitment to educate and transform, even as it entertains the audience. Thus realism as a formal category is defined by its pedagogic mode of address, influenced by the Leftist ideology of the state. Within Malayalam film criticism and other structures of recognition like state funding and awards, directors who take on socially relevant issues have reigned supreme.¹⁰

⁸ By the 1990s the discussion on sex work in Kerala entered a different phase because of the emergence of the sex worker as a target of governance and a participant in AIDS awareness and prevention programs. I will elaborate on the emergence of the "sex worker" in the next chapter.

⁹ In April 1936, the Progressive Writer's Association was formed and the Progressive Writer's Movement with its strong Marxist commitments had a strong impact on the cultural production in Kerala from the 1940s onwards. The writer's role here was to bring art closer to people, to advocate for the cause of the down-trodden and thus transform the very fabric of society. For an overview of the movement, see Chandrasekharan 1999.

¹⁰ Recent studies on the history of Malayalam cinema and its links to political formations in Kerala have suggested that the 'popular' as a domain represents the exterior or, at best, the leftovers of official narratives.

In the light of this regional judgment on film form it is not surprising that realism becomes an important ground on which a film like *Avalude Ravukal* could justify its decision to represent sex on screen. Premchand argues that this film outlived many other films which were hailed by critics and film-historians as ‘good cinema’ and sees this as a revolutionary move against the reified institution of film history and criticism which does not reflect the “mind of the public” (Premchand 2004: 3). But, even he does not question the seamless link between realism and good cinema. The film acquires value for him when it is watched not for “obscene pleasures” (Premchand 2004: 5), but for its faithful representation of marginal lives. There is a circularity in the argument here, because though the object of attention is a film that has a long history of circulation as soft-porn, the critical tools that are used to analyze it does not move out of the binary divide between good and bad cinema, where good cinema is what comes in the realist mode.

There is also an implicit distinction between two kinds of audience being made by film critics, the unenlightened audience who sees the film through a smutty gaze and sensitive viewers who can read a political message in the film. “If sex, stunts and violence are the ingredients for a film’s hit, this film which has all those ingredients, demands a new viewing eye. That is an eye that can see life’s misery” (Sreedharan 1984: 4). This is in keeping with Madhava Prasad’s argument that realist cinema is marked by a secure positioning for the viewer who can be a distanced, “sympathetic consumer” (Prasad 1998: 204) of the spectacle of suffering. When Sreedharan calls on the viewer who can see life’s misery, it is this detached vision of the secure, spectatorial position of realist cinema that he evokes. These strategies of distanciation (Prasad 1998: 194) work well in classic realist films in Malayalam, but a film like *Avalude Ravukal*, because of its

conflicting textual codes and diffuse modes of circulation, produces an inherently unstable viewing position. The motivation to fix the gaze of the spectator as a realist one is also a reflection on the need to sanitize the regional space of Kerala as one in which the figure of the prostitute is viewed only through a distant, rational gaze, not smudged by desire or titillation. The anxiety engendered by Raji's graphic image on the film poster does not quite go away. It persists even when Sreedharan recoups the film as one that can educate and enlighten if seen through the *right* eyes. In the 'pornographic' public there is the persistent anxiety that it might not be the right eyes watching in the right way.

The Spillovers of Realism

The opening sequence of *Avalude Ravukal* fulfills the criteria of a realist text. The film is made in black and white and this adds to its aura of documentary realism.¹¹ The spectator's gaze is aligned with that of the central character of the film, Raji, as she sees the city. The spectator sees fleeting glimpses of shop signs and pavements as though positioned inside a slow-paced rickshaw. This is cut to a close up shot of Raji's face followed by her narration of her life story. She recounts how after her parent's death, with an infant brother to fend for, she started begging on the streets. Homeless, she slept in public places like bus stops, pavements and the railway station. The film shows us Raji as a starving young girl wandering in the streets with her wailing, infant brother in her hand and being spurned by people as she begs for food. A young boy from the laboring class approaches her and gives her some money for food. "Boys who did manual

¹¹ The first Malayalam color film came out in 1961 and by 1978 many films were being produced in color. So the decision to make the film in black and white can be seen as part of its realist aesthetics. Black and white is perceived to be stark and less glossy and therefore more capable of capturing 'real life.' It is closer to the aesthetics of news-reels and documentary footage.

labor hugged me and went to sleep on cold nights. I don't know when I got spoiled, or how. By the time I realized I was a grown up woman, I had lost what a woman is supposed to guard," says Raji's voice in the backdrop while the viewer sees her asleep embracing a boy on the pavement. There are grimy bodies of other half clad boys around her as they all sleep on the roadside. The voice in the backdrop and the personal history give psychological depth to the character and establish spectatorial identification with Raji as in a realist text. The documentary humanism of realist cinema is evident in these scenes where the spectator occupies a distant position and watches the spectacle of suffering.

In contrast to these realist elements of the film, there are many sequences that are marked as fantasy. The sexual acts that Raji engages in are suggested and not shown explicitly in the film.¹² The character's experience of her body as sexually used by many men is telecast through her fantasy of her dancing body trapped in between cruel, whip wielding men. The opening sequence of the film, even before the titles appear, have a spectacular, theatrical quality. A shot of the violent, foaming waves in the sea, is cut to a medium shot of Raji dressed like a celestial dancer posing next to the roaring sea. This is cut to a shot of a man with a long black whip, lashing it against her body. Her ornamented body with sequined clothes moves in a choreographed manner, even as she tries to escape from the men who surround her with whips. The sound of the whip lashes on the viewer's ears, along with the crescendo of drum beats. The camera tracks her movements as she runs desperately, twirling away from the men who surround her. At two points the camera zooms in and she appears to run towards the viewer. She bodily

¹² "Apart from one shot where Raji wakes up from Jayan's bed there is not even one shot where a man and woman is sharing a bed. In spite of being a film about a prostitute," writes Shereef, in his attempt to counter the allegation that the film was all about sex (Shereef 1999: 4).

spills out of the screen and falls towards the audience, when the film cuts to a close-up shot of her, asleep in bed with a customer, in a hotel room. This dream like, choreographed depiction of male violence on a dancing woman's body punctuates the film's diegetic flow as the audience is transported to the dream landscape of Raji's imagination.

The film oscillates between its commitment to represent the grittiness of real life on screen, and an attempt to present the mental landscape of the central figure of the film. The title of the film, *Avalude Ravukal*, is an invitation to witness the unveiling of the sexual escapades in a prostitute's life. The night here signifies sexual activity and promiscuity. But 'night' is also evocative of the dark, unknown and mysterious mind of this generic 'her'. A promise to take the audience through a cinematic trip about what keeps 'her' awake in the night – her dreams, nightmares, anxieties and memories. The night refers to that which is beyond the visible, the known, the day. The film is as invested in giving the audiences glimpses of what is beneath the surface, the fantasies and imagination of a prostitute, as it is in documenting the 'reality' of a prostitute's life.

The pivotal song sequence in the film, from which the title emerges, "*Nidraaviheenangalallo, Avalude Raavukal*" ("Sleepless, Her Nights"), encapsulates the different aesthetic forms and the quick shifts between them that the film employs.¹³ The film is remembered for its musical numbers which take the audience to fantasy lands; the

¹³The music of this film, especially the playback song and the lullaby sung by Raji's mother "Unni Arariro" (My child, let me sing you to sleep) are significant elements in the sustained popularity of the film. "Sleepless, Her Nights" receives nostalgic praise on the "You Tube" site where the song sequence is available for viewing, "Sweet voice of S.Janaki from the picture *Avalude Ravukal*. How can we forget this song", "One of the best songs.....evergreen....everlasting". <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6C00YvjgZFI> . Accessed on July 5, 2010.

utopian impulse in the song sequences adds to its popular appeal.¹⁴ This song is a fantasy sequence in which an extreme close-up of Raji's face is the transition device to the palatial, ornate setting in which she dances dressed in a white, flowing costume. The figure of her as the dancing woman is transposed on to the close-up of her face, eyes wide open. The conflation of two different modes of representation is most evident in this shot.



Figure 4. Frame-grab from *Avalude Ravukal* (1978): Close-up of the heroine's face as transition device



Figure 5. Frame-grab from *Avalude Ravukal* (1978): From a fantasy musical sequence

In the magical dream, ephemeral pearls glow on her body and her hair. Bubbles float around her and the viewer sees multiple replications of her dancing body. The theatrical, spectacular sequence-making of the figure of the prostitute as an object of desire is

¹⁴ See Majumdar, 2009 for a discussion of the utopian aspects of film song sequences in Indian cinema and their links to popular appeal.

evoked both with the mirroring techniques and the use of flowing, translucent fabric that veils and unveils her. The song is shot in such a way that it draws attention to the process of fabric-ation of the figure of the prostitute. But in the same song sequence there are shots which follow more realist conventions such as the close-up shots and her silhouette against the expanse of the setting sun and the sea. The shot that is given below (Figure 6) adheres to the conventions of lighting, cinematography and setting of Malayalam art cinema sequences. The effect of natural lighting and the out-door setting of this shot is in sharp contrast to the focus on the decked up female body in an ornate setting in the fantasy shots.



Figure 6: Frame-grap from *Avalude Ravukal* (1978): Silhouette in nature setting

In its deployment of theatrical, spectacular sequences intercut with more realist shots, there are multiple formal and identificatory modes at work in this song sequence. This is true of the rest of the film as well.

Avalude Ravukal exceeds the vernacular definition of a realist text, because of its fantasy, melodrama and pornographic elements. The film formally borrows from

cinematic conventions of what is sexual or seductive and also sets into place the ingredients of an 'A' film. There were many films produced in the 1978 and early eighties in Malayalam which circulated as soft-porn films that used the term 'nights' in their title--*A Sweet-scented Night* (1978), *Sleepless Nights* (1978), *One Night in an Inn* (1978). This citational practice shows the impact *Avalude Ravukal* had on the production of the soft-porn film genre. The film has tropes from erotic scenes in Indian cinema that now seem familiar, such as Raji's long shower sequence with a jazzy background score, the rain-soaked heroine in a flimsy white shirt seductively posing for the hero and her stripping and posing semi-nude for a client. In the last sequence the viewer has the pleasure of watching Raji strip, even as she verbally abuses the man she is with and refuses to have sex with him. The film does not explicitly present a sexual act on screen, but the heroine's body is presented in tantalizing scenes which set up conventions of soft-porn cinema.

The film is melodramatic because of its appeal to familial sentiments, even though the protagonist is outside the conjugal family setting. Her relationship with her younger brother is a significant emotional angle in the film and it takes on the elements of a maternal melodrama. She often expresses her desire for marriage and conjugality, even when she is aware that this might be an impossibility in her life. In one sequence with the school teacher, Raji enacts the role of a wife. She dresses accordingly, cooks food for him and serves him saying that "this is the first time I am being taken care of by someone and I am cooking and serving food for someone, both these things will not happen again". There is a theatrical quality in these scenes where the nights of a prostitute's life is contrasted to domesticity through utopic song sequences and a 'family drama'.

Melodrama as a form has dominated the discussions within Indian cinema, because Indian cinema is often defined by how it goes against Western definitions of realist narratives. Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued that the line between melodrama and realism is a complicated one in Indian cinema (Rajadhyaksha 1993). There are elements of melodrama at work even in the films of Satyajit Ray, who was seen as a master of realist cinema. What is significant about the critical reception of *Avalude Ravukal* is that the standards this film are held up to are not classical definitions of a realist narrative, but a vernacular demand for social realism. The critical establishment of Malayalam cinema is more accepting of melodrama, but cannot tolerate the 'pornographic'. Critics who assert the artistic value of *Avalude Ravukal*, like Premchand and E.V. Sreedharan, erase the sexual scenes in the film even as they celebrate its powerful appeal through the use of melodramatic realism. It is clear that the pornographic in *Avalude Ravukal* has to be actively denied in order to recoup this film, and this makes it important to understand what is at stake in this disavowal.

Linda Williams, in "Gender, Genre and Excess," groups together horror, pornography and melodrama as genres which signify systems of excess that have a bodily impact on the spectators. Her essay explores the "notion that there may be some value in thinking about the form, function, and system of seemingly gratuitous excesses in these three genres" (Williams 1991: 3). Williams observes that in these genres the theater becomes a space of production of bodily fluids, such as tears or semen. By drawing attention to such bodily responses, she posits an understanding of the viewers that is grounded in physicality and a visceral response to what is happening on screen. The optimum distance of the sympathetic consumer of realist cinema is in sharp contrast here

to the unruly viewer who has an intimate relation to the screen that produces bodily excesses. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Madhava Prasad have argued that in postcolonial India, cinema is a form that is pivotal to the making of the modern nation because realism as a form calls forth on the legal, rights bearing citizen subject as its addressee, “realism [...] is a mode of cultural production that is tied to the fiction of the social contract. The legal citizen-subject of the modern capitalist state is its only possible addressee” (Prasad 1998: 196). Thus realist cinema is tied to the imagination of a bourgeois public sphere made up of individual subjects who have a controlled gaze. But the popularity of a film like *Avalude Ravukal* shows the conception of another kind of public which does not fit into this mould, a public whose intimacy with the screen is visceral and unbound.

Tracking the history of the cinematic medium in India, Rajadhyaksha observes how institutions of social governance from the early years of cinema have noted the social and economic consequences of cinematic “excess” and how “cinematic exchanges trigger off something that can spill over into extra-textual and other social spaces” (Rajadhyaksha 2009: 7). He argues that a particular kind of public is produced through celluloid by the twin regulatory mechanisms of containment and excess, containment being a formal requirement for the film frame and a social requirement of the movie theater. While Rajadhyaksha is focused on the unstable public engagement with celluloid, I analyze how excess and containment is a process through which all cultural production takes place and in tracking these tensions I produce a ruptured, representational genealogy of sexuality in Kerala. The debates and shifting trajectories of the reception of *Avalude Ravukal* point to the murky zones of the public sphere where the figure of the prostitute is not always met with a rational, controlled viewing response. In the post-90s context, as this film is re-

viewed, there are vehement attempts to contain it as a realist text that demands a distant sympathetic viewer. But this is contrary to both the textual codes of the film and also the more diffuse circuits of its reception.

Precarious Publics

From popular accounts of the reception of the film at the time of its release in Kerala and outside, it does seem to have been perceived as sexually raunchy and therefore not suitable for a ‘family audience’, a euphemism for women and children. “It All Started With...”, Babu Jayakumar’s blog-entry¹⁵ on the history of soft-porn in India, endows *Avalude Ravukal* with a forerunner status in establishing soft-porn cinema as a category (Jayakumar 2006). He describes in an anecdotal fashion how throughout the seventies and eighties the ‘Malayalam movie’ gained salacious overtones.¹⁶ His comments on the movie-going practices associated with sexual films draws attention to the assumed gender segregation at work in film reception in the seventies and eighties:

Malayalam movies had come to denote a stag party, an all-men affair at certain cinema halls — which were shunned by women — [...] thus starting a new trend in film-watching itself. It was the steamy scenes alone that warmed the hearts of men who watched them in the cavernous halls and discussed them at their local tea shops (Jayakumar 2006).

Film theorists¹⁷ have questioned the assumptions behind such blanket assertions and pointed to how the anxiety about soft-porn cinema in Kerala is grounded in a need to

¹⁵ Jayakumar, Babu. 2006. “It All Started with...Her Nights”

<http://www.canadiandes.com/forum.php?CID=53> Accessed on December 10, 2009.

¹⁶ One of the methodological questions raised by this chapter is what are the possible sources and methods to track the ways in which a film lives on in popular memory. The internet where film viewers interact with each other and actively distribute and comment on film clips and song sequences has made possible new debates on films from earlier periods of time. This is a site that does give us access to a virtual world of popular memory, albeit a limited one, which needs to be complemented with ethnographic methods.

¹⁷ For ethnographic work on film exhibition spaces in India, see Singh 2003.

police public morality. Radhakrishnan observes that in film historiography and public judgement “soft porn becomes the most visible non-family form of cinema, a kind of cinema that is frequented by (mostly lower class/caste lumpen) men” (Radhakrishnan 2010: 205) and the urge to control viewing practices is linked to the protectionist attitudes towards the family and the domestic woman anchored within it. Discussing the difficulties of classifying a film as soft-porn based on its form and content alone, Radhakrishnan argues that “a better space for defining soft porn [is] the domain of circulation”(Radhakrishnan 2010: 199). Reading the heterogeneous strands of *Avalude Ravukal* and diffuse modes of circulation over a span of time, challenges fixed assumptions about the category of soft-porn cinema, and its gendered reception.

Publicity materials like posters and film reviews have different modes of circulation from the film itself. Elements of the film like the songs and the screenplay can become unmoored from the film and acquire a more respectable status. From the 1990s onwards, *Avalude Ravukal* has been available in VHS and VCD format; it has been shown on Malayalam television channels and clips of the film are available on You Tube and on Malayalam cinema websites. The conception of the audience as a body of people who watch a film in the theater is broken prior to the video, TV and DVD revolution because a film’s publicity is staged primarily outside the theater. The debate around this film suggests a more dispersed realm through which a film circulates, so much so that an ‘A film’ that is meant primarily for a male audience can enter the mindscape of a child or of women. If one takes into consideration the publicity materials and the songs, which includes one that belongs to the most feminine of all genres, the lullaby

sung in a maternal voice, then the reasons for its popularity points to the particular modes of circulation of cinema as a heterogeneous medium that can cut across gender and age barriers, even as movie going practices may have excluded women from going to a theater to watch an ‘A film’.



Figure 7: Frame-grab from *Avalude Ravukal* (1978): The material for the controversial film-poster

There is an imagined audience that is projected when censors give this film an A certificate and a journalist comments that: “This was the first time a Malayalam film had a poster like this. The women of Kerala saw the poster, said ‘*chee*’ with a slight smile and bend their head in shame. But male desires were inflamed by this poster” (Sreedharan 1999: 2). In this statement there is a conjuring up of a social body, consisting of men and women, who should be protected from such a shameful or titillating poster. Raminder Kaur and William Mazarella observe:

the ideal of communicative rationality in public debate frowns upon the affective, spectacular tactics of publicity [...] Publicity is by definition an affect-intensive game. It touches upon the embodied and the intimate; its mode of persuasion is one of resonance rather than reason (Mazarella and Kaur 2009: 8).

This anxiety about the affective pull of film posters is played out in the discussion about the poster for *Avalude Ravukal* which is seen as irredeemable and as the most disgraceful aspect of the film's publicity.

This film creates a debate about representational forms, specifically the links between the visual and literary mediums and the possible responses elicited by these two forms.¹⁸ The preface to the first edition of the screenplay ends with the exhortation that this screenplay is sure to give reading pleasure to the audience and therefore it deserves to enter into the realm of 'Literature'. Sreedharan celebrates the powerful dialogues, "the words born in Raji's mouth", becomes a weapon against the inequalities in society (Sreedharan 1999: 4). The initial form of the film in its verbal format becomes the core that is resurrected in order to claim a new position to the film. Even though he reclaims the film-script as a tragic narrative that captured the "scent of real life", he holds on to his opinion that the poster for the film was an offensive one (Sreedharan 1999: 4).

He does a comparative reading of the film sequence and the poster depiction of *the* 'seduction sequence'. In the film Raji comes out after a bath wearing Babu's white shirt, and stands before him rubbing a scar on her thigh saying, "when I jumped the gate, the nail scratched me". He argues that screenplay places this act within a narrative, but the poster functions as pure image and divorced from the realist appeal of the film, it

¹⁸ The link between literature and cinema is made in *Her Nights* within the diegesis of the film also through Raji's love for literature. Her intellectual capability and depth of thinking is demonstrated when she refers to her reading practices in a conversation with Babu. Babu is awed by her insights and says that though he is a student of English Literature, he does not have the ability to think like her. The film posits a 'reading prostitute' to demonstrate that she deserved to be far above the situation that the audience finds her in. This trope is repeated in a more recent film *Susanna* (2000), which received public attention as an iconoclastic representation of the prostitute figure and was lauded by the sex worker's organizations in the state. In this film the protagonist asks, "Can't a *Veshya* (Prostitute) read Kazantzakis?" thus deploying her reading practices as a marker of her emancipated status.

aims only at titillation.¹⁹ Thus the screenplay brings *Avalude Ravukal* closer to a realist text to be appreciated by the right kind of audience. The image runs the risk of being appropriated and misused by a larger public, “attracted to the nudity and sexuality of the body being sold [...] used for satisfying bestial sexual hungers” (Sreedharan 1999: 4). The theater is marked off as a dark space to which people go on their own volition to watch films and there are gradations between theaters that are more ‘family-oriented’ and those that are dominated by men, but the poster which accosts the viewers in public spaces has a ubiquity which is the cause of more anxiety.²⁰

Avalude Ravukal strategically recalls other instances of cultural production in Kerala, which created a debate on what can be the subject matter of art. Raji mentions her fascination for the writing of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer²¹ during her first visit to Babu’s house, but the more direct link between her life and Basheer’s writing is established when the police come to arrest her at Babu’s house. In the high-pitched sequence where the police barges into the house in pursuit of her, she is engrossed in reading Basheer’s novella “Shabdangal” (“Voices”, 1947). First published in October 1947, after the declaration of Indian independence and prior to the formation of the Kerala state, this novella is a scathing account of a soldier retelling his life experiences during World War II and after. “Shabdangal”, at the time of publication, was a text that

¹⁹ This 1999 edition of the screenplay does use the controversial poster as the cover, but in the 2004 edition a different shot from the film is used.

²⁰ In the women’s movement in India, in the 1980s, protests against obscenity and the commodification of women’s bodies were staged by tearing down offensive film posters or pouring tar on them. Here again it is the publicness of film posters and their openness to multiple gazes that make them a target of protest. See Ghosh 1999 for a discussion of this phase of Indian feminism.

²¹ Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994) is one of the most vibrant and iconoclastic writers of modern Malayalam literature. He was a freedom fighter, novelist and short story writer. His immensely popular writing has been praised for its experiments in themes, form and language. Both through his use of colloquial language and his choice of themes he has been celebrated as a writer who holds a mirror to the life of ordinary people.

challenged norms of morality and respectability. This is the first well-known text in the history of modern Malayalam literature to take on the issue of homosexuality through its representation of a transgender sex worker's encounter with the narrator. Thus it pushed against the conventions of what could be represented in art. The impetus of the text was not to create boundaries between the licit and illicit, moral and immoral, rather it questions the structuring logic of morality itself.

Thematically *Avalude Ravukal* has similarities to “Shabdangal” because they both portray lives from the grimy edges of the social.²² “Shabdangal” immerses the reader in a cacophony of voices of people who are all unmoored and dispossessed. The prostitute, the disabled, the homeless, the poor – Basheer’s canvas is populated with characters who were perceived as the dregs of society. His novel is seen as a powerful example of social realism within Malayalam literature because it documents the gruesome, uncensored realities of ‘raw life.’²³ At the time of publication the novel was sharply criticized by the high priest of Malayalam literature Guptan Nair, “this book is populated with many wastrels and their fornications. [...] Homosexuality is a serious problem in our society. I feel that to write about it in such a casual fashion is a criminal offence” (Nair 1947/1994: 153). Literary battles were staged as critics argued about what liberties representational practices can take under the umbrella of progressive writing. *Avalude Ravukal*, in telling the life story of a struggling street prostitute, claims to participate in a similar project of

²² In the well known introduction to a novel by Basheer, *Balyakalaskhi* (Childhood Companion, 1944), M. P. Paul described it as a “page torn out of life. There may be drops of blood on the edges”. It is these powerful realist labels attributed to Basheer’s writings that the film deploys. He also has a short story titled “Pavapetavarude Veshya” (The Prostitute of the Poor) in which he criticizes the moral high ground taken against prostitution and shows how individuals are crucified while social structures remain unscathed.

²³ Literary critic Kesari Balakrishna Pillai predicted that *Shabdangal* would raise a storm in critical circles. Basheer's writing of *Shabdangal* is compared to Thakazhi's writing of *Thottiyude Makan* (*The Son of a Scavenger* 1947) about a profession considered too unclean for literary representation. Here we see how structures of exclusion are grounded in the vectors of caste and sexuality.

social realism. The reference to *Shabdangal* and the creation of a reading prostitute are moves that establish the director's realist, literary credentials even as he is crafting a "commercial film". This intertextual moment becomes a testimony to the pivotal role of social acts of reading and viewing films in producing the figure of the prostitute.

When a film like *Avalude Ravukal* remembers a controversial representation of sexuality from one of the most iconoclastic Malayalam writers, it functions as a mirroring moment within the film. It draws the viewer's attention to interconnected social practices of reading and viewing films and how circuits of cultural texts that occupy the grey zones between 'obscenity' and realism are the mobile networks in which the figure of the prostitute emerges. The multiple representational codes within these texts and its diffuse trajectories of circulation posit a prostitute figure that disturbs the ordering of the moral, rational public sphere. The dynamic and cross-historical intersections between texts, events and the audience create an unruly network of excess and containment in which sexual figures are located.

The publisher's note to the 1999 edition of *Avalude Ravukal* equates this film text to the literary experiments of the progressive writer's movement that challenged the conventions of morality, "like *Anju Cheetha Kathakal* (Five Bad Stories) in Malayalam literature, in film *Avalude Ravaukal* was described as a 'bad film' when it was released 21 years ago"(Y M Raheem 1999: 1). Published in the 1946, *Anju Cheetha Kathakal*, was a collection of short stories by well-known progressive writers in Malayalam. Through its provocative title the book is upfront about how it is playing with the sensitive borders between social realism and 'pornography'. *Cheetha* as a term refers to multiple significations of 'bad'. It can refer to what is seen as unclean, the detritus of society.

Caste and religious hierarchies in Kerala have been maintained through the division of spaces, work and bodies as clean or unclean.²⁴ It can also at the same time refer to sexual transgression; a woman outside the sanitized realm of conjugal reproductive sexuality can be referred to as a “*cheetha stree*” (bad woman), like a “bad apple” that has decayed and should be eliminated from the social. The 1996 reprint edition of *Anju Cheetha Kathakal* came fifty years after the first edition of the book. Its preface recounts the high level of controversy the book created:

that was a time when morality was given a lot of value. There were unwritten rules that all stories should be moralistic. [...] This book wanted to prove that for human knowledge, all kinds of emotional stories should be told. The editors declared it to be ‘bad stories’; only those who liked it needed to buy it (Varkey 1996: 8).

The significance of this collection of stories is that it did not circulate as countercultural. All five short stories were written by stalwarts of Malayalam literature, writers who feature significantly in the literary canon even today.²⁵ The ambiguous positioning of all these texts in the Malayali cultural sphere points to how what is seen as ‘dirty’ circulates within the public sphere, and the attempts to sanitize and monitor modes of reception, is constantly under threat. *Avalude Ravukal* is a text that gets labeled as pornography and re-visioned as a realist text, but the slippages between these categories are evident in the history of the film’s reception and a reading of the film itself. The cultural policing of

²⁴ The ritual cleansing conducted by the AIDWA member at the night vigil in 2008 which I discuss in the introduction, points to how practices of maintaining caste hierarchies through pollution and purity rituals are redeployed to police the boundaries between the domestic woman and her others. This also points to the assumption that the upper caste, Hindu woman is the ‘domestic woman’ whose purity has to be guarded and preserved.

²⁵ The gender dynamics of this enterprise is made evident by Thakazhi’s comment about the making of this book, “we had initially planned to have six bad stories. The sixth one was to be one of Lalithambika Andarjanam’s short stories. That was a time when all six of us were luminaries at the peak of our careers. But we were worried about the controversy that would arise if a Nambudiri [Brahmin] woman wrote in such an anthology and finally gave up on that idea” (Pillai 1996: 1). For male writers this enterprise was controversial, but to have an upper caste woman participate in this literary transgression was so risky that she had to be excised from the project entirely.

frames of seeing hinges on the awareness that texts and bodies circulate in a disorderly public sphere, were the boundaries between morality and immorality, the rational and the pornographic are shifting and unstable. These slippages in modes of address, textual codes and forms of reception are also central to documents that are at the core of human rights discourses on the prostitute.

The Afterlife of a Photograph

The aesthetics of realism is central to the viewing practices of the human rights discourse. The prostitute is quite often positioned as an object of sympathy. The trajectory of *Avalude Ravukal* shows that the prostitute is an inherently unstable figure whose reception is marked by excess. It is in the cross-sections of seemingly different forms such as that of realism, melodrama and pornography that the prostitute as a figure becomes possible in contemporary Kerala. This is evidenced yet again in the documentation of the custodial death of Kunjibi in 1987. This event of human rights violation that constituted a founding moment for the feminist movement in Kerala, produce documents that straddle the thin line between realism and melodrama. If realist figures such as Raji and Kunjibi have afterlives in public memory as sites/sights of erotic desire or compassion, then there is a need for a sexuality politics which is not embedded in the conception of a contained, rational public sphere.

Velutha Nizhalukal (White Shadows, 2006), a documentary film produced by *Vanitha* Society, a state supported self-help group in Calicut reenacts in a docudrama format the story of Kunjibi. The film opens with the mirror shot of the Kunjibi character who says, “by now all of you must have forgotten me”. This is an admonition to the

public that they have the obligation to remember Kunjibi; they might have forgotten her but this is a call to remember. The documentary film channels Kunjibi's spirit to narrate the history of struggling sex workers who have recently mobilized to better their conditions. Her story of denied justice is recast as a tale of martyrdom that animates the current era of collective struggle, "I see how after my martyrdom, you have awakened and organized. I bear witness to all this. I am still here with you, your Kunjibi". Kunjibi is a figure from the past redeployed to inspire the new configuration of the sex worker in the human rights and AIDS awareness discourse. But the aesthetic forms of melodrama and realism get entangled in the different sites in which Kunjibi is remembered.

A divorced Muslim woman, Kunjibi did sex work and supported her family. She lived in Bangladesh Colony (now renamed as Santhinagar colony), a non-affluent, urban settlement in Calicut. She was arrested one night in May 1987 and subjected to police torture. Her body was found hanging in the police cell the next morning. An investigation was ordered due to public pressure and this led to the suspension of the town's Sub-Inspector.²⁶ The investigation under the district collector submitted a report that said Kunjibi had committed suicide and the case was squashed before it could reach the court. A women's group in Calicut *Bodhana* (Awareness), took this up as their first case and they organized a protest movement with women from the Bangladesh colony. Sex workers formed a bond of solidarity with feminist groups and "for the first time in the history of Calicut we organized a rally of hundreds of these women," said the established feminist activist, Ajitha, in a conversation with me.²⁷ She marks this as an important

²⁶ This information is from the interview with Ajitha that I conducted on December 13, 2008.

²⁷ The political alliance between feminists and sex workers in India has been complex and shifting. The reform model through which feminists such as Ajitha operated in the 1980s later led to clashes with sex worker's mobilizations in the post-90s context. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan argues that the prostitution

moment when sex workers came out into the public sphere and shared a platform with middle class feminists. Here a tenuous link between feminists and sex workers was formed in the late 1980s using the language of human rights. “This was our humble attempt to alter the situation where no one asks a question when any violence is done to women on the street”, says Ajitha. She also opined that what had happened in the police cell was murder and not only rape and because of that they managed to get public support on the grounds of human rights violation.²⁸ Within the rubric of this case Kunjibi was presented as a woman who was economically deprived and therefore became an easy target for police violence. Her class status as a ‘woman on the streets’ is emphasized in the feminist reconstruction of this case. Kunjibi’s positioning as a lower class, Muslim woman follows the pattern of many other founding events in the early phase of the feminist movement in India where the subjugated “other” woman is the object of concern in organized protests lead primarily by more privileged women (Rowena 2005: 26).²⁹

When sex workers who were Kunjibi’s contemporaries reminiscence about this case they say they came out in solidarity because she was a woman like them. I spoke to a former sex worker who is now part of an NGO that addresses sexual minority rights

question has gathered around itself many of the issues that remain unresolved in feminism such as the relationship between feminists and female "victims of oppression", the construction of the female subject in terms of "agency" (choice, autonomy, desire, "voice") and the narrativisation-as-progress of women's history (Sunder Rajan 2003:117).

²⁸ Drawing attention to cases which were central to the feminist movement in India in the 1970s, the Mathura case and the Rameeza Bee case, Mary John and Janaki Nair observe how the legal judgment on a case of rape is predicated on the social positioning of the woman, “the class and/or ethnic status of the woman more or less automatically places her in the category of inviting rape while consistently denying the status of ‘victim’ to women with a sexual past” (John and Nair 1998: 25).

²⁹ This pattern of early feminist struggles in the 1970s and 1980s has been rethought in the post-1990s context with critical interventions by Dalit and Muslim feminists and a deeper feminist engagement with questions of caste and religion. Tharu and Niranjana (1996) reflect on the peculiar conjuncture that feminism in India finds itself at in the late 1980s and 90s that necessitates a re-examination of the category of ‘gender’ and the normative subject of feminism, that is, the ‘woman’ unmarked by any other social location.

issues, Federation for Integrated Research on Mental Health (FIRM) in Calicut.³⁰ She spoke about how it was a clear case of police torture, “we went and saw the body hanging in the police station, with marks of being kicked on her spine. I was not very brave then, I was very young but I went out for the public protest against her death. She was one among us”. In this recollection of Kunjibi’s death there was a sense of community and also an evocation of how the incident impinged on her life in material ways, “after this incident in the jail the police would take away our sari and underskirt, we would be left only with our underclothes”. The everydayness of encounters with police and state structures struck me in her comment about how Kunibi’s hanging to death with her sari lead to other sex worker’s being deprived of articles of clothing in the police cell. Police violence and blatant state power leveled against sex workers is a matter of concern for sex workers in the present as well.

Foucault, in “Governmentality,” argues how new arts of governance do not replace older forms. He pushes for an understanding of the workings of power where different modes of governance of a population coexist:

we need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society and by a society of government; in reality one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population [...]
(Foucault 1994b: 219).

The police system as a sovereign and coercive form of power operates in producing the figure of the prostitute as well as the sex worker. Since these forms of power have historical continuities, the rhetoric for embodying the sex worker and the prostitute are not mutually divorced. The next chapter examines how the representational tropes and

³⁰ I spoke to her in February 2009. She asked me not to use her name in my writing because she did not want any form of publicity.

regulatory mechanisms used in the pre-1990s period recur in the post-1990s globalization era too.

The media coverage of the Kunjibi case, mainly through reports in Malayalam newspapers, played a significant role in putting pressure on the administration and garnering sympathy for the case at that time. There was a renewed debate of the Kunjibi case in connection with an exhibition of the work of news photographer Choyikutty in the Lalita Kala Academy Hall, Calicut in 2004.³¹ The photograph by Choyikutty of the hanging body of Kunjibi in the prison cell was pivotal in triggering public attention on this occurrence yet again. Choyikutty, in a conversation with me, observed, “if the photograph had not been published, this incident would not have become an event in history”. His comment draws attention to the multiple mediations through acts of documentation and memorializing necessary to produce an event and the power of the medium of photography.³² Susan Sontag observes that even in this era of electronic media and nonstop imagery “when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image” (Sontag 2003: 22). Kunjibi’s photograph has travelled through time and become a freeze-frame in the public memory of Kerala. This photograph is referred to and republished in all contemporary discussions about the Kunjibi case. It is the central document of the human rights violation, but it also becomes the core around which a melodramatic story of oppression is narrated. It is the mechanical quality of the photographic medium to record the reality

³¹ Choyikutty is a news-photographer who has worked in the print media field since the 1960s. He is noted for his photographs on the life of the marginalized and did a photographic exhibition “Memories from the Street” in 2004. In an interview with me he said how his aim as a photographer has been to “make known unknown issues, what is the point in exhibiting famous people? The street is my issue”.

³² My conversation with him in February 2009 was in a small, dusty studio where he also conducted photography classes for teenagers from Bangladesh colony. He mentioned that he feels a sense of closeness to Kunjibi from having recorded her tragic end, a sense of responsibility, which troubles him even today.

of an event, but also its affective pull that makes it function as a powerful artifact in the public sphere.



Figure 8. Reproduction of the Kunjibi murder case photographs. The central image was the one printed in newspapers in 1987.

This is a series of black and white photographs of Kunjibi’s lifeless body resting on the bars of the prison door taken by Choyikutty in 1987. In the frontal shot her face is partially hidden from view by the bars and her hand dangles through a gap between the prison bars. In the second shot, we get a back-view of her inert body as the camera is positioned inside the cell. We can see a group of three people including one policeman looking at the body. The uniformed police officer stands out as much as the dead body because of the proximity it suggests to the cause of the death. On the one level these photographs functioned as evidence to counter the police claim that this was a suicide and not a murder. Here the purported objective, mechanical quality of the photographic medium, its ability to produce a “record of the real” (Sontag 2003: 26) becomes central.

R. Srivatsan observes how the one of the effects of the newsphotograph is that it is seen

as providing “solid evidence of truth” that displaces other less reliable forms of accounts such as word of mouth and print (Srivatsan 2000: 46).³³ Detailed attention was paid to the photograph with regard to the positioning of the body so as to determine the cause of death. The fact that her legs hit the floor and the positioning of her hands, as though it was placed on the bar, suggested that this was not a suicide. The scattered alcohol bottles and cigarette stubs on the floor of the prison, clearly seen in the second photograph, also functioned as clues to what happened in the prison cell, prior to Kunjibi’s death. The photographic medium’s ability to recreate a scene of crime is operational here.³⁴

Madhyamam, a Malayalam newspaper, first carried this back view photograph the day after the murder, as a small one column news report.³⁵ This photograph was reproduced in later media accounts of the Kunjibi case and the visual evidence thus has an afterlife in public memory. A *Mangalam* report on the photo exhibition by Choyikutty focuses on his controversial pictures of Kunjibi’s death, “when Choyikutty used his camera to capture the picture of Kunjibi’s death, that picture became the first witness for the murder case” (*Mangalam*: 2004). According to a newspaper article “Even After Eighteen Year Kunjibi’s Sobs Do Not Cease”, Kunjibi’s dead body communicates what she could not say, “this picture of the dead body leaning against the bars of the prison, will silently speak to you and tell you what happened there the previous night.”(Hareesh 2005) The paradoxically ‘silent voice’ that the reporter attributes to the photograph is on one level evidential, but on the other hand it is the animating power of the photograph to

³³ See Srivatsan (2000) for an investigation of the affective function of news photography within the contested space of the Indian nation.

³⁴ Walter Benjamin (1969) discusses the origins of the photographic medium and its links to recording crime scenes.

³⁵ Choyikutty mentioned how he was able to get access to this sensitive crime scene because he was mistaken as a police photographer, “there was no advanced technical tools then, like mobile camera phones, only flash photography and that could not be concealed.”

reach out to the readers and communicate a powerful story of injustice. There is an affective pull conceded to the photograph which exceeds its function as an image that operates as evidence.

News photography has a pivotal role to play in revealing acts of atrocities and can become the basis of a human rights protest as in the Kunjibi case. But like the news footage in the night vigil episode, which I discuss in the introduction, this photograph also generates multiple codes of viewing. In fact, the photograph leads to a rights claim only by also functioning as a spectacle of suffering and pathos. The scene of violence, the dead body and the presence of the police man saturates the photograph with the aura of death, the sense of violence that-has-been. The complicated affective responses that the photograph calls forth shows how a news photograph may also position the viewer in such a way that the realist gaze is disturbed by an affective excess. In her reflection on the function of war photographs, Sontag observes:

there are many uses to the innumerable opportunities a modern life supplies for regarding – at a distance, through the medium of photography – other people’s pain. Photography of an atrocity may give rise to opposing calls. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen. (Sontag 2003: 13)

The distant, controlled ‘bemused’ observation of a photograph of an atrocity is one demanded by a realist spectator, the one in which the photograph does not disturb the spectatorial positioning. But in the case of this photograph, the ability to prick the viewer’s position of comfort could be what makes it a remembered picture. There are many ways in which this affective excess is managed in the framing of this photograph. It is positioned as realistic evidence, but also harnessed to a melodramatic narrative in which the viewer can occupy a position of sympathy. Compassion, as a mode of viewing

the ‘pain of others’, can function as a way of stabilizing the viewer’s position and creating a modicum of distance from the spectacle of suffering, “in operation compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there*.” (Berlant 2004: 4) Compassion, as Berlant suggests, can work as a way of managing emotional distress so that the spectator can become an ameliorative actor not implicated in the structure of oppression.

“Even After Eighteen Year Kunjibi’s Sobs Do Not Cease”, V. C. Hareesh’s reconstruction of the Kunjibi case in *Kerala Kaumudi* uses the language of sentimentality to create sympathy in the minds of the reading public towards the prostitute figure. The report starts with an account of how even after eighteen years some policemen say that they hear Kunjibi’s cries echo from the lockup. The emphasis on her tears and cries shows how the report aims to create a sentimental link between the reader and the image of the prostitute. “When we discuss the pitiable situation of sex workers, one image might appear clearly in some of our minds – Kunjibi,” he writes, setting up Kunjibi as representative of all sex workers who are helpless victims in need of pity and compassion (Hareesh 2005). It draws a sentimental pageant of the Kunjibi as the loving, all sacrificing mother, “some of the older people in the colony can still remember the image of a mother who held her beloved daughter close to her chest, as she showed her the moon and fed her rice” (Hareesh:2005). Kunjibi’s arrest and police torture is reconstructed as a tragic narrative of a mother who is torn away from her young daughter, a mother who’s “only desire was to bring up her daughter in comfort” (Hareesh 2005). Through the trope of destroyed motherhood, Kunjibi’s life story is linked to that of a sex worker in the present who was arrested while she was buying milk for her young child. “The law keepers and the judicial system do not think of the baby crying for milk. When

this mother returns, where will this child be?”(Hareesh 2005) is the emotional plea with which the report ends. This image of the prostitute as an object of pity is a repeated trope, through which the prostitute is materialized. Thus the human rights discourse whose addressee must have a controlled gaze that views suffering and responds with an “*average affect*” (Barthes 1980: 26) is fused with the sentimental tropes through which the reader is asked to sympathize with the prostitute figure from a distance. My reading of representational practices point to how the prostitute as the figure of rights and figure of compassion are both produced through similar processes of controlling the affective excesses of the public eye. The prostitute as a figure is predicated on the play between excess and containment in the modes of reception of the seeing public eye.

The ideal viewer of *Avalude Ravukal*, the distant, contained subject who will sympathize but not be seduced by the erotic scenes, is also not a given in the case of a news photograph which circulates as a social justice document. Other than functioning as evidence or producing an ameliorative sense of compassion, the photograph may also disturb the spectator’s stable positioning. It is difficult to predict in any exhaustive fashion the possible responses triggered by both *Avalude Ravukal* and the Kunjibi photograph. The affective excesses in the purview of documentary and filmic realism point to how the process of figuring, tied to practices of print and visual culture, retain a level of instability. The crisis produced by the representations of the prostitute is not countercultural, nor is it in the future. It is a part of the transitive process of the affective public that operates through excess and containment. In the afterlives of *Avalude Ravukal* and the Kunjibi case, the emphasis is on harnessing these texts and events for a human rights discourse which privileges the aesthetic of realism that has a distant, sympathetic

viewer as its addressee. But a mapping of the circuits of this film and the Kunjibi case signals to the fractures in the aesthetics of realism. Pulling out these contradictions from the vantage point of the present, makes possible the creation of a regional history in which norms around sexuality and the public sphere are not rigid and foreclosed.

The modes of representation in the post-90s scenario, when the sex worker claims political presence and is recruited in public health programs, have both continuities and differences from the representation of the prostitute. I will now move on to a discussion of the dual autobiographical project by Nalini Jameela, to examine the modes of subjectification available to a sex worker in post-90s Kerala. The contradictions and excesses in the representational genealogy of the prostitute make it possible for a sex worker to experiment with the form of the autobiography in Kerala. The tangled, shifting linkages between the subject of politics and cultural practices is crucial in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Claiming the Day: The Sex Worker as Subject

Anandinte Thirodhanam (Anand's Disappearance) is a small pedagogic booklet produced by Kerala State AIDS Control Society (KSACS) specifically for categories of people classified as being at "high risk" of contracting and spreading AIDS. This booklet is in the form of an illustrated detective story and uses comic strip conventions such as bright water-color graphics and speech balloons. CID (Criminal Investigative Department) officer Arjun and his team set out to investigate the suspicious disappearance of a high-profile television serial actor Anand. The clues lead them to Vimala, a sex worker who had an intimate relationship with him. Going against the earlier hypothesis of a possible kidnapping, CID Arjun proves that Anand had absconded because he was HIV positive. The main thrust of the narrative is focused on Arjun's discovery of how Vimala had unprotected sex with Anand and his advice to her to use condoms even when she is with regular clients. This booklet uses popular cultural forms and draws on the prevalence of reading as an activity in 'literate Kerala' in order to spread the message of safe-sex to sex workers. The sex worker is addressed in many new ways by the state in the post-90s public health discourse.

The Indian state's position on prostitution is governed mainly by the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA) enacted in 1986, a legislation that mainly aims to prevent exploitation of minors and forced entry of women into prostitution. This act also prohibits

prostitution in the vicinity of hospitals, religious and educational institutions. Prostitution is not a criminal offence per se in India, but there are multiple loopholes in this act which often result in state violence against them.¹ The bio-medical and the juridical are two of the main frameworks in which the prostitute has been positioned in India. But within state discourses, prior to the 1990s, the prostitute had a marginal position, in contrast to the domestic woman who is the target of family planning campaigns. In the post-90s, the specific shape of the AIDS pandemic in India and its modes of transmission and prevention have shifted the sex worker into a more pivotal position. The Commercial Sex Worker (CSW), normed as female, though there is a limited recognition of male sex workers in the AIDS framework, is perceived as one of *the* primary nodes of AIDS prevention and control in India.² In fact the change in terminology from ‘prostitute’ to ‘sex worker’ is linked to the AIDS discourse and the subsequent rights-based mobilizations by sex workers. In the CID Arjun crime investigation the criminal act is not that of prostitution, but of not using a condom. So he does not advise Vimala to give up her profession, but only to practice safe sex.

In this chapter, I investigate the new configuration of the sex worker that emerges in the post-90s context in globalizing Kerala. What are the modes through which the state addresses the sex worker within the AIDS discourse? How do sex workers’ struggles for self-representation engage with these new modes of address by the state? I place the state discourses on the sex worker in relation to sex worker’s efforts to claim a political subject position through cultural production. The forms of representation and modes of address

¹ For case studies and discussions about the law and prostitution see contributions by Harshad Barde, Asim Sarode and Puja Yadav in Sahni et al (2008).

²The AIDS control programs positions MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) as a high risk category and male sex workers are put into this grouping. The official website of the Kerala State AIDS Control Society mentions that the route to HIV transmission is 82% heterosexual and 2% homosexual. (<http://ksacs.in/hiv-aids-in-kerala.php>) Accessed on June 10, 2010.

used by the state and sex workers are crucial to my analysis because cultural circuits are the site in which the contesting discourses on the sex worker emerges.

One of the key events that signaled the arrival of a new mode of configuring the sex worker in India is the autobiography by Nalini Jameela, a sex worker and activist from Kerala.³ She published her first autobiography in 2005 and a second version in 2006. This iconoclastic move of a sex worker to take on the status of an author in India and demand respect for her profession made her dual autobiographies the center of media attention. While distancing myself from the rousing reception of Jameela's self-writings as a radical text, I argue that these narratives of self-composition point to how a marginalized subject has to engage with the public discourses, but also critique it in order to give an account of the self. Jameela's "anti-heroic" (Tellis 2009: 7) narratives are a screen on which the critical reader can track the incomplete and fraught trajectories of the sex worker's claiming of a political subjectivity. I examine the tensions and slippages in this dual project of autobiographical writing and how it critically engages with the changing state address of the sex worker.

Experiments with Self-Narration

Oru Laingika Thozhilaliyude Atmakatha ('The Autobiography of a Sex Worker,' Jameela 2005a, hereafter *OLTA*) by Nalini Jameela was published in June 2005 by D. C. Books, one of the largest publishing firms in Kerala. It was advertised as the first autobiography of a sex worker in Kerala. The first book came out in six editions in one hundred days

³ This move towards self-representation can be read alongside the use of autobiographies as a political form in mobilizations by different marginalized groups in India, significantly the Dalit movement and the tribal movement. A well-known tribal rights activist in Kerala, C K Janu's, biography *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu* was published in 2003 (Bhaskaran 2003).

and Jameela became a well-known figure in Kerala because of the debates on the controversial book in the print and visual media. Media reports labeled Nalini Jameela's book as a candid, defiant documentation of the 'the life of the silenced': "Nalini Jameela, who is the coordinator of the Kerala Sex Workers' Forum, reveals her sordid story with no trace of compunction. Within 10 days of its release, 2,000 copies flew off the shelves as Keralites lapped up the first autobiography of a sex worker in the country," says a report in the national news magazine *Tehelka* (Ittyipe 2005). With a close-up shot of Nalini Jameela's face in a reclining position on its front cover, the book was packaged as a "burning, spine-chilling"⁴ exposé of the life of a sex worker. The book garnered massive attention and debate in the regional, national and international media.⁵ From sexual curiosity to political solidarity there are a range of motivations that could have contributed to the phenomenal success of this book. The book publicity also focused on how Jameela deviated from the familiar profile of an 'author', because of her underprivileged caste, class, and professional status. Within the public sphere of Kerala there was a "furious debate" on the book and its author in which "'inadvertent alliances' between voices from the conservative right and some feminists were formed" (Devika 2007b: vii). Some of the leading Malayalam literary figures condemned the book as a 'prurient money-spinner' and many middle-class feminists attacked the narrative of an unrepentant sex worker who refused to be saved (Devika 2007b: vii). Other feminist scholars and activists in the regional public sphere such as J. Devika, A. K. Jayasree and

⁴ From the blurb in the back cover of *OLTA*.

⁵ This includes reports in Malayalam magazines and newspapers and all major English language national magazines such as *Tehelka*, *Outlook* and *India Today*. National channels such CNN-IBN and NDTV also covered this story. The international media has also picked up on this literary event. "Indian Prostitute Mum Creates Storm with a Book" (2005), is a report in *China Daily*. A July 6, 2010 report in the *New York Times* on life-narratives by marginalized women from India also focuses on Nalini Jameela (Roy: 2010). The book has been translated to a number of regional languages in India including Tamil, Hindi, Telugu and Kannada.

Dileep Raj emerged as supportive voices who argued for the need to recognize the significance and complexities of a sex worker's rejection of "dominant Womanhood" (Devika 2007b: x).

Six months after the publication of her first book in December 2005, Jameela brought out a second version of her life story, *Njan Laingika Thozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Atmakatha* ('Me Sex Worker: The Autobiography of Nalini Jameela,' Jameela 2005b, hereafter *NJA*). This was not merely a revised edition; she stated that the second book was the more reliable account of her life. There are multiple shifts in the voice and choreography of the events from the first autobiography to the second. As the title suggests, the first book presents itself as the autobiography of a representative sex worker; the emphasis is more on the identity of the sex worker than the individual subject, Nalini Jameela, while in the latter the "me" as sex worker acquires prominence and Jameela's name appears in the title itself. But both the autobiographies raise the question of how a marginalized subject can lay claims to forms of representation and the different discourses she has to draw on to do so. In this chapter, I track the compositional strategies in both these books and its engagement with the public discourse on sex work. When a marginalized subject takes on the task of tracking the trajectory of her subject formation, it is not a quick movement of claiming the public sphere or "baring it all". She has to struggle to find narrative forms to tell her fragmented story that is not tailored to conventional forms of the autobiography.⁶ Since the "auto" or the "I" she sets out to plot is not contained or stable, the form of the autobiography is reconfigured and pulls at its seams as she narrates her story. But this literary form does seem to provide her with a

⁶ For a discussion of the emergence of the genre of the autobiography in Kerala and its links to the inhabitation of modernity, see Kumar 2008.

space for self-exploration unavailable in other sites such as the rights discourse and the state discourse.

Jameela grew up with limited means in a working class, non-dominant caste, *Ezhava* family. Her formal education ended at the age of nine when she was in the third grade. From the age of nine she worked as a daily wage laborer carrying loads in a tile factory and then later as a domestic worker, before she became a sex worker at the age of twenty four. Her entry into political mobilizations by sex workers is linked to her participation in AIDS awareness programs and sex worker's organizations since the 1990s. She worked as the coordinator of the Kerala Sex Worker's Forum and was also a member of *Jwalamukhi* (Volcano), a sex worker's organization. As part of a transnational AIDS awareness program, she visited Thailand and received training in documentary film-making. She made two documentary films, *Jwalamukhikal* (A Day in the Life of a Sex Worker, 2002) and *A Peep into the Silenced* (2003), before her autobiography pushed her into the limelight at a regional and national level.

“This autobiography writing is part of the many experiments I have undertaken. You shouldn't hope that all the memories of one person can be presented in one biography,” writes Jameela in the introduction to *The Autobiography of Nalini Jameela*, anticipating the criticisms about her decision to narrativize her life a second time. (*NJA*: 3). This revisioning of her first version of her life-narrative was an unprecedented move not undertaken by many autobiography writers. In the second version she says, “People have asked me is it right to revise an autobiography like this. I do not know if there are any laws about this in the global schema. Even if there is and if I am the first person to correct this law, then so be it” (*NJA*: 2). The second book was translated into English by

J. Devika in 2007 (Jameela 2007).⁷ Both these books were the result of collaborative work. She wrote the first book using a long time associate I. Gopinath as an amanuensis. The publication details of the first version mentions how the book is “Nalini Jameela’s autobiography retold by Gopinath”. Her dissatisfaction with the first collaboration made her publish a second autobiography, “I wanted to write this version of my autobiography in a hurry, to remedy the damage caused by the first, inadequate draft that was published. I was so concerned about reclaiming my autobiography” (Devika 2007c : 142). The second book was written with the participation of a group of young activist friends, with whom Jameela says she shared a “very equal relationship” (Devika2007c: 143). In the first version Gopinath’s voice plays a prominent part in introducing Nalini Jameela through his preface to the book and imposing his frames of viewing sex work onto her narrative. The collaborators’ presence is not intrusive in the second version and their names do not appear in the publication details.

One of the main concerns in the reception of Jameela’s books in Kerala has been around the differences in these two versions. The domineering presence of the scribe I. Gopinath and his rendering of Nalini Jameela’s life as a ‘liberated’ sex worker were critiqued by interlocutors such as Devika (2007). In the first autobiography, the sex worker is positioned against ‘the feminist’ who is branded as regressive by I. Gopinath, “Feminists who do not analyze in depth this sexually starved society and write many pages against men will not understand Nalini. We should walk a lot more to catch up with Nalini” (Gopinath 2005: 2). Gopinath’s self positioning as Jameela’s ‘progressive’ supporter and the jarbs and caricatures of feminism is toned down in the second book.

⁷My analysis is based on the Malayalam publication which I have translated into English. I have not used Devika’s translation.

Jameela demonstrated her desire for a more complex rendering of her life in her decision to produce a different version and her struggle to resist the collapsing of her life with liberal manifesto on sex work (Devika 2007b: xiii).

The relation between feminism and sex work is a multi-layered one in Kerala.⁸ Prostitution is seen by certain dominant feminist groups in Kerala as a symbol of commodification of women's bodies especially in the context of Kerala's increasing investment in tourism. These groups have opposed sex worker's political articulations. Dalit feminists have pointed to the risk of legitimizing sex work because of the unequal caste dynamics and construction of Dalit women's bodies as sexually available. Sex worker's groups in Kerala and their supporters, who also have feminist leanings, have argued for the need to arrive at a more complex understanding of the positioning of the sex worker and the possible threat she poses to normative sexual arrangements. A founding figure of the sexuality movement in Kerala, A.K. Jayasree argues, "A paradigm shift is necessary to address the problems of sex-workers delinked from the problem of sexual morality. [...] Their right to enjoy bodily pleasure and to self-determination should also be valued" (Jayashree 2006: 66). Dileep Raj has argued for the need to examine prostitution as a feminist problem (Raj 2005). The complex negotiations between the debate on sex work and feminism is erased in the first version of Jameela's book where the progressive man claims the right to speak for the sex worker. While taking into consideration the differences in the two collaborations that Jameela undertakes, I see both these texts as mediated through different political frames and

⁸For theoretical debates on sex work and feminism in the national context see contributions by Geetanjali Gangoli, Swati Ghosh and Anagha Tambe in Sahni et al. 2008.

examine both of them as tentative, fragmented gestures through which a sex worker claims a subject position in public.

The process of writing in partnership locates Jameela's autobiographical project within the landscape of post-90s Kerala where the AIDS discourse and the political debates on sex work create new forums where sex workers come into contact with social workers, academics, journalists and media persons. This is through political meetings, cultural events and rallies organized by sex worker's groups and participation in national and international conventions of solidarity building such as the World Social Forum, conducted under the aegis of global NGO networks. These exchanges make it possible for Jameela to find partners willing to collaborate with her. Jameela reflects on how though she spoke about her life incessantly, it was difficult for her to write it down, "though I tried many times to write, it would not progress beyond a few sentences" (*NJA*, 2005: 1). This is a negotiated, mediated process of producing a life narrative which had many stuttered beginnings. When one partnership does not produce satisfying results, she moves on to find an alliance with a group of activists who could capture her style of narrative more scrupulously. In an interview with Devika included as part of the English translation of her autobiography, she writes about the second version:

I could express myself in my own style with them and they worked as a group, which was very good for me, since their many questions reactivated my memories and allowed me to tell a good story. This wasn't the case with the first version. The person who worked with me didn't encourage the participation of others-- it was only his effort that counted. And I hardly ever participated in shaping the story. (Devika 2007c: 143)

Collaborative textual productions, in which Jameela retains author status in spite of all these mediations, is possible within the new visibility of the sex worker in the post-90s

period and the alliances between sex workers and other actors in civil society. I am not suggesting that this is an easy process and that in the current economy a sex worker is in a position of control where she can pick and choose collaborators. Her first collaboration placed her in a vulnerable position and her visibility in the public sphere had multiple risks. The two books are two versions of her life, shaped by different collaborative partnerships, but they are interlinked episodic explorations on the fragmented subjectivity of a sex worker. In spite of Nalini Jameela's withdrawal of the first version of her autobiography, I still draw on it because these two books form a chain of events which points to the intricacies and labor of the process of marginalized subjects claiming the public sphere.

Condom Teachers: Sex Workers in the AIDS Umbrella

I will examine the primary modes through which the sex worker is addressed and represented in AIDS awareness campaigns before I enter into my analysis of the autobiographies. The scenes of address of the sex worker in the developmental and public health discourse are the dominant paradigm in which Jameela is embedded. But her struggle to claim a subject position also critiques the figuration of the sex worker by the state. To examine the interweaving modalities through which the figure of the sex worker is produced in state processes and self-narratives, I read Jameela's autobiographical project in juxtaposition with AIDS awareness materials produced by the Kerala State AIDS Control Society (KSACS). This shows how representation through the writing of a self-narrative becomes enmeshed with the gestures of recognition by the state.

AIDS as a pandemic has produced an “epidemiological mapping of the world” and Asia in a space-time framework is positioned as Pattern Three where “AIDS arrived late” in distinction to North America and Europe (Pattern One) and Africa (Pattern two) (Patton 2002b: ix). HIV emerged later in India than it did in many other countries and the first cases of HIV was diagnosed among sex workers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu in 1986 (Godbole and Mehendale 2005). Unlike countries in the West, where AIDS was characterized in its primary phase in the 1980s as a disease that infected the gay male body, in India it has been associated mainly with heterosexual unprotected sex. Thus the commercial sex worker has been a crucial population category in the management of AIDS in India from the onset.

In the same time period there is a sexual and labor-rights based mobilization by sex workers in different parts of India as part of “new social movements”. These are social movements in the post-90s which are transnational in scope. NGOs are key players in it and class as a category of political struggle is replaced by other vectors like sexual identity. The sex workers’ mobilizations in different parts of India, in the post-1990s, are linked to the establishment of NGOs which work on AIDS prevention and provide a space for sex workers to come together as a community. The transnational flows of AIDS funding and a globally circulated language of sexuality, with identity categories such as Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) and CSW inform the configurations of regional struggles and articulations by sex workers.

The sex worker as a target of governance emerges in a neoliberal economy⁹ where governmental technologies are used by the state to manage population categories through “instrumental notions of costs and benefits” (Chatterjee 2004: 34). As I discuss in the introduction to the dissertation, concerns such as health, birthrate and sanitation become sacrosanct in these modes of governance of a population. The concept of population makes available to government functionaries “a set of rationally manipulable instruments for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as targets of their ‘policies’” (Chatterjee 2004: 34). This deviates from the classical model of governance through participatory citizenship. One of the important shifts in the neoliberal economy is also the positioning of individuals as economic agents, rather than political participants in state processes. The tenuous claims for recognition by sex worker’s in Kerala must be placed in these regimes of governance in which they are primarily positioned as ‘targets’ to be managed in a cost-effective manner. Their bodily hygiene and sexual behavior have to be streamlined for the efficient functioning of the state as a whole.

From being a scattered and diffuse group of people who existed within the grey areas of state policy and legality, the AIDS discourse produces the sex worker as a hyper-visible population category, a central node in the management of AIDS. The impact of the AIDS discourse in the labeling of a specific segment of the population as sex workers is especially significant in Kerala, a state which has no brothel system and therefore no spatially marked out zones for sex work, unlike other states such as Maharashtra or West

⁹ The introduction discusses the impact of globalization and neoliberalism on Kerala as a state. This is mainly through new alliances between the state and the market and the shifts in technologies of governance.

Bengal.¹⁰ Many sex workers in Kerala solicit and work in public spaces like the streets, lodges, hotels, bus stations and theaters. A. K. Jayasree says there are three main categories of sex workers in Kerala. The first are street sex workers who are homeless and solicit on the street. The second have their own homes and solicit in hotels or lodges. The third are called ‘family girls’ because they entertain clients at their own homes with or without the help of agents. (Jayasree 2004: 59) Many marginalized women also move from different jobs in the unorganized labor sector and the distinctions between “sex work, housework and paidwork” is often blurred (Devika 2007c). So sex workers are a diffuse and dispersed category who are identified and classified as part of the AIDS control programs.

As part of my research, I went to *Suraksha* (Safety) centers,¹¹ such as the *Vanitha Society Suraksha Center*, a state-supported organization that works with ‘high risk’ groups, which had a prominent chart on the wall that said ‘Target Group: Sex Workers’ in the first column and went on to the next column, ‘Number of people who are counted as part of the target group: 1717’. The chart had numerical counts for the number of people in the target group who had been made aware of safe sex practices and for the number of condoms distributed in different areas within Calicut district. These charts are compulsory fixtures in all the *Suraksha* centers in Kerala. Thus there is a process of identification and statistical enumeration through which the category of the sex worker is consolidated within AIDS interventions. Employees in these organizations describe one

¹⁰ In many cities in India like Mumbai and Kolkata there are specific areas where sex workers work in brothels. These areas are often known as Red Streets, referring back to the colonial history of the formation of these streets, as areas where British soldiers in their red uniforms had access to sex. For a discussion of the colonial history of prostitution in India see Tambe 2009.

¹¹ *Suraksha* (Safety) centers are projects run under KSACS (Kerala State AIDS Control Society) that funds and gives guidelines to NGOs and CBOs in different parts of the state to work with ‘high risk’ groups such as sex workers and Injective Drug Users.

of their preliminary jobs as a site assessment were they go to public areas like bus stands, railway stations, markets, beaches and theaters to identify sex workers. This is in keeping with the workings of governmentality where the state creates an “elaborate network of surveillance through which information is collected on every aspect of the life of the population that is to be looked after” (Chatterjee 2004: 34).

AIDS control programs play a significant role in the developmental rhetoric of contemporary Kerala. Stacey Pigg and Vincanne Adams argue that efforts at sexual reform and intervention are linked to national and local projects of development:

In epidemiologically driven international health development programs, the technologies used for data collection and the frameworks used to legitimize risk reduction offer new ways for states and international interests (such as binational and multinational donors) to be vested both in the health of the population and the project of modernity. (Pigg and Adams 2005:15)

The modes of address of the sex worker position her as participating in the interconnected projects of state development through the technical language of “health”.¹² The deployment of the sex worker as a conduit for defending the social body from AIDS, has placed a demand on the sex worker to be an actor within the state programs. This is primarily done by using sex workers to spread awareness about the need to use condoms, “since spreading awareness about condom usage was their main activity they began to be known as condom teachers” (*OLTA*: 93). The sex worker is given the function of a participant and not only a target in AIDS awareness programs through the role of the Peer Educator (PE). In a UNAIDS report, peer education is described as “a popular concept that implies an approach, a communication channel, a methodology, a philosophy, and a

¹² Pigg and Adams observes how in the biological terrain central to new technologies of governance “‘health’ and ‘life’ becomes nodes of control, dominion and erasure.” (2005: 15) Because of the moral and unassailable position occupied by sexual health development programs it is only recently that critiques of such programs has emerged (Pigg and Adams 2005: 15).

strategy” (1999: 5). This report explains how peer education draws on behavioral theory and participatory education models which believe that equals talking among themselves will elicit behavioral change and empowerment (UNAIDS report 1999: 6).

AIDS awareness programs in Kerala are now at an advanced stage and have a dynamic history behind it. Sharmila Sreekumar observes that AIDS was a symbol of a civilizational crisis in the early phase of the spread of the disease in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Sreekumar 2009: 169). She argues that the sex worker is positioned as the ‘other’ of the monogamous woman victim in popular representations of AIDs such as cartoons and advertisements that were produced in this period. The sex worker in this early phase of AIDs control is projected as “not merely the carrier of an irreversible destruction, but destruction itself” (Sreekumar 2009: 169). In the 1990s, the sex worker was kept out of the sympathy generating space of AIDS awareness advertisements, “neither are they brought into their visual spaces or given speaking parts – not even an ambivalent, third person, auto/biographical speaking part” (Sreekumar 2009: 171). But this mass panic around AIDS and the corresponding characterization of the sex worker as a figure of doom and destruction has shifted after the first decade of AIDS management. After 2000 and the introduction of Anti-retroviral Therapy (ART) the emphasis has been more on AIDS as a manageable disease and the sex worker as a partner in state campaigns of AIDS control.¹³ In the post-2000 materials produced by KSACS there is a conscious attempt to locate the sex worker in her familial setting and call upon her to take

¹³ At the beginning of the new millennium there was a breakthrough in treatment provision when an Indian pharmaceutical company started to produce generic antiretrovirals that were exactly the same as those made by large pharmaceutical companies, but significantly cheaper. This sparked a price war between branded and generic drug makers, which forced the large pharmaceutical companies to lower the price of their AIDS drugs. This competition, coupled with pressure from activists, organizations and governments of developing countries with severe AIDS epidemics, dramatically reduced the price of ARVs. (<http://www.avert.org/generic.htm>). Accessed on May 25, 2009.

responsibility for a better future. In contrast to the 1990s demonization of the sex worker, in current narratives produced by the state, the sex worker is framed through the language of agency and empowerment.¹⁴

In AIDS prevention interventions, especially in phase two of the National AIDS Control Program, which extended from 1999-2007, one of the important strategies has been targeted interventions through peer educators.¹⁵ In Kerala, peer educators are used to identify other sex workers to spread awareness about safe sex practices, to keep track of the changes within the community of sex workers and provide them with necessary services.¹⁶ The co-operation of sex workers with AIDS awareness programs also leads to other benefits such as help with starting a bank account or acquiring a ration card and thus provides sex workers access to the institutions of the state such as banks, hospitals and public welfare schemes.

There are different pedagogical tools produced by KSACS that use mass media forms to configure and address the sex worker. KSACS produces educational materials that include games, playing cards, comic books, pamphlets and documentary films that can be used by NGOs to spread AIDS awareness among “high risk groups”. These

¹⁴ According to a news report given by KSACS in 2010 with an estimated 55,000 HIV positive people, Kerala's average is less than the national figure, at about 0.26 per cent against 0.34 per cent. (<http://ksacs.in/hiv-aids-in-kerala.php>)

¹⁵ The National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) is currently in its third phase (NACP III). The first phase (NACP I) was put into action from 1992-97 and extended till 1999. The second phase of the programme – the NACP-II which ended in 2007, gave thrust to the development of targeted interventions at high risk behaviour groups, expansion of the counseling and HIV testing facilities in the state and the initiation of anti retroviral treatment. The current phase of the Programme (NACP- III) began in 2007 and will continue till 2012. (<http://www.ksacs.in/ksacs.php>). Accessed on May 10, 2009.

¹⁶ These strategies have shifted in the recent past. Since 2007 the global anti-AIDS effort has changed track, moving away from the focus on using sex workers as peer educators. (Devika et al, 2008: 153). Currently, there is concern that excessive focus on sex workers might have ignored the vulnerability of married women to AIDS. This also points to the problem that the sex worker and the married women are often perceived as mutually exclusive categories. But the KSACS website still states that: “Current data suggest that the HIV epidemic in the state is largely confined to individuals with high-risk behavior and their sexual partners”. (<http://www.ksacs.in/ksacs.php>). Accessed on May 10, 2010.

materials are produced specifically for “those who benefit from the sexual health projects of the state” and are the target of the state run *Suraksha* projects. They are different from pedagogic tools that address the ‘general public’. These materials do not circulate profusely in public media networks like television, radio, newspapers, billboards or posters in crowded public spaces like railway stations or bus-stops that are the primary sites through which the general public is inundated with AIDS messages.

Many of these materials have shared formats in national and international contexts, but there is an increasing attempt to tailor it to local needs. The head of the Media and Outreach section of KSACS, Ajai Kumar, spoke to me about the use of accessible language and the attention to the modes of representation as an important strategy in making AIDS a less stigmatized disease. He drew attention to the “imaginative and people friendly” naming of the different projects run by KSACS, “*Sneha: Snehathinte Thoovalsparsham*” (“Love: The Feather Touch of Love”), centers that prevents mother to child transmission and “*Thanal*” (Shade), counseling and support center for HIV positive individuals. One of the doctors who worked as a project coordinator with KSACS explained how they shifted from clinical names to more “*Painkili*”(sentimental) terms to add to popular appeal. Ajai Kumar also mentioned that since local contexts are different from the national, there is an attempt to “Keralise things”. Many of the campaign materials draw on tropes of Malayalam cinema and use popular literary forms such as detective fiction so as to spread the message through modes that appeal to the public. Thus there is a concern about harnessing the power of cultural practices to make an impact on the popular imaginary.

A board game conceptualized and produced by an organization associated with KSACS, Partners for Better Health, for the education of male and female sex workers, is a useful tool for demonstrating the manner in which the sex worker is addressed in AIDS discourse. The board game can be played by four people at the same time and the throw of the dice determines what column the player has to move to. The game is in the model of ‘Snakes and Ladders’¹⁷, but winning or losing the game is determined by the player’s sexual practices.



Figure 9. Snakes and Ladders Board-game: KSACS education tool for ‘high-risk’ groups (2007)

¹⁷ Snakes and ladders, or Chutes and ladders, is a popular children's board game. It is played between 2 or more players on a playing board with numbered grid squares. On certain squares on the grid are drawn a number of "ladders" connecting two squares together, and a number of "snakes" or "chutes" also connecting squares together.



Figure 10. Board-game: Close-up image

The colorful board has square columns from one to 100. At regular intervals the columns have sketches and messages about safe and unsafe sexual practices which determine the fate of the player. For example, the fourth column has an image of a man in the center, hugging two nude women with the words ‘you had sexual intercourse with more than one partner without using a condom, go back to square one’.¹⁸ This is a pedagogic tool for educating sex workers and other high-risk groups on safe health practices and for motivating them to take responsibility for their own safety and well-being.

The images in five columns are about signs of medical problems that need immediate medical attention. Showing symptoms of STDs or not taking steps to get treatment immediately puts the player at a disadvantage – ‘Puss and swelling on your sexual organs that causes discoloration and emits a foul smell, go back to column

¹⁸ For this particular instruction the addressee is male. Many of these materials are produced not just for women sex workers. Other ‘high-risk’ categories such as Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) are also included in this rubric. Office spaces and drop-in centers run by the state supported NGOs cater to these different target-groups of AIDS interventions.

twenty'. The language here is stark and direct. Sexual organs of the male and female body are sketched in unflattering terms – visually and verbally. There are close shots of sexual organs of the male and female body which shows signs of infection as in column fourteen. The players of this game are primarily addressed as owners of their disease-prone bodies and reminded at every throw of the dice that their choices regarding their health care and sexual practices will determine their progress not just in the game, but in life too. The last column of the game spells out this connection explicitly, “Congratulations! Replicate this success in your life too.” Unlike the posters and campaigns which address the general public, there is directness in the sexual references here. Through pedagogic tools like this board game, the sex worker is addressed as a medicalized body and it is within this framework that the sex worker acquires a shape and form in the AIDS discourse. There is also a positioning of the sex worker here as juvenile and childish by presuming that they have the leisure and inclination to sit around in NGO-supported office spaces to play games. One of the employees at *Sangamitra*, a Community Based Organization, mentioned that sex workers rarely sit down to play this game, which they perceive as a ‘juvenile’ activity. Thus there are many slippages and “backtalk” (Pigg and Adams 2005: 3) by various social actors as these campaign materials circulate in translocal institutions.

The format of the game marks a distance from earlier models of state pedagogy and public health mechanisms. There is a sharp distance in the positioning of the recipient in pamphlets and posters of health education used till the 1990s and the new methods used by the AIDS control society. The pre-90s campaign had a sloganeering format in which information was given to the audience in a direct, top-down pedagogic

fashion. Even today, some of the public health campaigns on family planning deploy the same format of direct message transmission. The board game, in contrast, is an interactive tool of pedagogy in which the sex workers have to be participants in their own edification. The message can be spread only if sex workers find the time and leisure to take a break from their routine and sit down to play this game. The philosophy of peer education is embodied in this game too. It is a community activity where the player interacts with other sex workers and the board comes alive and acquires meaning only if the participants are ready to throw the dice and participate in the rules of the game. This is education that is also recreational; it is premised on the belief that the better learner is the one who actively participates in the process of education.

Two of the documentary films produced for KSACS by Invis Multimedia, *Nanmakkayi (For Your Well-being, 2006)* and *Thiricharivinte Kuttaymakkayi (A Collective through Realization, 2006)* reflect the maxim of progress through self sufficiency and encourage sex workers to protect themselves and work for the well-being of the community.¹⁹ *For Your Well-being* tells the story of a young sex worker Ramani and her transition from risky sexual behavior to safe sex practices. The film's opening shot is a close-up of Ramani's face as she dresses up in front of the mirror. Her young daughter watches her and Ramani fondly pats her as she steps out of the house. At the door-step Ramani faces the camera and says, "I am Ramani, I am a sex worker like you. I am a little busy right now". The direct address, the conversational tone and the bestowal of interiority through the close-up mirror shot, establishes audience identification with Ramani from the beginning. The voiceover in the film aims at creating a community of

¹⁹ Outreach officers at NGOs mentioned that the documentaries were more popular among sex workers especially because of their emotional appeal.

affective ties, “Ramani is one among us, our vocation relies on our beauty and health. Let us take care of that.” The film shows the role of the sex worker as peer educator in Ramani’s interactions with an older sex worker, who educates her about AIDS testing centers in the state and the necessity to practice safe sex. But the film also sets up Ramani as a peer educator whose journey into knowledge will enlighten the viewing community.

The film has a melodramatic and sentimental tone. It sets up Ramani as a suffering, single mother who is the “sole support for her aging mother, who has collapsed in the path of life and her young daughter, who she loves more than her life”. The dialogues are saturated with hyperbolic tropes about motherly love and emotional mother-daughter scenes are staged with lilting background music. When Ramani resists the older woman’s advice to go to a testing center, she warns her, “there will be no one to take care of your daughter if you get sick”. This emotional appeal to her motherhood motivates her to visit an AIDS testing center. The opening title shot of the film says “*For Your Well-being...My safety, is my family’s safety,*” thus the film places the sex worker as a woman whose commitments to her family forces her to do sex work and the need for her to adopt safe sex practices so that she can fulfill these responsibilities. Ramani is also advised to take her partners to the testing centers, because if they have an STD she may get infected again. Thus the sex worker is addressed as an individual agent who should take primary responsibility for the well being of herself, her family and the social body.

The incorporation of sex workers as agents of development should be placed in the context of the ‘People’s Campaign for Decentralized Planning’ (PPC) in Kerala since 1995, initiated by the Left Democratic Front, the ruling party in the state during that period. The PPC is described by economists and social scientists as the dominant Left’s

social democratic mass agenda taking a ‘liberal turn’. This is a program which solicits broad-based community involvement in political and planning processes through local self-governing bodies and by locating the ‘people’ as the major historical agent of social transformation and economic growth (Devika et al 2008: 16). This program marks the inability of Kerala as a state to continue with its earlier agenda of socialist welfare in the post- 1990s period. Thus it captures the shift in the state’s model of governance and economic policies in the neoliberal period which is a move towards privatization and disinvestment on the part of the state. This is a market-oriented growth model where individuals are pushed to become economically viable and self-sufficient, “women – especially the informal sector woman-worker/housewife – or the ‘below-poverty-line’ woman – was identified as a key target and ‘responsible’ agent for this new liberal welfarist regime” (Devika et al 2008: 17). The main problem of this approach, the authors argue, is that political issues are treated as developmental ones. Other scholars who examine the impact of neoliberal policies on the developing world have argued that the economic Structural Adjustment Programs initiated by the IMF and World Bank in developing countries place a huge burden on women who are “considered only as economic agents rather than central political actors” (Desai 2002: 32). The forms of collectives supported in this regime are those which work in a market-oriented logic of entrepreneurship and do not make demands for structural change.

The documentary film, *A Collective through Realization*, captures this state sponsored recasting of political problems raised by the sex workers to provide a developmental solution. This film is a celebratory account of one woman’s empowerment as she becomes a member of *Vanitha Sahakarana Society* (Women’s Co-operative

Society), a community based organization run by sex workers with the support of the state. The film shows us the trajectory of a sex worker, Geetha, who is arrested by the police, but the Society helps to bail her out and she becomes a new member in the organization. From then on we see an awe-struck Geetha being introduced to this new world of progress through self-empowerment. She is advised to take regular medical tests and practice safe-sex in the familiar AIDS awareness paradigm. But she is also taught how to start a bank account and save money. We see her navigating an urbanizing cityscape of Kerala, where the camera pans from bill-boards of nationalized banks like State Bank of Travancore (SBT) to privatized, global banks such as HSBC. The music is upbeat and jazzy as she is warmly welcomed in institutions of modernity like the bank and the hospital. There are repeated shots of successful enterprises run by sex workers which include a tea-shop, a handicrafts unit, a laundry service center, garbage clearing services and a tailoring center.²⁰ When Geetha is suitably impressed with all these venues of successful entrepreneurship, her friend who is a long-time member of the Co-operative society, smiles and says, “you have no clue what other things are in store for you to see”. In this tantalizing journey of progress the possibilities are endless and presented as easily within the reach of this new entrant. If she follows the instructions given to her she can continue to be a sex worker, but also access all these supplementary economic resources.

The film spends limited screen-time showing Geetha’s interactions with her clients or her life as a sex worker. The only reference to this activity is to show her buy Kamasutra condoms after she decks her hair with jasmine flowers, in preparation for doing sex work. There are repeated shots of women at work, but the film only refers to

²⁰All these jobs are traditionally feminine occupations that bank on domestic skills of cooking, cleaning and sewing in keeping with Desai’s observation that economic restructuring through globalization use existing patriarchal assumptions about women’s labor and endurance abilities (Desai 2002:32).

sex work and never visualizes it. Geetha's journey to civic participation and economic empowerment is tied up more to her supplementary economic activities which have societal acceptance. By downplaying the complexities of doing sex work and the social stigma associated with that job, the film posits Geetha as a beneficiary of development whose journey to progress is devoid of any confrontations. This film puts forward the utopic promise of progress through the combined effort of sex workers as a community made of individual members who willingly subject themselves to norms of safe-sex behavior and economic productivity in order to become successful. This form of individual self disciplining and 'efficiency' is the crux of the market-oriented logic of development.

The final sequence of the film is a close-up shot of lush green grass lit up by beams of sunlight. This pastoral shot is cut to a smiling Geetha sitting on the doorstep of her new house and she exclaims, "Because I luckily reached a CBO I am able to work and fend for myself without depending on anyone else. [...] This house is now my own. I am happy today". Geetha is a satisfied, docile beneficiary of state reforms. Her life-story spreads the message of safe-sex, but here we have a sex worker who does not in any way challenge existing structures of the social and the normative family. In a society where the normative family and domestic woman have a privileged position and any other sexual arrangement is met with violent disapproval, this film accommodates Geetha by casting her primarily as an economic agent and a safe-sex practitioner. The gaping black-hole in the film is that, though it is addressed to sex workers, it does not analyze the liminal position of sex workers within the social and their demands for social acceptance which disrupts the paradigms of morality and respectability. In both these films, the

anchoring voices are that of non-disruptive, individual sex workers whose story becomes an exemplary narrative for other sex workers to follow. Thus there is an active attempt on the part of the state to create modes of identification with these ideal sex worker protagonists, who do not question structures of the normative family. The state governs the subject formation of sex workers through these modes of address.

Questioning the Familiar/ Familial

In 2007-2008 the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) engineered and executed a massive and innovative plan to spread AIDS awareness messages all throughout India. This was through the Red Ribbon Express, a specially-designed seven coach train, which traveled across 180 stations in India carrying HIV/AIDS prevention messages through the course of the year. The NACO website describes this as a national campaign that “promotes a multi-sectoral effort to bring HIV/AIDS into the mainstream of overall socio-economic development rather than regarding it as a medical/public health issue”.²¹ The train was a mobile education and exhibition centre, which used high-tech devices like interactive touch screens and 3D models to give the visitor a clear view of HIV / AIDS transmission and prevention.

²¹ <http://www.nacoonline.org/NACO>. Accessed on May 12, 2009.



Figure 11. Red Ribbon Express Campaign: Calicut Railway Station, 2008 (Photograph by author)

On July 8, 2008 I went to the railway station in Calicut, Kerala to see the exhibitions in the train and the public reception of the Red Ribbon Express. When I reached the platform, I had to join a queue of almost three hundred people, all waiting to get on the train. It was a mixed crowd. Men and women, who cut across different age groups and class status. There was a long well-ordered queue of senior-level school children in uniforms, who were brought in en mass from school. This national level pedagogical mission used new high-tech modes of communication technology coupled with the railway system--the latter being one of the foundational networks of India's entry into colonial modernity. The colorful awareness posters, "Moods" condom vending units, well-lit-up 3D installations and informational short films screened in the train, were all aesthetically appealing and glossily packaged. The direct focus on disease prevention in

the board game for use by sex workers was absent in the pedagogical tools for the ‘general public’.



Figure 12: Poster inside the Red Ribbon Express (2008, Photograph by author)

The framework of the family as the foundation of a healthy nation was a repeated trope in many posters. For example, one poster showed the picture of a working class family featuring the parents and two children, a girl and a boy. All of them pose in a stiff manner and smile at the viewers. The woman is dressed in a traditionally auspicious red sari, a sign of her marital status, with the tip of the sari demurely covering her head.²² A blue

²² This appearance of the family and the clothing of the woman is not typical of a Kerala setting. Since the Red Ribbon Express was a national campaign most of the materials were produced for a pan-Indian

sky and a green field form the back-drop to this well-arranged family photograph and the inscription says, “A healthy Bharat begins from a healthy family, from all of you, from all of us”.

This sex education through sanitized and beautified language and images that can appeal to a large cross section of the public, including school children, is a different enterprise from the materials for high risk groups. The modes of address used in both these campaigns are quite different, yet they share some similarities. Both these pedagogical campaigns aim at creating a collective which will help the progress of the nation. “Come let us surge ahead together”, says one of the posters in the Red Ribbon Express. The appeal to the general public is often an appeal to the family, that is maintaining the health of the family will implicitly lead to the health of the nation. With the sex worker too, this trope of familial welfare is used as in the case of *For Your Well-being*, but there is an omission of how the recognition of the sex worker might question the arrangement of the normative family and thus the foundation of the nation. The sex worker’s world as shown in *For Your Well-being* is a self-contained one and there is no contrast between the sex worker and the domestic woman.

The autobiographies by Jameela disruptively yoke together the sex worker and the domestic woman. Carmel Christy contends: “for a Backward Caste woman like Nalini, it is often a conflation of the private and the public spaces which creates her gendered reality” (Christy 2008: 1). Jameela’s juxtaposition of the sex worker and the domestic woman questions the normative arrangements of sexuality in which the monogamous wife is glorified as the anchor of the family, the foundation of the nation and region. In

audience. But the language was changed as the train moved from one state to another to communicate better in every region.

the interview with Devika, in the English translation of her book, Jameela complicates the binary between the domestic woman and the sex worker, “I look after my family, I also do social work, and when in financial need, as someone in my situation often is, I do sex work” (Devika 2007c: 140). She foregrounds her identity as wife and mother and shows how her sex work becomes essential to support her family. Thus Devika notes how she writes in an ‘elaborate domestic’ into the narrative of the life of a ‘public woman’ (Devika 2007b: x). Important turning points in her narrative are structured by the needs of her family, especially her children. She enters into sex work to support her children after her first husband’s death and she later goes back to sex work after a gap of almost a decade when her third marriage falls apart and she has to take care of herself and her young daughter.

This acknowledgement of how the sex worker often has responsibilities to the family, especially her children, is part of the new address through which the state speaks to the sex worker. My discussion of the documentary *For Your Well-being* captures this emotional appeal to the sex worker to take care of her body, because she is the primary caregiver and earning member for her child and aging mother. But the state-produced self narratives of sex workers side-steps the comparison between the sex worker and the domestic woman. The sex worker is encouraged to take on domestic responsibility, but she does not in any way critically comment on the unequal structures of the normative family. Tellis argues that Jameela’s narrative does not “miraculously transcend the discourses of both middle class, domestic womanhood because it characterizes sex work as labor” (Tellis 2009: 2) and that she retains her aspirations for domesticity. But we

should recognize her “irreverence towards the institution of family” (Christy 2008: 9) and how she exposes its gendered hierarchies.

She pries apart the binary between the sex worker and the wife/mother by showing up the similarities between the domestic realm and sphere of her work. When her friend introduces her to sex work after her first husband’s death and explains the nature of work, Jameela observes, “when my friend said I have to go with men who needed women, I understood these men wanted to *use* women like husbands used their wives” (*NJA*: 29). Here it is through the terms of conjugality and the sexual exchange within it that Jameela understands the structure of sex work. She often notes the similarity between the domineering behavior of clients and husbands, “those days clients had the behavior of husbands. We couldn’t ask them anything, but they wanted to know everything about us. And if they did deign to say something then the attempt would be to prove how they are so above us” (*NJA* 2005: 39). She contrasts the sexual and physical violence in her first marriage, to the more satisfying sexual and emotional bonds that she develops with some of her clients.

In the first chapter in *OLTA* titled “The Manifesto of a Sex Worker” she argues that a sex worker is structurally less constrained than a housewife in Kerala: “A sex worker is much freer than an ordinary housewife in Kerala. [...]. During night-time and even during day-time who else can walk with some amount of security on the streets of Kerala? (maybe women who wear the veil can do it)”(*OLTA*: 15). Here she challenges assumptions about the domestic women’s protected status in society and exposes the entrenched forms of curtailment of women’s mobility. Her rhetorical aim is to dismantle the assumption that the normative, familial, upper caste Hindu woman, who is the ‘Kerala

woman' is more liberated than the 'other woman'. She draws a list of the relative freedoms sex workers have in comparison to the house wife

Sex workers are free in four respects. We don't have to cook for a husband; we don't have to wash his dirty clothes; we don't have to ask permission to raise our kids as we deem fit; we don't have to run after a husband claiming rights to his property (*OLTA*: 109).

Many of these claims are not borne out entirely by her life choices of three marriages and also her desire for her daughter to enter into a suitable marriage. "How much then are Jameela's protagonist's pronouncements the taking on of a certain rhetoric that leaves her own life and choices quite untouched?" asks Ashley Tellis (Tellis 2009: 8) in his analysis of the contradictions between her statements and her actions. But I would suggest that she is consciously deploying this provocative rhetoric in order to trouble the entrenched hierarchies between the sex worker and the domestic woman in Kerala. Even as she launches this critique of the patriarchal structures of the family, she does not completely step out of the norms of femininity and domesticity. But neither is she 'untouched' by this rhetoric. She states that her entry into her first marriage was a desperate move not because she desired marriage but because she wanted to get away from the tyranny of her father (*OLTA*: 24). Later when she leaves the second marriage with her young child she says: "When I was leaving his house I just had a baby frock, a turkey towel and a milk bottle in my hand. I didn't want to argue about my daughter's claims. I was stubborn that I would abandon him before he left me." (*OLTA*: 38) Her contradictory moves and statements must be seen as a site of struggle, grounded in a recurring dissatisfaction with the normative arrangement of the male-headed household.

These unsettling contradictions are central to her negotiations with structures of state governance also.

The Subject of Critique

Ashwini Tambe in her detailed historical study on prostitution and workings of the law in late colonial Bombay, draws the reader's attention to the continuities between state approaches towards prostitution in the colonial period and the post-independence era:

Whereas state recognition of sex workers as an identifiable group in need of public health intervention might seem as an improvement [...], the state – both the colonial and post-Independence developmentalist version – is not a benevolent entity. The state position is marked by an instrumentalist approach towards sex-workers; it is much more committed to preventing ill-health among the client population than among sex-workers (Tambe 2009: xvii).

The positioning of the sex worker as a medicalized body who has to be policed and sanitized to protect male clients and the social body has continuities with the regulatory mechanisms of the Contagious Diseases Act²³ in the colonial era. Tambe argues that these new modes of address and participatory language to enlist the support of the sex worker in AIDS campaigns is instrumentalist and that the state is an interested entity performing for domestic and international audiences and funding agencies (Tambe 2009: xvii).

As part of my research, I spoke to social workers who worked with state supported sex worker's organizations who focused on the instrumentalist workings of

²³ The Contagious Diseases Act (CDA) was enacted in India under British rule in 1868 to prevent the spread of venereal diseases to British soldiers and the body of the prostitute was severely monitored under the workings of this act through mandatory medical health examinations and lock hospitals for treatment and retention. See Levine 2003 and Arnold 1993.

AIDS prevention programs: “sex workers are used as tools by the government [...] many of them don’t have a space to sleep in the night. The government does not make any arrangements for their children to get a school education” (Interview with Sreela, January 2008). An autobiographical project like Nalini Jameela’s demonstrates how new modes of address by the state, however instrumentalist, cannot be divorced from their attempts to claim a subject position. Jameela’s project of self narration inhabits and takes shape within neoliberal modes of governance, but tactically disturbs these structures. Her narratives also show the slippages between the address to the sex worker as a population category and their struggles to get access to the participatory position of the ‘citizen’.

Jameela’s life narratives embody the spirit of critique that Foucault defines as the “the art of not being governed so much” (Foucault 1994c: 265). He observes how within governmentality critique is not a face-off opposition and a refusal to be governed at all, but a more critical practice of negotiating and limiting the modes and aims of governance. It is not a full-fledged stepping out of the system, but “the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability” (Foucault 1994c: 266). This definition of critique focuses on strategic planning, practice and reflection and not a revolutionary stepping out of regulatory structures. This staging of infractions within the system can be used as a frame for Jameela’s narrative of the life of a questioning sex worker. Her trajectories of subject formation critique the modes of governance in which the sex worker is an instrumental category for development and the health of the social body. Jameela is a recalcitrant subject of state reform, because even though she uses the language and beneficiary measures offered by the state, she exceeds the dominant frames in which the sex worker is placed. Jameela enters into the public sphere using the AIDS

awareness programs and institutional structures it provides. These include formal spaces for sex workers to come together, awareness classes and training programs in gaining new skills. She is a subject of state reform, who concedes to the benefits brought about by the AIDS discourse, but her self-narrative shows the mediations by sex workers to wrest control over the process of political and cultural representation.²⁴ The sex-worker claims political subjectivity in Jameela's writing, and this complicates the mechanisms through which the sex worker is allowed entry into state structures as an entrepreneurial, self-sufficient agent or a population category.

Jameela, in the chapter titled "Projects," describes how the sex worker's organizations in Kerala²⁵ began work focusing on human rights issues in 1995: "by 1997, these activities spread from health issues to make a difference to all aspects of living. By then the monster called AIDS had made an appearance in Kerala and there was much propaganda that blamed sex workers for the spread of AIDS" (*OLTA*: 93). The chapter title uses the term 'projects' which refers to the developmental paradigms of NGOs with national and global funding. The language of incremental change through set targets, as propagated by the AIDS discourse, is in sharp tension with the more political demands of sex workers for justice and social change. The new call on the sex workers to be

²⁴Chatterjee in his use of governmentality moves toward the conceptualization of the political society as a population group that seeks and finds recognition through the moral attributes of community (2004: 74). He distinguishes this tenuous logic of strategic politics as different from the sanitized rights claims within civil society. My focus is on the political claims of an individual subject and so I do not enter into this frame of the 'political society'. Since the sex worker's mobilization is so embedded in developmental and public health discourse, they do not fit into Chatterjee's model of political society. This is a different mode of negotiated politics.

²⁵ This is through the formation of political groups like the Sex Worker's Forum in Kerala after a series of public meetings in 1999 and 2000. An NGO which works with marginalized groups, Federation for Integrated Research in Mental Health (FIRM), facilitated the formation of Sex Worker's Forum Kerala (SWFK) and in May 2006, SWFK was registered as a charitable society with legal entity.

participants in AIDS awareness campaigns lead them to make demands on the state to better their lives.

Jameela records her struggles to claim recognition through state mechanisms. She documents her attempt to get a passport in order to travel to Thailand to attend a Media and Social Work Seminar organized by GAATW (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women). At the passport office they demand a ration card²⁶ and she realizes how she does not have one. Her father had immediately cut her name from the family ration card when she got married against his wishes, “my father knew the ration card had lots of value. I just thought I lost the monthly allotment of subsidized rice and sugar. I didn’t know that I had lost my identity itself.” (*NJA*: 93). The power of the ration card to bestow legitimacy on her existence brings to the fore how processes of identity and self-formation are embedded in modes of recognition used by the modern state.

Jameela writes in *OLTA* about the interventions of activists who supported sex worker’s rights movements:

We didn’t have a ration card or any of the signs that a society gives to its citizens. The truth was that no one was even aware that all that applied to us also. No one recognized the term sex worker also. People called us other terms like ‘*veshyas*’ and ‘*abhisarikas*’. [...] It was at that point that Paulson and his group entered into their midst and told us that we were human beings and had the same rights as others (*OLTA*: 74).

Here different modes of representation get entangled and one seems as important as the other in order to produce a better social position for the sex worker. The right to have a ration card, which is a sign of being under the care of the modern state, is as important a gesture as being called a sex worker, instead of historically denigrated terms like *veshya*.

²⁶ Ration cards have been an important part of the Public Distribution System (PDS) in India. On the basis of their economic condition, people can buy goods like food grains, sugar, kerosene, etc. at varying prices, with the help of their ration cards. A ration card is a useful document for Indian citizens because it functions as an important tool of identification.

Jameela's claims on categories of governance, like the citizen, demonstrate how political subject formation draws on and intervenes in established modes of enfiguring. Jameela's narrative dwells on the mediated subjectivity of the sex worker who deploys modes of address put forward by the state, even as she raises discomfiting questions that disturb the positioning of the sex worker as a docile follower of state reforms.

The upbeat, utopic accounts of progress through self-empowerment as embodied through the protagonist Geetha in the documentary film is disturbed by Jameela's narrative which does not gloss over the everyday violence faced by women in sex-work, especially street sex workers, both from state authorities in the form of the police and from clients. Her entry into sex work is through her sexual encounter with a police officer, "a hegemonic male ideal" with all the markers of an upper caste man (Christy 2008: 9). He behaves with her tenderly in the night like "the lover of my dreams" (*NJA* 2005: 31), but betrays her to the police the next morning. This was in 1977, during the state emergency period, when disciplinary state power worked in a draconian fashion. Jameela's account of the event is a disturbing depiction of blatant state violence:

As soon as we got to the police station, the caning started. We were caned on the soles of our feet. In my anger and distress at this treatment, I shouted, 'Police to sleep with by night; police to give a thrashing by day! In between beatings, the Assistant Station Inspector jeered, 'So what did you think? If you slept with *saar* at night, he wouldn't tell us?' (*NJA* 2005: 31).

The acts of physical violence are described in a stark manner, the details of the acts of violence and their infliction on specific parts of her body heightens the memory of bodily pain. As she recreates this event through the lens of her memory, there is an interjection of her voice of desperation and anger even at the extreme levels of subjugation. She does not depict the scene of violence as an instance of silencing; instead, there is a pushing

back on her side through her desperate, verbal response. This sense of struggle in the face of day to day violence underwrites her narratives of the life of sex workers and links her narrative to the political struggle around the Kunjibi murder case in the 1980s. She demonstrates how far from being an aberration at the time of state emergency, police violence is a continuing reality in sex worker's lives in Kerala.²⁷ Jameela in her narrative emphasizes the struggles in sex workers' lives as they have to strategize and maneuver their way through multiple, everyday structures of violence.

The police as the law keepers become the most familiar face of the state for sex workers and the protests against police violence become an important situation where the sex worker emerges as a political figure. By insisting on how juridical forms of power continue to criminalize sex workers, even as they are incorporated within public health interventions, Jameela points to the paradoxical impulses within the working of state power. A repeated thread in her narratives is the demand to be protected from police violence and the right to practice her profession without being abused by state authorities, "most often when sex workers are arrested as part of a raid in a hotel room, the police prepare the charge sheet in such a way than the men who are with them are not punished" (*OLTA*: 85). The documentary, *A Collective through Realization*, that I discussed earlier, begins with the sequence of two sex workers fleeing from the police. The camera focuses on the running feet of the two women as they are chased by the police jeep. But the situation is quickly resolved with the intervention of the Women's Cooperative. Police violence in this documentary is presented as one of the structural factors that can be

²⁷ A.K. Jayasree draws on accounts from sex worker from 1995 to 2001 to provide factual evidence to support Jameela's claims, "street sex workers are arrested in Kerala 3-4 times a month, according to oral histories by the women". Data shows how 90% of those arrested under the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act are women sex workers. The other 10% are brothel keepers, pimps and clients. (Jayasree 2004: 61).

solved through incorporation into the development programs. Jameela's narrative points to the diffuse networks of state power within which sex workers continue to face violence from disciplinary institutions of the state, even as they are recruited to spread AIDS awareness and given certain benefits and entitlements.

Beyond Victimhood

Jameela uses the language of rights to articulate her demands for equality, but her narrative posits a subject who is not the victim demanding reparation.²⁸ As I discuss in the previous chapter, in feminist activism against violence towards sex workers in the 1980s, the affective appeal was primarily through sympathy for the prostitute as a victim. Jameela's narrative makes a significant shift in the paradigm of the rights discourse by demanding equality and not sympathy. Her intervention in a seminar conducted in 2002 as part of the Kerala Social Forum is a public statement on the dominant rhetoric of the sex worker as a victim:

The heated debate began when a doctor remarked that in his imagination a sex worker was a dark, thin, poverty-stricken woman standing in front of a hut. The doctor did not know I was a sex worker. At one phase of the argument he was shocked when I asked him if I fitted the image he just described (*OLTA*: 103).

Jameela uses her body and self-presentation to complicate the monolithic representation of the sex worker as an emblem of deprivation. She also draws attention to the casteist overtones in this statement, the dominant assumption that the 'dark' non-dominant caste woman will be sexually available. Her interventions disrupt the imagination of the sex worker as a symbol of oppression, a dominant rubric through which the sex worker is

²⁸ Menon (2004) points to the limits of the rights-based framework in the context of the Indian women's movement. She argues that the intersection of feminist politics, law, and the state often distorts important ethical and emancipatory impulses of feminism.

positioned in the public sphere. Wendy Brown has argued about the risks of permanent identification with narratives of suffering which may have the “capacity not only to chain us to our injurious histories [...] but to instigate the further regulation of those lives while depoliticizing their conditions” (Brown 2005: 85). Brown argues that confessions of suffering become the norms through which ‘victims’ are regulated and frozen in that narrative. Jameela struggles to move away from this ‘regulatory fiction’ (Brown 2005: 91) of the sex worker as the perennially suffering victim.

In the public address she makes in Calcutta in connection with the celebration of Indian Sex Worker’s Day organized by the Sex Worker’s Forum, she recounts how in contrast to other participants who recounted their exploitation and oppression she spoke about how sex workers were different from other women. It is the relative lack of constraints in a sex worker’s life in comparison to a married woman that she describes because “unlike everyone else who used the five minutes they got to recount the tragedies in their own locations, I felt more satisfied talking in this way”(NJA: 92). There is a conscious deployment of a language of mobility and self-assertion to describe a sex worker’s life, in order to counter the common rhetoric of sympathy and pity, especially in her public speeches and interviews. The opening chapter in *OLTA*, which is titled ‘Sex Worker’s Manifesto,’ asserts the sex worker’s status as a laboring body and argues that this work must be treated with dignity as much as any other socially accepted job. In an interview with Dileep Raj, Jameela argues, “It is not essential that everyone does sex work because they like it. Most people do jobs they do not like to do. [...] Do people talk about rehabilitating individuals who do scavenging work in the most unhygienic conditions?” (Raj 2005: 23). More than unequivocally celebrating sex work, she is

concerned about the moral stigma associated with this work that determines dominant approaches to sex work in Kerala.

She observes how many people who declare solidarity with sex workers do not understand the real problems they face. A theater group from Thrissur made a documentary and staged a play on the life of sex workers. But Jameela disagreed with the premise of the play which portrayed the pathetic life of sex workers and asked society to rescue them, “I believe firmly that we do not need the kindness or sympathy of the society – what we demand is a position of equality with other sections of society” (*OLTA*: 82). This language of rights and demand for equality draws on the political language deployed by rights based organization like FIRM (Federation for Intergrated Research in Mental Health)²⁹ and the Sex Worker’s Forum of Kerala. When women’s organizations in Kerala organized a “Make the Night Our Own” demonstration in Trivandrum, she says that this was not the demand of sex workers, “the night always belonged to them. Sex workers did not have to struggle to own the night. Their problem is to own the day. That has been denied to them by Kerala society (*OLTA*: 102).” Here she observes that sex workers have always been allowed to function in a covert manner by the society, in the cover of the night. But in broad day light there is no open recognition or acceptance of them. Even when they are incorporated within public health mechanisms of AIDS control, they are often denied access to other institutions of society.

This denial is demonstrated in her narrative through the lack of access to institutions of modernity like the home, hospitals and schools. She discusses how both

²⁹ This is one of the most active NGOs in Kerala that has been working since 1995 to provide legal and economic support and counseling to marginalized communities in Kerala.

her education as well as her daughter's were disrupted.³⁰ The 'public' or the *pothujanam* as a legitimate sphere of bonding and belonging is one on which the sex worker has a limited claim. Jameela also connects her homelessness to her exclusion from the structures of the public sphere and her conflicted relationship to the sphere of the home must be read in the context of how this is an aspirational space, not guaranteed to subaltern woman.³¹ The identical dedication in both the books: "To sex workers who have no space of their own and are forced to sleep on the streets at night," points to how the public operates as a structure of social recognition which also gives access to certain spaces, including that of a house of one's own.

It is through the centrality of practices of reading and of print culture in the making of the public in Kerala that Jameela stakes claim to equality and recognition. As I argue in the introduction, visual and print cultural practices are crucial to the configuration of the public in Kerala as an inter-connected, affective network. A demand for rights and decriminalization of sex work is mainly directed at the state as the law and policy-making authority. However, the publication of her autobiographies reconfigures the reading public as the addressee. This exceeds the demand for decriminalization of sex work and entitlements and becomes an appeal to the public for a new imagination of the sex worker and her position within the social.³²

³⁰ In *NJA*, one of her early memories is of her sense of dismay when her education is stopped after she finishes her third grade. She later mentions how her daughter's education is also disrupted because of the dislocations within their family life (*NJA* 14).

³¹ Dilip Menon in his historical study of the 19th century subaltern novel in Malayalam observes how for the non-dominant caste groups the 'home' as a spatial and affective entity is a primary object of desire that cannot be taken for granted (Menon 2006: 103).

³² Sex worker's organizations in Kerala conducted a public meeting to felicitate the director and main actress of the film *Susanna* (dir: T.V. Chandran 2000). This was the first time sex-workers claimed the public sphere, not as victims, but as spectators responding to a cinematic representation of the prostitute figure. This claiming of the position of film viewers shows how cultural practices are crucial to sexual politics in Kerala. Menon and Bharadwaj and other scholars discuss how the sex worker's reception of

Narrative Infractions

Unlike a political speech or manifesto, the form of the autobiography allows the articulation of instability and contingency in the process of political subject formation.³³

Within the form of the life narrative, the subject is always incomplete and shifting and forms a contrast to the contained, unified subject at the core of the rights discourse.

Jameela's opening statement in her first autobiography brings to fore the tensions of being a representative figure, but also a shifting subject whose life-story cannot be neatly told:

there is an upcoming revolution in Kerala, spearheaded by the lower-most sections of society, I am one of those who are part of that struggle. I was born as Nalini, at one moment in my life I became Jameela, today I like to be known as Nalini Jameela. Let me now muster courage to remember my life experiences.”
(*OLTA*: 16)

These shifting instances of naming and self-definition mark the distance of the autobiography from a rights-based political document.

Her second book, *NJA*, approximates the conventional forms of autobiographies more than her first book *OLTA*. There are certain normative conventions about how one can tell an intelligible story of one's life. As Butler observes “the norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not precisely mine [...] and there can be no account of myself that does not, to some extent, conform to norms that govern the humanly recognizable” (Butler 2001: 66). Butler draws attention to the norms in place, which have to be negotiated, if one is to produce a recognizable narrative of a life at a particular historical juncture. The temporal arrangement of a life is one way in which a life story

Susanna is a critical gesture to invent a new position for the sex worker in the public sphere (Menon and Bharadwaj 2002, Menon 2005, Mokkal 2003).

³³ For a discussion of autobiography as a way of writing history and its links to the inhabitation of modernity in Kerala, see Kumar 2008.

becomes recognizable. One has to begin at the beginning with the memories of childhood becoming an acceptable starting point. A childhood memory functions as the opening moment of *NJA*, “first memory: I must be 2 and a half or three years old.[...] Even now in my mind I have the image of my grandmother standing on all fours and cooing to my infant brother”(NJA: 13). This is markedly different from the first version of her life narrative which begins with a chapter titled “The Manifesto of Sex Workers”. But the form of both books is fragmented and episodic and does not follow the logic of a linear teleology. The endings of both the books are inconclusive and anti-climactic. The formal ruptures in this dual autobiography project are enmeshed with Jameela’s precarious positioning within the social. The complexities of Nalini Jameela’s task of giving an account of one self, in which the “self is already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration” (Butler 2005: 8), is captured in the fifth section of her book which has a chapter titled “Nalini, Jameela”.

This segment of the book is a montage of memories where she looks at different mediums - photography, film and literature and her own encounters with these narrative and documentary forms. The narrative shuttles through space and time and strings together multiple memories in a non-linear fashion. She records her experience of watching a film for the first time in her life when she was fourteen, her responses to well-known literary writings in Malayalam that she encountered as a child, and having her first photograph taken when she was twenty-one years old. “I had my picture first taken when I was twenty-one. I wore a traditional sari in it. When I looked at it, it was a lot like my mother’s photo. Not like mine!”(NJA 2005: 106). This juxtaposition of different media, film, literature and photography as a means way creating memory is a

point she often repeats in the second book, “That’s the way my memory is. I remember the past in moving pictures, like a film, with scenes that are sharp in my mind” (Devika 2007c: 135). From the medium of literary narrative she expands her reach and speaks of other significant representational practices and the affective impact these mediums have on her. The chapter about naming herself “Nalini Jameela” comes after she recounts these memories of encountering different representational mediums. Here she establishes the need to access different cultural forms of narrativising in order to create a ‘compositional subject’ called Nalini Jameela. Her reaching for visual forms of representation even as she uses the verbal form of the autobiography is linked to how this is not a unified liberal subject that can be neatly mapped onto the existing form of the autobiography. The fractures and ruptures of her embattled subjectivity necessarily breaks down the form of the autobiography and results in this invocation of multiple representational practices. Thus there is no “telos of represented object to representing subject” (Kang 2002: 27), possible in Jameela’s experiments in self narration. She is, to use Laura Kang’s terminology, a compositional subject, “composed, composite and positional” (Kang 2002: 27). Her experiments in self narration are linked to her fraught position in the social. In order to give a public circulatable form to her fractured subjectivity, she draws in visual tropes and creates cinematic instances even as she is verbalizing her life-story.

In interviews, Jameela characterizes the second book as a corrective and a more authentic rendering of her life. She explains that she produced a second version so as to reclaim her autobiography and assert her voice. But in my analysis, I suggest that in order to understand the messy, negotiated process of the politics of subject formation, it is

necessary to read both the books as interconnected projects. Both these texts are mediated productions and the overlaps, the reiterated as well as incomplete processes point to the impossibility of a contained theory of self-formation, when the subject from the margins lays claim to representation. It is not surprising that Jameela wrote not one, but two versions of her autobiography and still feels her project is incomplete, “I should warn you I might write again in the future – ‘My autobiography, part II!’” (Devika 2007c: 143). The struggle to create a form within which she can speak as a subject is arduous and vexed. She has to speak multiple languages, tell conflicting tales and skip through time and space. She inhabits the paradigms of rights and citizenship, and also accesses the AIDS awareness moulds for the ‘sex worker’ and even then parts of her story remains unsaid and illegible. The subject formation that Jameela performs in her narratives is a reminder of the precarious positioning of the sex worker in the public sphere. It reveals how ration cards and governmental recognition are only one mode of participation in the social. She seeks participation in these state mechanisms of entitlement. But what exceeds the documentary enterprises of state processes surfaces in Jameela’s autobiography as a practice of self-making, which complicates the dominant figuration of the sex worker as a victim, a medicalized body or the abstract representative of a marginalized community. Her compositional mode of juxtaposing the linguistic and the imagistic and her turns to visual mediums even as she uses the literary form of the autobiography, places a demand on the reader and the critic to be open to these shifting modes and acknowledge the necessity of these restless movements for a subaltern subject to tell her life story.

Ashley Tellis argues that Jameela’s narrative turns every moment of interiority into a “matter-of-fact exteriority” and flattens “the autobiographical ‘I’ into a connector

with several other ‘I’s’ and he reads this as intricately connected to her fraught social position (Tellis 2009: 6). In Jameela’s autobiographies the iconic events of self-assertion are staged in the public. This is a model of subject formation that marks its presence through inter-related modes of being face to face with a viewing other. Because of this constant awareness of a sociality in which the “I” exists in relation to a “you”, Jameela’s acts of affirming the self is always risky and tenuous. One of Jameela’s powerful memories is about how as an eleven-year-old she participated in a protest march for land rights: “That picture is clear in my mind. [...] Me walking with the crowd holding a flag aloft, shouting slogans - feeling like someone who was getting noticed. Like we say a woman warrior” (NJA 2005: 105). Later she says how she realized people were staring at her because of her physical beauty. Though she was only eleven, her body had the shapely contours of a fourteen year old, “I just wore a short blouse and a skirt that reached my knees. Silk Smitha’s clothes in later years. That’s the only dress I had then” (NJA 2005: 105). In one memory, there are two oscillating frames through which she perceives how she is looked at, the first as a brave political protestor and the second as a sexualized body. The comparison to Silk Smitha is telling, because she was an actress who was the ultimate symbol of sensuality in South-Indian cinema in the eighties.³⁴ The erotic tensions in the public gaze do not cancel out her sense of claiming presence and her appreciation of standing out in this march.

Another incident of being seen and creating an impression on the viewer is recounted in both versions of her autobiography. During the early phase of her life as a

³⁴ Silk Smitha (1960–1996) starred in over 200 Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada and a few Hindi films. Her raunchy dance numbers and provocative performances made her *the* glamorous sex symbol of South Indian cinema. Her suicide at the age of 35 gives a tragic aura to the public memorialization of this hugely popular and controversial film star.

sex worker, she worked at a hotel where the small room in which she had sex with clients had no electric bulb or any source of lighting. This was the arrangement in the hotel so that the client would not know the sex worker's identity and could not see her face. One of her regular clients wanted to see her and after much insistence on his part she stepped out into the lighted hallway. He was struck by her good looks and asked her, "you are so beautiful, why do you sit in the dark like this?" Jameela expresses her surprise at his behavior, "usually men went off and returned at night, that's all. It wasn't common at all for them to pay us compliments. [...] That amazed expression which lit up his face on seeing me for the first time remains stamped on my mind even now"(*NJA*: 35). Here we witness another incident where Jameela's image of herself is formed through the admiring gaze of the onlooker. His amazed face becomes the mirror through which she builds her sense of self-worth. The significance of an addressee, whether it is a watching crowd or one man who asks her to switch on the light, parallels the workings of autobiography in which experiences are authorized and acquire validity by circulating in the inter-linked public network. The concept of a stable sense of interiority and the self-contained individual subject is undermined in Jameela's narrative.

These instances of her personal history which she presents as self-affirming are intertwined with normative assumptions about women's bodies and beauty. These contradictions in her narrative should not be papered over to claim her as a radical political subject. The more productive impact of her narrative is that it forces the reader to re-examine set paths towards claiming the public sphere through contained models of political subjectivity. This fraught, fragmented and incomplete exercise of a sex worker claiming the day performs the stuttered process of compositional subject formation. The

gaps, frictions and irresolvable tensions in Jameela's dual autobiographies are productive to think about regional registers of sexuality and subjectivity in post-90s Kerala.

This questioning of dominant paradigms of the political subject and its links to the recasting of narrative forms is central to my investigation of political interventions around the figure of the lesbian. This will be my focus in the next two chapters. In contrast to the hyper-visible sex worker, the 'lesbian' is relatively absent in state processes and public health discourses. But queer politics in India is located in the matrix of identity politics, sexual health management, NGO-ization and human rights discourses. This is an important scaffolding for the emergence of the lesbian as an identity category in the present and I examine the possibilities and limitations of this framing. As the massive public debates and mobilization around Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) shows, cultural practices are a crucial field to map the politics of lesbian desire in India. In the next chapter, I analyze the representational practices of two Malayalam films, from different time periods, to reflect on the formations of queer politics in Kerala.

Chapter 4

Shifting Spaces, Frozen Frames: Visions of Queer Politics

Released in 2004, Ligy Pullappally's film, *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004), makes an important political statement by portraying a lesbian love story in rural Kerala.

Sancharram makes a strong claim for positive representations of lesbian desire in order to counter societal violence against non-normative sexual arrangements. It makes possible a cinematic space within which lesbian desire is openly affirmed. Labeled as the first Malayalam "lesbian film," *Sancharram* has been celebrated in reviews coming from India and abroad as inaugurating a radical sexual politics within Malayalam cinema. This film, in which two young women defy societal conventions in order embrace their desire for each other, is read as emblematic of a radical desire for sexual liberation within global India. This is in keeping with a narrative of progress in which contemporary forms of representation and politics are often characterized as breaking the silence and making visible hitherto silenced forms of sexuality in the non-Western world. My aim in this chapter is to push against this narrative of progress where current forms of representations are assumed to be more progressive than those from the past. I will read *Sancharram* in conversation with another Malayalam film from the eighties *Deshadana Kili Karayarila* (The Wandering Bird Does Not Cry, 1986), in order to mine the multiple sexual imaginations that are available within the public sphere of Kerala.

While acknowledging the important political contribution made by *Sancharram*, the comparative reading in this chapter interrogates the limits of a universal language of sexual identity politics. It points to the dangers of valorizing a singular model of politics as universally applicable and the only available mode. At this point in history, where sexuality is a global political issue, it is important to recognize and deploy multiple ways of forging a politics based on sexuality. Reflecting on the risks and limits of a discourse of sexual liberation grounded in the mechanisms of ngo-isation and globalization in post-90s India, Ashley Tellis observes:

Southasians must forge a language and a politics closer to our own contexts, a locally grounded politics that respects sociological particularities and our own languages. This would mean eschewing the identity politics that have led to widespread impasses, even in Western Europe and the US where they were born (Tellis 2008).

By reading a film text from the 1980s that does not circulate in the public sphere as a lesbian film, alongside a film like *Sancharram*, I am opening up the possibilities of a critical imagination of queer politics.¹ I hope this comparative reading will enable us to interrogate the radical claims of a dominant, identity based sexual politics.

Two Visions for the Present

The opening shot of *Sancharram* depicts a steep, menacing cliff and a surging waterfall below. A young woman is vulnerably positioned at the edge of the cliff. The camera gives us a close up of her feet as she holds them out precariously into thin air. Booming

¹ I use the term queer in order to tap into the critical political possibilities opened by it. The process of queering is not one of setting up rigid identity categories, but rather it questions the normalizing mechanisms that divide the social world into hierarchical binaries like male/female, homosexual/heterosexual or married/single. Queer is a term that is currently gaining circulation in India in an attempt to forge a sexuality politics that questions normativity.

sounds of temple drums can be heard in the backdrop, making this a climactic moment of possible suicide, which the film returns to in the end, as we see the girl turn back to stake her claim over life rather than death. *Sancharram* is bracketed by this threat of suicide both within the film plot and the contemporary events to which the film responds.

Pullapally says that she was motivated to make this film because of her concern about the series of lesbian suicides in Kerala, “I hope my film helps young gay people consider the option of moving ahead with their lives, instead of taking the devastating step that will resonate for years within their own families and communities, suicide” (Interview, Cheerath-Rajagopalan 2005). *Deshadana Kili Karayarilla*, directed by P. Padmarajan, is one of the rare Malayalam films from the 1980s that touches on the issue of “lesbian suicide”.² This film ends with the double suicide of the two women protagonists. We see them in the closing shot in bed—entangled bodies in a final sleep. This chapter is a comparative reading of both of these films on sexual practices, from different moments of Kerala history, in order to offer a critical commentary on the political debates around queerness in contemporary Kerala.

“Lesbian suicide” is one of the issues around which sexuality has become a political issue in the Kerala public sphere in the last two decades. Lesbian suicide can be seen as a desperate act of claiming recognition for a non-normative sexual relationship through an ultimate stepping out of the social. The acts of lesbian suicides and the debates and mobilizations around it point to an existing terrain of discourses around sexuality in Kerala within which some of the dominant assumptions around the public

² In a state that has the highest suicide rate in India, there has been since the mid-90s newspaper reports about women who die together. Initially these were unspecified reports tucked away in a corner of the newspaper, but as the pattern repeated it drew the attention of some concerned individuals and groups.. Today, as the category of the “lesbian” is well-circulated in public discourses, even mainstream newspapers name such suicides “lesbian suicides”.

and the private, norms of desiring and modes of resistance get troubled.

My readings of the two films *Sancharram* and *Deshadana Kili Karayarilla* (from now on *DKK*) are both firmly rooted in the demands of the contemporary moment as the dominant frameworks of a global LGBT rights movement³, like the politics of visibility, the concept of a counter-public, and the desire for a solidified gay or lesbian subject position, gets transfigured in the public sphere of Kerala. Though *DKK* is from an earlier time than *Sancharram*, it is not the burden of this chapter to advocate a nostalgic return to “traditional” models of desiring. On the contrary, it is because *DKK* speaks about the complexities of sexual desire within modern Kerala that it is found to be relevant. The film stages the gendered struggles, in the negotiations of the public sphere, which resonate with the challenges faced by queer activism in Kerala today. Rather than fixate on the temporal differences between these two films, I use the films to speculate on the different models of sexual politics available within a region.

It is productive to look at how cultural texts can embody different modes of sexual politics, as activists and academics struggle to coin strategies in order to articulate the possibilities and impossibilities of non-normative sexual practices in Kerala. This is also important in the face of the concern around lesbian suicides that is often read as the only desperate measure that a same-sex couple can take in the absence of any existing

³ There are significant political and historical differences between the two terms “LGBT” and “queer politics” as it is used in India and elsewhere. The LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) movement is the term used in India to refer to the political activism around sexual minority rights and I use it to denote the more visible face of a largely identity based sexuality politics. The movement gained strength since the in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and mobilizations that led to the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2009. Recent publications like *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (2005) point to the complex conversations about questions of sexuality in India today. It’s introduction suggests that the term queer is useful to move beyond the limits of identity politics, “queer politics does not speak only of the issues of these communities as ‘minority issues,’ but instead speaks of larger understandings of gender and sexuality in our society that affect all of us, regardless of our sexual orientation” (Narrain and Bhan 2005: 4).

discourses within a culture about same-sex desire. My analysis of cultural production in the eighties and the present questions the linear narrative of an absence of representation of non-normative sexual relationships in the past to a greater visibility in the current moment. I use this reading to reexamine the politics of visibility and the dangers of positing it as the only strategy to critique the violence of normative heterosexuality.

Feminist scholars who work on questions of sexuality in India like Nivedita Menon have observed how in the post-1990s period in India, after liberalization and the opening up of the Indian economy, we see a new language of sexuality emerge. There are multiple sites of cultural production like films, literature, popular magazines and pornography since the 1950s in Kerala that have produced sexual texts. But from the 1990s on there is a shift in the articulation of these sexuality-based issues, as a more well-formulated language of sexual identity politics makes its way into the public sphere of Kerala. These developments have played an important role in engendering an LGBT movement in metropolitan India that relies heavily on an international language of sexual rights. *Sancharram* is a film that locates itself centrally within this international LGBT counter-cultural space.

In *DKK*, on the other hand, while definitely informed by a cultural discourse around desire and female friendship,⁴ sexuality is much less solidified and therefore available for multiple depictions. I explore the political implications of the cinematic

⁴ There are certain common tropes that this film shares with other representations of homoerotic relationships between women in Malayalam literature, the most noted one being V. T. Nandakumar's *Two Girls* (*Randu Penkuttikal*, 1974) and also popular discourses in women's magazines. One of these is the concern around the possible intimacies between women in sex-segregated spaces like women's hostels and educational institutions. T. Muraleedharan's "Dispensable Sisterhood: Women's Friendships in Malayalam Cinema" (Muraleedharan 2010) provides a detailed discussion of the history of the representation of women's friendship and solidarity in Malayalam cinema from the 1970s onwards. He argues that in many of these films women's friendships are sidelined as the resolution privileges the heterosexual bond.

codes used by a director⁵ from the 1980s who might be aware that he is taking up a “taboo theme,” but represents it so that the lesbian relationship is posited as one among other possibilities of desire. This provides a productive counter-point to a film like *Sancharram* which is the product of a different cultural representational logic and wears its queer identity politics on its sleeve. The imagined audience and the circuits of circulation of both these films are also markedly different.

Chicago-based director Pullappally’s⁶ *Sancharram* has garnered critical attention, awards and appreciation for being a bold film that breaks accepted boundaries.

Sancharram was honored with the Chicago Award from the Chicago International Film Festival, The Lankesh Award for India’s Best Debut Director and the John Abraham Special Jury Award for Best Malayalam Feature Film. It has been lauded as “an incredible act of affirmation of queer desire” by well-known gay rights activists in India like Arvind Narrain (Narrain 2004). It premiered in the Chicago International Film Festival and has been screened in film festivals in India and also in many noted gay lesbian film festivals in the US, Canada, and Australia. This is a film that locates itself in the visible LGBT networks in India and abroad through the publicity of the film, its places of exhibition and networks of circulation. The DVDs of this film is marketed by the US Company, Wolfe Videos, a well-known distributor of gay and lesbian feature films. This is one of the few Malayalam films whose copies can be easily picked up in video rentals in the US like Blockbuster or Net Flix. It is one of the only films that

⁵ Writer and film-maker Padmarajan made films from 1979 to 1991 and is a prominent cultural icon in Kerala. In a short span of twelve years he made twenty films and wrote screenplays for another twenty. At the time of release and in the decades after that, his films have enjoyed both popular appeal and critical appreciation.

⁶ Ligy J. Pullappally was born in Kerala, and grew up in Chicago. She is a trial lawyer by profession who has worked specifically on women’s issues. *Sancharram* is Pullappally’s first foray into full length feature films.

audiences in metropolitan centers in the West and India had an earlier and easier access to than a Kerala based audience. *DKK* was not labeled or marketed as a queer film at the moment of its production, but the intimate relationship between two women forms the crux of this film too. Its context of production and circulation is mainly for a regional Malayali audience that is very different from *Sancharram*, which has not yet had a commercial release in theaters in Kerala. A film like *DKK* that is historically positioned outside the current moment can be reappropriated in order to offer a new lens to look at the contemporary.

Critically Queer

Whether it is through the metaphor of the “closet” or the paradigm of “coming out,” the questions of visibility and invisibility and the stakes of what it means for a sexual relationship to be public and recognizable has been one of the persistent concerns of contemporary LGBT politics. A sexual relationship acquires social sanction as a legitimate ‘couplehood’ only when it stakes a claim in the public sphere through an act like marriage or living together.⁷ The publicness of sex becomes intimately tied up to the spaces that a couple occupies. In cinema we can track this by looking at the mis-en-scene and camera work that place the characters within different spaces. There are also specific codes of representation within film through which a couple is established through certain acts or by their positioning within a shot.⁸ In the case of *Sancharram*, the exercise of

⁷ There seems to be a dark twist to this in the case of lesbian suicides where the couple becomes established through the act of dying together.

⁸ Madhava Prasad and Moinak Biswas have analyzed the complex codes of representation of desire in Indian film, where a public gaze often disrupts the private space of the formation of the heterosexual couple (Prasad 1998; Biswas 2000). Moinak Biswas, in his study of the highly popular Bengali film *Hurano Sur* (1957), observes that the journey from the familial to the conjugal remains largely unfulfilled in popular

producing such a film is itself mired in the language of visibility and invisibility, and a “breaking the silence” trajectory is one that the film neatly fits into. The link between sexuality and the public sphere is explored in complex ways within the cinematic text of *DKK* so as to dramatize some of the strategic negotiations that the heroines in this film have to undertake in order to walk the thin line between visibility and safety.

The different conceptions of desire that these two films put forward and their political implications are played out through the different spatial economies of these films. My “spatial” analysis in this chapter is two-fold. I mainly analyze how spaces are framed within these two films, but I read this in conjunction with the different sites of production, circulation and reception of these two films. My analysis demonstrates that a film like *Deshadana Kili Karayarilla*, which does not make its heroines claim a queer subject position, manages to retain a sense of contingency of the term queer. Through its more subterranean ways of working, it disrupts and queers the social sphere of Kerala in a more critical fashion than *Sancharram*.

Reading against the grain of some of the more celebratory reviews of *Sancharram*, which describe the film as “queering” the terrain of Malayalam cinema, I demonstrate how this film puts into place a narrow and rigid definition of what the process of queering involves. In the final chapter of *Bodies that Matter* titled, “Critically Queer,” Judith Butler writes that the assertion of “queer” must never purport to fully describe those it seeks to represent (Butler 1993: 230). She argues that to democratize queer politics and retain an awareness of the exclusionary ways in which discourses of power work, it is essential to emphasize the level of contingency of the term queer. A critique of the “queer

Bengali cinema in this period (Biswas 2000). In fact, he suggests that the lasting popularity of *Hurano Sur* is because it finds a way of recognizing and articulating the absent space of the couple.

subject” should be built within a critical queer politics which is aware that a single trajectory of queerness cannot be universally applicable. “For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked character to the demand for universal “outness”? Who is represented by *which* use of the term and who is excluded?” (Butler 1993: 227), she asks, drawing attention to the complexities that are bound to arise when certain crystallized forms of queerness are exported universally. David Eng, Judith Haberstam and Jose Esteban Munoz reassess the political utility of the term queer in the context of late twentieth century global shifts which has lead to the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian identity and national manifestations of sexual hierarchies (Eng et al. 2005: 1). The critical analysis I undertake in this chapter reflects their argument that the theoretical and political promise of the term queer is embedded in how it is a “political metaphor without a fixed referant” (Eng et al. 2005: 2). A comparative reading of *DKK* and *Sancharram* demonstrates how and why certain cultural texts capture the possibilities of being “critically queer”.

Differing Scripts of Travel: *Deshadanam* and *Sancharram*

Sancharram tells the story of two young women Kiran and Delilah (Lilah), in a rural setting in Kerala, whose friendship crosses accepted boundaries and enters the realm of the sexual. Kiran comes from a prestigious Nair⁹ family with a father who is an established journalist and a mother who has a wealthy legacy. Delilah, Kiran’s neighbor

⁹ The Nairs are a dominant Hindu caste group from Kerala. The Nairs practised martial arts and till the early 20th century they exerted their influence in medieval Kerala society as feudal lords and owned large estates. They dominated the civil, administrative and military elite of the pre-British era in Kerala and they also have more access to educational and cultural institutions in contemporary Kerala. This is one of the communities in Kerala that practised matrilineal forms of family arrangement and inheritance until the early 20th century.

is Christian and her mother runs her household and their rubber estate after the death of Delilah's father. The film shows the budding relationship between the two girls as they study together in the same school and share their everyday lives. Kiran is reluctant to express her sexual desire for Lilah, but when circumstances force her to do so she discovers to her surprise that Lilah shares her feelings. They confess their love for each other, but a crisis develops when Rajan, one of their classmates who desires Lilah, sees them in an intimate moment and reports this to Lilah's mother. Due to familial pressure, Lilah agrees to an arranged marriage and Kiran is ostracized both by her family and in school when news about their relationship circulates in the community. Kiran repeatedly attempts to convince Lilah to cut ties with her family and run away with her, but Lilah refuses to do so. On the day of Lilah's marriage, a desperate Kiran contemplates suicide, but changes her mind in the last moment and turns back to embrace a new life. At the same instance, in a dream-like sequence, Lilah rebels in the wedding hall and refuses to passively enter into a suitable marriage.

The motif of the journey is central to Padmarajan's film. Its title *The Wandering Bird Does Not Cry* (*Deshadana Kili Karyarilla*) refers to the figure of the migratory bird who roams the nation or "*desham*" and never cries. The film follows the trajectory of the lives of two young girls, Sally and Nirmala (Nimmi) who are in a strict boarding school run by Christian missionaries in Kerala. They are both seen as a disruptive presence in the school and are punished for breaking school rules. Sally is shown from the beginning as the more aggressive and assertive of the two and she often takes the initiative for their escapades. The principal of the school even calls Nirmala "Sally's tail". Both the girls are shown to have apathetic families. There is one teacher in the school, Devika, whom Sally

and Nimmi rebel against. To take revenge for Devika's disciplinary actions, the two of them decide to run away from a school picnic organized by her. Things work according to plan and their disappearance results in Devika's suspension.

The two of them take on new identities as tourists and research fellows and start to live in a youth hostel in a different town. Sally cuts her hair short and her clothing style changes to jeans and shirt, a costume which in the eighties would be a marker of both Western modernity and the appropriation of masculinity. Nimmi finds a job in a handicrafts store. They seem satisfied in each other's company until the entry of an older man, Harikrishnan, into Nimmi's life. Sally is suspicious of this man, but Nimmi is clearly attached to him and looks upon him as her "father, lover and companion". He also seems to reciprocate her affection, but as the film progresses, we see that he is actually in love with Devika and hopes to marry her. He also wishes that Nimmi and Sally would return to their school and resume their education and for Devika to get her job back. Towards the end of the film, he convinces Nimmi to go back to school, while Sally resolutely refuses to do so. On the day before Nimmi is to return to her old school, Harikrishnan tells her about his plan to marry Devika. Nimmi is shattered at this news and attempts to commit suicide when Sally also packs her bag and leaves. But Sally returns at the right moment and tells Nimmi that she cannot go off anywhere by herself. The film stages an intense moment of reunion between the two girls, but the narrative takes us to the following morning, when we see both girls dead in bed hugging each other. "To a far, far, far away place," says the postscript to the film in small black letters.

The Public Sphere and the Making of the Couple

Sancharram through its textual politics, its marketing and circulation is part of a counter-public. It positions itself as a “lesbian” film staking a claim for an expression of queer desire that goes against societal norms. A counter-public is seen to be in a conflictual relationship to the dominant public and therefore operating in frictional relation to the norm. As Michael Warner argues: “a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one” (Warner 2002: 86). Pullappally’s film works within the logic of a neat splitting between the dominant public sphere and a disruptive counter-culture. In order to perform this dichotomous relationship, the film posits a traditional Nair home and a picture perfect rural Kerala as the backdrop for its “love story”. There is a need to construct a calm river for a counter-cultural stone to create its ripples.

DKK, both in terms of its spatialisation of desire in the film and the spaces it occupies through its circulation, undoes this binary between a dominant culture and a counter-culture that sets itself against it. It makes visible the “contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of *all* publics” (Warner 2002: 81). By doing so it points to the limits of positing a counter-public as an exclusive site of resistance. Unlike *Sancharram*, this film was screened in mainstream film theaters and also makes its way into domestic spaces later through its transmission on Malayalam television channels. Padmarajan is seen as one of the established and highly popular filmmakers of Kerala whose films are nostalgically evoked as part of the “golden era” of Malayalam cinema. So there is a culture of aesthetic appreciation and film reception that places *DKK* as

acceptable, “good” cinema. The circuits of circulation of this film as a mainstream film meant for “family audiences” show how the dominant public sphere can itself be an unstable space. Thus my move towards a reading of *DKK* suggests that films and cultural texts that circulate in the mainstream public sphere and carry the label of “good art” might at times have its own strategies of undoing normative codes of desiring.¹⁰

Of the three interlocking strands of desire in the film—the relationship between Nimmi and Sally, the marriage oriented relationship between Harikrishnan and Devika, and the incomplete romance between Nimmi and Harikrishnam—it is the one between Sally and Nimmi that functions as its emotional fulcrum. The Harikrishnan and Devika relationship is shown as a “mature” love story of a man and woman who belong to the same caste and religious background and are eligible for each other. It has the clear aim of marriage written into it. This relationship has the ingredients necessary for the making of a normative couplehood, but the film actively dislocates this story from its narrative center and reduces it, at best, to a sub-plot. The Nimmi and Harikrishnan relationship is shown within the diegesis as an interrupted love story and the couple is never stably established because Nirmala’s desire is not completely reciprocated by Hari.

There are sequences in the beginning of the film where the camera movements and the spatial arrangements help to set up a bond between Nimmi and Sally. For example, there is one sequence where both the women sit on the long steps in an open courtyard in the school and Sally unfolds her plan of how to foil a school entertainment event. The first shot is a medium shot of Sally and then the camera tracks out and the viewer sees

¹⁰T. Muraleedharan has argued that the absence of a recognizable gay/lesbian cinema need not undermine the relevance of queer mass culture studies in India. His articles such as “Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema” (Muraleedharan 2002) and “Crisis in Desire: A Queer Reading of Cinema and Desire in Kerala” (Muraleedharan 2005) carved a new direction for the study of representations of sexuality in popular Malayalam cinema by teasing out the implications of same-sex attraction deployed in the narrative construction of masculinities.

both of them in the frame. As they talk, Nimmi clicks a photograph of the view before her and then the camera moves behind Nimmi and we see her hand and shoulders and Sally as seen from her perspective. Then Nimmi takes a photograph of Sally, thus we see her through Nimmi's gaze. The scene ends with a long shot of both of them now seated close to each other with Nimmi's hands on Sally's lap. They are placed together at the center of the long steps that extend to both ends of the frame. The spatial arrangement wherein they are framed by the long steps and planted in the middle structurally resembles the genre of a 'couple photograph' and it enables the film text to establish them as a connected unit.

The song sequence, which celebrates their togetherness, is one that again follows many of the conventions of representing romantic couplehood in Malayalam films. Muraleedharan in his analysis of sexualized bonds between men in popular Malayalam cinema demonstrates how "desire in contemporary India overflows contemporary heterosexist frameworks of reading" (Muraleedharan 2002: 191). In the song in *DKK*, we see Nimmi and Sally holding hands and walking together towards the sunset on the beach. Sally puts her arm around Nimmi's shoulder as they walk in parks or go shopping. They go boating together on a blue lake. They run around playfully and try to chase each other and end up falling into each other's arms. The song ends with both of them in a merry-go-round in a fair, another familiar space of the normative heterosexual couple. By placing them in spaces that are often marked cinematically as the space of the couple like the beach, the park or even the merry go round and deploying a body language that marks a sense of physical intimacy, this song gives them the position of a couple in the film. This is emphasized when we watch the second song that comes later in the film and is

dedicated to the budding romance between Nimmi and Hari. Similar scenes are repeated against similar backdrops like the beach, the park and the street showing how the codes with which the filmmaker represents queer desire echoes the ones he uses to put into place the heterosexual couple. This replication of representational codes and repetition of the “space of the couple” in the film makes it difficult to differentiate one couple as the legitimate and other one as the illegitimate one. One does not seem to be more or less impossible, than the other, in the cinematic space.

DKK weaves a criss-crossing network of relationships, where one organization of sexuality overlaps and throws a shadow on the other, in such a way that it disrupts the centrality of normative heterosexuality. It manages to do so by claiming publicness to the performance of sexual relationships¹¹. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their essay “Sex in Public” draw on the work of Foucault and Habermas in order to discuss the counter impulses within the discourses around sexuality and public culture (Berlant and Warner 1998). On the one hand, there are multiple mechanisms in place through which certain normative forms of sexuality acquire public recognition. This could range from the approving smiles a handholding heterosexual couple in suburban United States gets, to how landlords in most cities in India prefer to rent out apartments to married couples. Contrary to this, there is an erasure of the public in sex when “sexuality seems like a property of subjectivity rather than a publicly or counterpublicly accessible culture” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 560). These contradictions around sex as both public and intensely private is one that is of much significance to queer politics today. These are

¹¹ Lukose in her chapter, “Romancing the Public,” examines the “very fraught kind of public intimacy,” through which young women in globalizing Kerala negotiate their navigation of public spaces, consumption and education (Lukose 2009: 98). She identifies romance as a key site for negotiating consumer citizenship in Kerala.

questions that get staged in opposing ways in *Sancharram* and *DKK*.

DKK foregrounds the publicness of sexual relationships by making the couple through displaying them in public spaces and showing the role of public spaces in the making of the couple. Thus couplehood is shown as a public construction with established codes of narrativisation within film. One obvious example of this is the mandatory song sequence that the couples in this film, Nimmi and Sally, Nimmi and Hari, are fitted into. These song sequences mirror each other. They show up the conventions of the making of the couple and reflect how cultural forms like cinema play a role in this construction. Often in films the rituals of normative heterosexuality are repeated so much that its ritualistic codes become naturalized. But when two women as a couple perform the codes of heterosexual couplehood, it opens up gaps and fissures that foreground the constitutive instabilities of romantic couplehood. The acknowledgement of the public construction of couplehood in this film undercuts the assumption that heterosexual couplehood is a stable or natural formation. It thus enables the opening up of the possibility of multiple directions of desire within the social realm. Thus the film, by drawing attention to the conventions of the construction of heterosexual couplehood, manages to queer the public sphere of Kerala, instead of setting up a separate niche or space that could work as counter cultural.

A comparative reading of these two films exposes the different literary and filmic conventions that make couplehood culturally intelligible. *Sancharram* draws on existing literary and cinematic convention of making the couple, but its impulse seems to be in opposition to that of *DKK* because it enacts couplehood and the act of desiring as intensely private and subjective. The space of the couple as it emerges in *Sancharram*

often appears as a dream space that is disassociated from the social or the public realm. The film is heavily invested in the visual and verbal discourse of romantic love in which sexuality becomes a “property of subjectivity” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 560). The plot device, which is used to kindle the romance between Kiran and Delilah, is a familiar one from the Malayalam romantic writing dating from the 19th century and even earlier. Kiran’s smoldering desire finds an outlet when one of their classmates Rajan asks her to help him pen love notes to Delilah in order to win her heart. “I like her as much as Kunjakko Bobban likes Shalini in *Adorable Sister (Aniyathi Pravu)*”, says Rajan drawing on a popular Malayalam teenage love film to express his desire. Rajan’s status as a misfit within this narrative of romantic love is complicated. For one, he is a man between two desiring women. But he is also from a non-dominant caste background and lacks Kiran’s cultural repertoire. He struggles to speak English, and his language of romance comes from delegitimized, *Painkili* (sentimental, pulp) fiction. At one point, when he decides to take on the task of writing to Delilah, his declarations of love with its over-the-top, sensual sentimentality only serves to disgust her.¹² But Kiran employs another high literary discourse of love when writing to Delilah. Her language comes from the romantic poetic traditions of Malayalam literature and it is saturated with nature imagery and intense emotionality. Kiran is set up as the intense, introspective poet fairly early in the film. In a Malayalam literature classroom she interprets Sugathakumari’s poem “Krishna Nee Enne Ariyalla” (“Krishna, You Don’t Know Me”) about the Radha-Krishna relationship, as a poem about the hellish loneliness of love. Kiran and Delilah’s love is also revealed to each other through poetic words. The first poem that Kiran publishes is

¹² This question of class, taste and the divide between aesthetic forms of romance is central to my analysis in the next chapter. This is also significant because one of the well-known lesbian novels in Malayalam *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1974) is in the tradition of sentimental, ‘pulp’ fiction.

titled “Awakening” (“Unnarvu”) and I cannot miss the parallels to the American feminist writer Kate Chopin’s novel *The Awakening* (1899), a classic evocation of sexual liberation stemming from a deep sense of selfhood or interiority. Placing the love story in this high-romantic tradition creates a reified object of same-sex love; in this idealized form it can be practiced only by certain privileged subjects. The queering of the public sphere in DKK and the reification of lesbian desire in *Sancharram*, is paralleled in the contrasting spatial dynamics of both these films.

In the official website of *Sancharram* the director Ligy Pullapally gives an account of how the choice of theme of this film was triggered by an e-mail she received in January 2000, describing the death of a young woman at a university in Kerala, who committed suicide after rumors were spread on her campus about her lesbian relationship. These reports made Pullapally want “to do something to draw attention to the alarmingly frequent incidents of gay suicide — to try to stem that tide”. By tracking newspaper reports for corresponding dates, I found that the specific case that *Sancharram* was responding to is the suicide of a Dalit student in Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, in November 1999. An MA Political Science student, Mini committed suicide after she ran away from the hostel with another woman friend and was brought back home. The letter she left behind states that it was the baseless rumors spread on the college campus about her being a lesbian and a morally corrupt woman that forced her to commit suicide. In the article, “Sahayatrika¹³, Some Lessons from Experience,” Devaki Menon¹⁴ discusses this case and observes that “what is noticeable here is the social norms that make a public

¹³ Formed in 2002, *Sahayatrika* (Co-Traveller) is the first organization and support network for lesbian and bisexual women in Kerala.

¹⁴ This is the pseudonym used by Deepa V N, the founder of *Sahayatrika*, in the early phase of her activist career.

accusation of being a lesbian strong enough to lead a person to commit suicide” (Menon, 2004: 32). The report in *Sameeksha* by K.K. Sreenivasan, the responses of Mini’s family, as well as the college Dalit student’s association’s demand for a judicial enquiry into the circumstances that lead to Mini’s death, point to how the unsympathetic and hostile manner in which the college administration handled this case was linked to Mini’s caste identity and assumptions of moral looseness of non-dominant caste women, for example, the hostel warden checked Mini’s bank account to see if she was working as a prostitute. The vilification and humiliation that Mini faced was shaped by her marginal position; there was no respect for her privacy and safety. This suicide throws light on the ways in which caste and violent exclusions around it structure the violence faced by sexual minorities in Kerala. While the director specifically mentions how the suicide of the Kerala Varma College student motivated her to make *Sancharram*, the translation of the event into a cinematic text necessitates a significant shift in the caste position of the central character.

The central desiring subject of the film, Kiran, fits the mould of the model ‘Kerala woman’. She is an educated, career-minded, Nair woman whose intellectual capacity and creative faculty marks her as a promising future citizen. Kiran is in many ways the icon of rebelliousness in this film. She is the one who takes the initiative to express her desire to Lilah and refuses to be crushed by social pressures. When Delilah says that she is willing to get married but continue to have a relationship with Kiran, Kiran refuses this adulterated existence. The film ends with Kiran choosing life over death and walking ahead heroically to carve a path of her own. But this sense of agency

that the film bestows on Kiran seems to be tied up to an essentialized Nair identity which the film constructs for her.

In *Sancharram* desire is posited as unconnected to existing social structures and it is enacted in its fullest only by Kiran, who is shown to have an external horizon of possibility. In the beginning of the film, she comes to Kerala from the metropolitan capital Delhi and at a moment of crisis, caused by the public revelation of her relationship with Delilah, she talks on the phone to her gay uncle in Delhi considering a move outside of Kerala. Her access to markers of modernity, like the fluent use of English, sets her up as mobile and capable of functioning outside of the local setting. Pullappally's choice of the social location of her main characters cuts against some of the repeated patterns brought out by the *Sahayatrika* group in their study on lesbian suicides. The study has brought out the disturbing trend that many of the lesbian women who have committed suicide are from marginalized communities, especially Dalits, Adivasis and Muslims. Many of these women have limited economic means and fewer opportunities to move to more urban centers in India.

The shift from a marginalized woman to a woman firmly located in a privileged, mobile milieu shows how the form of a romantic love story and a "coming out" narrative necessitates a Nair woman as the protagonist. In another perceptive analysis of *Sancharram*, Samedha Satapathy argues how the Christian woman in the film, Delilah, cannot become the protagonist of the film and is never the 'voice' of the lesbian movement because its legitimate place belongs "to the upper-caste woman who is part of an identity politics that does not critique caste politics" (Satapathy, 2006: 137). This is because the narrative conventions of this romantic story are woven around the conception

of a desiring woman who is positioned as ‘agential’. Within literary writings since the late nineteenth century, the Nair woman is often given the status of an autonomous subject whose matrilineal history gives her an aura of individual rebellion. *Sancharram* taps into this history when Kiran traces her lineage back to her female ancestor who rebelled against social conventions in order to marry the man of her choice. While it is not easy for any woman to lead a non-normative life in contemporary Kerala, there is a greater availability of narrative forms within which an upper-caste woman can be presented as an autonomous, transgressive subject. For the ‘other’ woman who belongs to the non-dominant caste or class strata, her ownership over her body is not a given and there is a paucity of canonized narrative forms within which her story can be told. She does not fit into the model of the agential Kerala woman and her desire to desire does not find many celebrated predecessors in narrative.¹⁵ Satapathy argues that caste and gender intersect to limit the possibilities of transgression available to Dalit women and how it is important to revisit the concept of transgression in terms of accessibility and affordability, “transgression has been acceptable only when those who can afford to transgress, transgress” (Satapathy, 2006: 78). So it is not coincidental that a filmic rendering of high romantic desire between two young girls deploys the figure of the privileged, Nair woman in Kerala as its central protagonist.

¹⁵ Gayatri Gopinath in “Queer Regions: Locating Lesbians in *Sancharram*” (Gopinath 2007) cautions the reader of the risks of reifying and romanticizing the matrilineal Nair past. But she goes on to argue that the redeeming power of *Sancharram* as a regional text is in its ability to resuscitate the non-normative Nair past that stubbornly refuses to die in spite of nationalist judicial interventions that abolished matriliney. This is a dangerous claim on which to validate the film, especially when we read it in relation to the ground reality that most reported lesbian suicides, including the one that motivated the film, were committed by women from an underprivileged, non-dominant caste background. The structured exclusions of caste that is central for a regional politics of sexuality are elided in Gopinath’s validation of the film.

Sexual Places, Sexual Spaces

If we take a quick look at the title of both of these films, what stands out is the reference to movement and travel. Travel is a process through which space is rendered mobile. *Sancharram* literally embodies this sense of movement. *DKK*'s reference to travel is through the term *deshadanam*. It refers to the figure of the migratory bird (*deshadanakili*) who seasonally wanders from one destination to another in search of a conducive environment. *Deshadanam* suggests the ambiguities in the Malayalam language with reference to the concepts of space and travel. *Deshadanam* is a compound term made up of the two parts “*desham*” and “*adanam*”, which means travel. *Desham* as a term conjures up multiple imaginations of space. It refers to the macropolitical unit of the nation, but it can also be used in a much more local sense to refer to the spatial unit of a particular geographical region within Kerala.¹⁶ *Deshadanam* is the process of traveling through the *desham* in a wandering manner without necessarily having a destination in mind. It is more the journey itself that matters than the final destination. There is an element of quest or search that is built into such traveling. It is through occupying space and encountering new experiences that you arrive at new meanings. Since the term *desham* can refer to a large geographical space unit of the nation, but also a specific localized region, it infuses multiple histories and spatial dimensions into a localized space. Layers of possibility are packed into one single space that is rendered mobile and unstable through ways in which it is occupied. The term *desham* has parallels to De Certeau's definition of a “space” as distinct from a “place”. For him place carries an

¹⁶ The etymology of the word can be traced to the pre-independent practice of dividing a princely kingdom into smaller land units called “*desham*”. The current usage of *desham* refer to a regional district within the Kerala state. One of the examples of the use of the term *desham* in this way is the well-known Malayalam novel by S.K. Pottakad, *Oru Deshathinte Katha (The Tale of a Desham 1971)*, which records the life-world of one particular location within Calicut district in Kerala and shows the layers of movement unfolding within this small place.

indication of stability where every object has a specific location, while space does not have a stability of the “proper”, “*space is a practiced place*” (De Certeau 1984: 117).

One of the important distinctions I would like to draw between the spatial representations in *DKK* and *Sancharram* is how within *DKK* the specific area of Kerala within which the film is set becomes a “*desham*” or a “space”, while in *Sancharram* the location appears as a “place”, which remain stable and frozen.

Though the film is titled *The Journey (Sancharram)*, it loses its sense of mobility because of the rigid sexual politics that are reflected in the spatial dynamics of the film. One of the privileged sites within this film is the inside space of the home which is represented through the image of the Nair taravad.¹⁷ The film spends a lot of its energy in constructing this space of the imagined home as rooted in tradition. This is one of the chronotopes that the film uses repeatedly. The opening sequence of the film is a shot of the ancestral home of Kiran’s mother. This is shot from outside and a leaf falls in slow motion in front of the house giving it an aura of having lived through the passage of time. The image is arrested so that it resembles a still photograph. This is followed by two shots, one of the wooden pillars and the ceiling of the house, and then a close-up of a lamp blackened by time and use that hangs from the ceiling. When the young Kiran enters the house we have a high angle shot of a dwarfed-looking Kiran who seems physically overwhelmed by the house. The camera tilts up to show her reflection on the old photographs on the wall. Then the camera tracks her exploration of the old house

¹⁷ This is the conventional architectural structure that was the housing and property unit of affluent Nair families. Wealthy *taravads* encompassed a spacious house built in a specific architectural style, and a fresh-water pond (*Kulam*). These taravads have become a symbol of Nair privilege in contemporary Kerala and though structures like this are relatively few today, they are repeatedly invoked in Malayalam films and writing as part of the process of constructing an essentialised Nair identity.

which looks like a museum with the wood work, artillery on the wall and Ravi Varma¹⁸ like paintings. Through these carefully chosen and arranged artifacts like black and white photographs and Ravi Varma paintings, the film condenses time and produces an imagined cultural cocoon within Kerala. As a backdrop to this guided tour, we have Kiran's mother's voice telling the story of the continued lineage of this Nair heritage as sustained through women. It is the shot of this house that functions as the transition device for Kiran and Delilah's move from childhood playmates to intimate adolescent friends. Though the film exposes the heterosexual foundations on which this matrilineal tradition is built, it relies on a manufactured idea of Nair tradition that is portrayed as timeless and eternal, and embodied in this architectural structure of the Nair taravad.

¹⁸ Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was a painter who is seen as one of the founding figures of modern Indian art. His depictions of Indian women, especially Nair women, and scenes from Hindu epics are mass-produced and well circulated in Kerala even today. They are often deployed in the invention of a Kerala tradition which is rooted in a dominant caste Hindu culture.

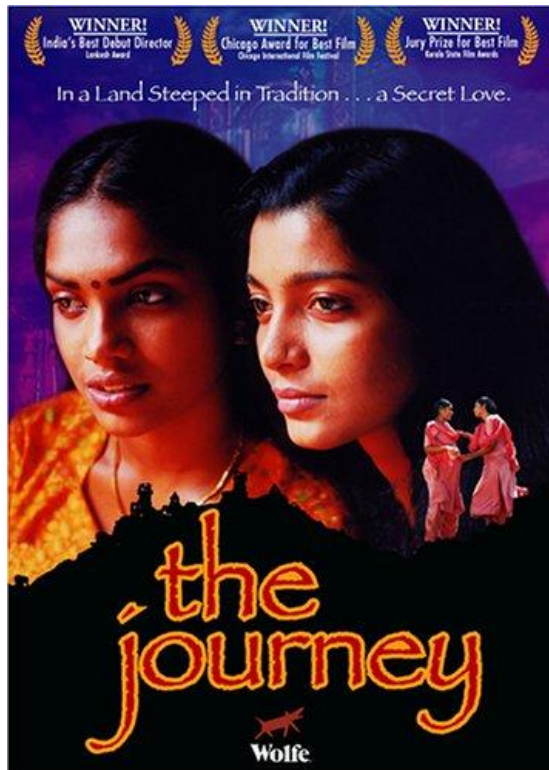


Figure 13. DVD Cover of *Sancharram* (2004)

“In a land steeped in tradition... a secret love”, says the blurb on the DVD of *Sancharram*. The construction of a place that stands still and seems to be untouched by modernity is a device that the film uses in its portrayal of Kerala as well. “All this is filmed against the lush backdrop of Kerala, the histories and customs of the tharavads, the strong women who run the houses in this matrilineal society,” says Vikram in a review of *Sancharram* that appears on the official website of the film (Vikram 2004). The film establishes continuity between the idyllic landscape and the sphere of the Nair home as both become emblematic of a rural Kerala. Reviews of this film mention its “mesmerizing lyricism” and emphasize that what is different about the film is the eruption of same-sex love in a pristine, rural setting. Thus the film sets up an imagined

Kerala, which is steeped in tradition. The construction of this frozen space is essential for the forbidden desire to seem radical.

The one scene of intimacy between the two girls shows us how much the film relies on its idealized construction of a place in order to deliver its “queer” statement. The scene is set in a secluded pond that has stone steps and the sequence begins with a long shot of the pond itself. We see the lilac water lilies, the lapping green water and the reflection of the coconut trees. This is followed by the sequence in which the women express their sexual desire mainly shot in a series of extreme close ups. At the end of the sequence we get a close up of Lilah’s feet as they hit the water. The camera pans to give us a shot of the green water with fish moving in it. Then there is a cut to a long shot of the pond seen through the window and the next shot shows a stone statue on the steps of the pond. Thus cinematically it is essential for the director to set up an idyllic setting within which this desire is staged. The pond, the greenery and the temple drums that form the backdrop are the conventional pegs on which Pullapally hangs her “radical” love story.



Figure 14. Frame-grab from *Sancharram* (2004): Prelude to the sexual encounter

Most of the scenes between the two girls are located in places that are marked by

an absence of human occupation. Narrow pathways with emerald green fields on either side, towering hills, bubbling brooks, the moonlit sky - it is often a pristine landscape that offers the backdrop to the unfolding of their desire. Or it is within the closed space of the house, the bedroom of either Kiran or Lilah, that we witness their interactions. This particular construction of a cinematic “place,” to use De Certeau’s term, makes the spatial organization of this film a static one. The regional setting within this film does not acquire the layered texture of a *desham*, but remains inanimate like a picturesque, tourist postcard.

In sharp contrast to this, *DKK* is mostly set in an urban center of Kerala, Cochin and the public spaces in this city that are mobile and dynamic. Unlike the neat binary that *Sancharram* sets up between the stable realm of the home/ homeland and the disruptive forces of desire that rocks it, *DKK* sets out to map a fluctuating social field of an urbanizing Kerala. It is important that he chooses Cochin as the destination point to which the heroines run away in an attempt to build a new life. Even today Cochin is seen as the urban hub of Kerala—which embodies a heady mixture of anonymity, sexual activity and criminality.¹⁹ There are constant references to the dangers and possibilities that the city offers in the film. When Nimmi and Sally come to a Catholic convent in Cochin and request accommodation for a night, Sally tells the missionaries that if they deny them accommodation, they may have to read about the gang rape of two young girls in the newspapers the next day. When Harikrishnan and Nimmi first meet, he refers to the multiple encounters between people in the city who meet and part as strangers. Sally and

¹⁹ Cochin is a port city in Kerala and has been the center of tourism and urbanization in Kerala. It is also at present depicted in popular Malayalam cinema as the city in Kerala where you can see the darker sides of urban life. It is here that gang wars and smuggling are often staged. A 2007 film, *Chotta Mumbai (Small Mumbai)*, is Kerala’s production of an underworld film in which Cochin is set up as Kerala’s mirror image to Mumbai. We can see the traces of this imagination of Cochin in *DKK* with the multiple references to the signs of urbanity and criminality.

Nimmi often capitalize on the fact that Cochin is a site of tourist flow and behave as if they are outsiders visiting Kerala. They rename themselves Maya and Eileen, speak in English or broken Malayalam, carry cameras and exude an interest in Kerala folk arts. With every step they take in this new space, they are well aware of unpredictable new developments. The unnamed desire and intimacy that is staged between the two women seems to be intrinsic to the lack of stability of the social sphere they occupy. It is the layered and mobile realm of the “*desham*” which they occupy that engenders this desire. Therefore queerness is not posited as a “forbidden desire”; it is part of the messy contours and multiple possibilities within the urban space itself.

While *Sancharram* unfolds in the home space and the realm of the family, *DKK* is marked by its absence of home or domestic spaces. In fact, all through the film there is not a single sequence where either Nimmi or Sally is shown inside a house. They occupy a range of public spaces and the film focuses on their negotiations of these spaces. These spaces form a shifting terrain as viewers get a sense of how they are occupied by these two women. The film begins in the highly disciplined boarding school run by Roman Catholic sisters and we see the attempts of Nimmi and Sally to upset the order of this school through diverse pranks and rebellious acts. After they run away from school, the youth hostel marks their arrival in the city. Here they can don a new identity and temporarily erase their history. A place made for travelers and tourists is shown as a transitory space which can offer a temporary shelter to the two women. One of the crucial moments in their journey together is when they feel that they have escaped the surveillance of the school authorities. A sequence of both of them running together on the open road shows their sense of newly acquired freedom. The camera visually captures

their process of occupying the open space of the road. The sequence is in slow motion with background music and we have a close-up of their legs moving rhythmically as they run into the road that stretches before them. The background music is fast paced; it is early morning and the two women merge with the morning joggers, another sign of a more urban lifestyle.

The public spaces that these two women occupy reflect the everyday spaces of an urbanizing Kerala in the eighties. There are night shots of crowded streets with shops on both sides and political posters that festoon the roadsides. STD²⁰ phone booths, ice-cream parlors, public parks, bus stations, restaurants and theaters give the audience a texture of the developing urban spaces in Kerala in that period. The two women's encounters in these public spaces are often tinged with a sense of danger. In fact, the first rule we see them breaking in school is when they go to a theater to watch a matinee and the news reaches the school authorities because they are harassed there by some men. After they run away from school, we see them negotiating the streets and using various methods²¹ to evade different men on the streets, including a policeman who targets them. In the night scenes on public roads, men often follow to harass them and Sally at one point says in English how "they are getting on my nerves".

²⁰ Standard Trunk Dialing (STD) is the process of calling from one region to another in India. These public phone booths show how a place is interconnected to other regions in the nation.

²¹ They often speak English, behave like tourists and capitalize on their class privilege as convent educated girls in order to ward off harassment on the streets.



Figure 15. Frame-grab from *Deshadana Kili Karayarila* (1984)



Figure 16. Frame-grab from *Deshadana Kili Karayarila* (1984): Sally and Nimmi on the run

The film speaks directly to the feminist debates in Kerala, since the 1980s, about women's lack of access to public spaces and the high level of violence against women in such spaces. This is an ongoing debate and a matter of concern for activist groups based in Kerala. Deepa in her observations around the responses to *Sahayatrika*, a support network and help line for lesbian and bisexual women in Kerala, mentions that many of the women supporting them did not identify primarily as lesbians or women loving women. They were “drawn to the potential of a political and social space where one

could articulate issues and experiences of women's sexuality more freely" (Deepa 2005:192). These responses to *Sahayatrika* show the absence of locations where women can resist the "patriarchal ordering of their bodies" (Deepa 2005: 192) and the continuing struggle of women to stake a claim on public spaces.

Thus the strategies staged in *DKK* of two women occupying public spaces do have a political resonance even today. In fact, the film retains a sense of ambivalence about what brings these two women together—is it their desire for each other or their common dream of an imagined space of freedom? Or is it even possible to distinguish these two motivations? They often express a shared desire for a safe space. This is the question that Nimmi asks Sally when they first come to the youth hostel, "Is this the place you told me about...the safe space far, faraway?" But at no point in the film do they seem to attain this sense of reaching a destination. They are always on the run, always in search of another world; this is how they perform a *deshadanam*, a constant wandering within one regional location.

What is disruptive about the film is that it shows that the journey is a possible one. These women do manage to enter into public spaces usually closed off to women and occupy it in strategic ways as a couple. When Hari first sees them in a restaurant eating ice cream and chatting, he mistakes them for a heterosexual couple. Later when he realizes that they are two women, he has no qualms in interrupting their shared space and even insinuating that they were immoral women because they waste away their time in a public place. He interrogates them and tells them how he could inform the police of meeting two young women in suspicious circumstances. The ease with which he is able to disrupt the space shared by these two young women comes from the fact that the

public space of the restaurant is not in the first instance a space that belongs to them. The film's tragic ending seems to be a statement of the impossibility of safe spaces for two women. But in spite of this closure of possibilities, the whole film stages multiple enactments of two women's struggles to occupy the public sphere.

“As the film concludes, a new journey begins” says the synopsis of *Sancharram* on the film's official website with reference to the ending of *Sancharram*.²² I would argue that *DKK* begins where *Sancharram* ends; it actually sets the two women off on a physical journey through the world and the grittiness of life. It is a journey that ends in suicide but what the film captures is the journey itself. It is the sense of movement that remains with us even when we are confronted with the shock of the ending. By showing these two women performing this disruptive journey and by making them occupy public spaces in unconventional ways, the film queers the social sphere in which it is located.

Strategies of Queering

A comparative reading of *Sancharram* and *DKK* and the strikingly different representation of spaces within the two films highlight the different discourse of sexuality within which these two films are located. Ligy Pullapally undertakes the project of setting up a visible lesbian subject and makes a claim for the expression of lesbian desire within the Kerala public sphere. Gopinath also observes that “the film's representation of queer female desire and subjectivity functions quite clearly within a global human rights-based framework; to that extent, it mirrors both the uses and limits of such a framework” (Gopinath 2007: 345). Pullapally's political agenda, as it is projected through her film, cuts against the more tentative and conflicted political positions and strategies that

²² See website: <http://www.thejourney-themovie.com/>, 1 June 2008.

emerge from groups like Sahayatrika which are based in Kerala. In *DKK*, through the journey of the two women, we see a dramatization of the tensions between visibility and invisibility and their attempts to deploy different everyday strategies of survival. After they run away from school, Sally exclaims that they are free birds once they get out of the school uniform. “No one can say who we are now, we can decide that now on,” is her statement of celebration at the masking of their past identity. From renaming themselves, to dressing differently and taking on new identities as tourists or researchers, there are multiple ways in which they erase their past and make use of anonymity in a new place in order to lead the life they desire.

In the political organization of sexual minority rights in Kerala, there is an implicit critique and a search for alternatives to the politics of visibility. Since the backlash against lesbian couples who come under media scrutiny is often tremendous, *Sahayatrika* organizers mention that they have to use a multiplicity of strategies to negotiate the tensions between visibility and safety. Deepa draws on the experiences of *Sahayatrika* to emphasize how “visibility continues to be both empowering and disempowering for sexuality minority groups, and we must all grapple with its contradictions” (Deepa 2005: 192). *Sahayatrika*, in its early phase, had made statements in the public sphere without having any visible spokespeople (Deepa 2005: 194). In her introduction to the organization, Deepa highlights its tenuous nature and its strategic use of invisibility or anonymity. I quote her:

Sahayatrika itself came to be perceived as representing a community and movement (one tabloid newspaper estimated our organization membership as being 1000 women strong!) when in fact our contacts with women were sometimes tenuous and fleeting. This tenuous community had an invisible spokeswoman with a fake name and dubious identity— ‘Devaki Menon’—a pseudonym which sometimes represents myself and sometimes Sahayatrika workers collectively

(Deepa 2005: 176).

The organizational experiences of *Sahayatrika* points towards a strategic use of invisibility and anonymity, even as they fight for public acceptance for sexual minority groups. The lesbian subject position that is posited in *Sancharram* seems to have a less conflicted relationship to the politics of visibility. It transplants the “coming out” narrative to the Kerala scenario in an unproblematic way.

Ligy Pullappally, in her conversations about the making of *Sancharram*, draws attention to how her film is a particular process of translation. She draws on the frameworks about LGBT rights within a metropolitan Indian and transnational context and applies it to a rural setting. In an interview that appeared in the Bangalore based newspaper *Deccan Herald*, she positions her film in the middle of the mainstream LGBT movement in India and abroad when she says that *Sancharram* was her response to the Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* (1998).²³ “That film handled the subject of a lesbian relationship as well. [...] In addition, *Fire* is an English language film in an urban setting. I made my film to reflect the more *traditional* gay experience in India. My characters are unapologetically gay and speak a regional South Indian language” (Cheerath-Rajagopalan 2005, italics mine). A climactic moment in Deepa Mehta’s film which triggered off multiple responses is one in which the two women protagonists moan the

²³ Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* is an English language film that tells the story of two sisters-in-law in a Hindu joint family who break the stifling bonds of duty and tradition to enter into a sexually and emotionally sustaining relationship with one another. The theater release of this film in November 1998, was disrupted by the Hindu right wing groups and the film was cause for much moral and cultural panic. As a response to the Hindu right violence, gay and lesbian groups entered into the public sphere in an unprecedented fashion in major cities in India. They sought alliances with feminists and other progressive voices in order to counter the claim that homosexuality was alien to Indian culture. The debate around *Fire* is a foundational event within gay lesbian politics and mobilization in contemporary India.

fact that there is no word in their language to name their relationship.²⁴ Pullappally seems to function within this same logic of naming and making visible as she sets out to show how lesbian love in a recognizable form is alive and thriving in rural pockets in India. It is not surprising that she highlights her choice of Malayalam as the language for the film instead of English. But I would argue that this process of translation in which an already processed concept of lesbian desire is neatly plastered onto a new context, faces the risk of freezing cultural formations rather than queering the social sphere.

In her attempt to produce a “traditional” lesbian narrative, Ligy Pullappally at times slips into an unquestioning valorization of a Nair identity and banks on a caste-based stratification to deliver its heroes. The film draws on the tropes through which Nair hegemony is consolidated in contemporary Kerala like the caste group’s claims of a military past with expertise in martial arts. In the beginning of the film we see Kiran as a young girl returning to her mother’s ancestral home in Kerala and wandering around its huge, palatial rooms. It is in this place that the film embeds her. Even when her mother confronts her about her relationship with Delilah, it is her Nair identity that Kiran asserts to articulate her spirit of rebellion. “Isn’t it the blood of the warriors that flows through me also?” she asks, as she refuses to settle for any compromising marriage. Thus the film, in its attempt to set up a heroic female figure, resorts to the trope through which male heroes in Malayalam films are often made. Caste, religious privilege and a noble lineage become the marker of heroic valor.²⁵ The setting up of totalized identity categories in a film like *Sancharram* results in relations of power within which selected practices and

²⁴ See Bose (2007) and John and Niranjana (1999) for some of the important debates on *Fire*.

²⁵ One of the more recent and hyperbolic manifestations of this trend is Mohanlal’s action films also known as “Thampuran films” (Thampuran can be translated as lord, an honorary term used to refer to an upper caste, land-owning man) which includes films like *The Sixth Lord* (*Aram Thampuran*, 1997) and *King Ravana* (*Ravanaprabhu*, 2001) where the hero’s dominant caste status and prestige is central to his heroism.

subjects are privileged over others. The celebration of a high-romantic lesbian desire and a singular lesbian subject position in this film sets off a pattern of cultural exclusions and inclusions. Thus the film side-steps and reduces the complexities of the issue of lesbian suicides which motivated the film in the first place.

DKK, because of the historical moment of its production and the circuits of circulation it was located in, steers clear of a counter-cultural labeling. Padmarajan as a director was an important exponent of the genre of “middle cinema” that blended the conventions and concerns of commercial and art cinema and thus appealed to a larger audience base.²⁶ Though he was quite experimental in his representations of sexuality, his attempt was primarily to address a Malayali middle class audience. The star-casting in his film with the popular hero Mohan Lal and successful actresses like Urvashi and Karthika and the attention paid to the song sequences, are all markers of the fact that this was a film made for a mainstream theater release. Padmarajan in this film steers clear of a graphic expression of sexual desire and this is different from some of his other films like *Thoovanathumbikal* (*Dragon Flies in the Sprays of Rain*, 1987) and *Namukku Parkkan Munthirithoppukal* (*Vineyards for Us to Dwell*, 1986) which are noted for their bold expression of erotic desire on screen. *DKK* is understated in its verbalizations of emotions and romantic feelings.

²⁶ Middle cinema is the name given to a segment of films within the Malayalam film industry which self-consciously carved out an aesthetics of its own. In well-circulated accounts of Malayalam film history, middle cinema is seen as occupying an intermediary space between “art” cinema and “commercial” cinema. The exponents of middle cinema in the 1980s and 90s were seen as producing films which appealed to a broader audience than the niche audience of the 1970s art cinema. For more discussion on the ambiguities and significance of these categorizations within Malayalam cinema see Menon 2008.



Figure 17. Frame-grab from *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (1984): The final reunion

Even in the final emotionally-charged scene when Sally returns to Nimmi, her affirmation of her attachment to Sally is in the form of a question. “Haven’t you understood me yet?” she asks Nimmi, leaving the audience to fill in the gaps of what they or Nimmi understand and thus making possible multiple interpretations of the relationship. The process of queering that this film undertakes is not to set up a stable unit of the “lesbian couple” nor is it privileging a particular subject position as the queer subject position.

In Search of a Resolution

When filmmakers give a representational form to relationships that are considered to be outside the realm of the legitimate, the plot resolution or the ending of the film is often a point of crisis. *Sancharram* takes a conscious turn away from suicide as a possible ending and stages Kiran’s decision to turn away from the abyss of death to the beginning of a

new life. This is cinematically represented by the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly that flies into the blue sky. At the same moment, Lilah's voice booms through the air as she cries out Kiran's name. Here the film suddenly cuts to the scene of Lilah's wedding in the church. As the wedding vows are read out by the priest they are repeated multiple times, as if resonating in Lilah's mind. The camera gives us Lilah's point of view as she kneels down and we see everyone around her elongated and blurred.

Suddenly the church empties out and Lilah drops her bouquet and runs out of the church, screaming Kiran's name. It is this voice that reaches Kiran and a fantasy reunion is staged as the same butterfly flutters before Lilah's watching gaze. Thus *Sancharram* resorts to a break from realism in order to stage a resolution to the "love story".

This formal turn around, in order to enact a hopeful resolution to the problem the film poses, brings to the fore a clash of registers between the realist commitments of the film and its sudden slide into the realm of fantasy. The issue of "lesbian suicides" that the film is responding to and denouncing is rooted within the contemporary social field of Kerala. But the depiction of lesbian desire in this film, as a romantic passion which can be realized only through an act of individual rebellion, evacuates queer desire of its potential to destabilize the public sphere. The dream like quality of the ending of *Sancharram* becomes symptomatic of the split between the questions of sexuality within the social sphere of contemporary Kerala and the politics of the sexuality that the film puts forward. This seems to suggest the limits of a sexual politics, where rebellion is posited as an individual act of grand revolution and desire is set up as a radical force outside the realm of the social or the public. The opposition the film constructs between the "secret love" and a "land steeped in tradition" makes a turn to a dream sequence the

necessary cinematic device through which a final act can be staged.

The final act of suicide in *DKK* is a difficult one to read, because the film makes a simple reading impossible. The film comes from a time period when “lesbian suicides” were not established in the public sphere as an object of public concern and political activism. So the suicide at the end of the film cannot be linked to the issue of lesbian suicide as we know it today. The film has an unexpected ending, when the morning after an intense night of reunion between Nimmi and Sally, the viewer sees the inert bodies of the two girls in bed together. The euphoria and hope of their coming together the previous night does not in any way prepare the viewer for the rude shock of death in the next sequence. “To a far, far away place,” in small black letters is the postscript to the ending of this film. The fact that the two girls have to commit suicide after they swear to be together forever, does point to the tenuous nature of their tactics of survival. It may signal the hopelessness of the success of their search to find a safe haven within existing social structures. But the sliding chain of referents within which the final shot of the entwined dead bodies of the two girls can be placed complicate the reading of the suicide simply as a statement about the impossibility of non-normative desires.

The suicide in *DKK* can be read within the conventions of climaxes in romantic films and literature in Malayalam. This plot resolution is reminiscent of endings in other celebrated heterosexual romances in Malayalam literature and film where the ultimate triumph of love is to die together especially in the face of social opposition.²⁷ By making two women stage this final act of togetherness, especially after a climactic scene of

²⁷One of the classical examples of this is Kumaran Asan’s poetic work *Leela* (1914), an epic of romantic love, in which the heightened moment of union between the hero and heroine is the moment of death, with the hero ending his life in the river and the heroine following the same course. *Chemmeen* (Shrimp, dir. Ramu Kariat, 1965), an internationally acclaimed Malayalam film, based on a cult love story by noted novelist Thakazhi Shivashankara Pillai, also tells the story of a couple whose desire transgresses social norms. They finally have to die together in order to stage their eternal union.

reunion where they pledge to be with each other forever, the film once again mimes the conventions of heterosexual couplehood. Thus the suicide instead of cementing and privileging a heterosexual matrix functions as another trope through which the film troubles the normative sexual arrangements of society. In a culture of representations where the testimony to true love is to die together, Sally and Nimmy's couplehood becomes established beyond doubt through their suicide. Thus, one could argue, that the film retains its ability to destabilize the social sphere even through this seemingly dark gesture of suicide.

My comparative reading of both these films posits the desire for cultural productions that capture a different language of queer politics in Kerala, grounded in the specificities of the context. My analysis pushes for the need to reflect on the dangers of setting up a universal demand for "outness". It is attempting to show how some of the taken-for-granted assumptions of transnational queer politics, like the celebration of visible bodies, gets radically questioned when we turn to regional sites of analysis. The location of Pullappally's film in the LGBT discourse in India and abroad makes it so enmeshed in setting up an established meaning for the term "queer" that the process of queering becomes one of stabilizing a chosen form of desire as the ideal one. This process of setting up a stable trajectory for queer desire freezes the spatial and social terrains of Kerala. The process of queering that *Deshadana Kili Karayarilla* undertakes is not one that attempts to set up a particular subject position as the queer one nor does it plot a blue-print for the direction that same-sex desire should take. It sets out to trouble the naturalized construction of the heterosexual couple and injects a sense of instability

into the social sphere itself.²⁸

Gayatri Gopinath reads *Sancharram*'s remembrance of the discordance of the matrilineal Nair past as an enabling move. But in my analysis, this insistence on the colonial past as the only source of transgression in contemporary Kerala is a symptom of the film's inability to engage with the complexities of the configurations of sexuality in Kerala today.²⁹ Unlike *Sancharram*, that projects a picture perfect image of Kerala disrupted by same-sex love, *DKK* puts a finger on the queerness within the nebulous terrains of sexuality in Kerala. This film gives a representational form to the destabilizing possibilities that are necessarily there in any social sphere, but not always talked about. This might be why *DKK* can be more enabling or disturbing to a regional Malayali audience, while *Sancharram* can be accepted or dismissed easily as a quaint love story in an imagined Kerala. If the dominant sphere can be shown to be an unstable one, it is useful for a different model of queer politics that is not always invested in the project of naming and solidifying identities, but can work within a terrain of the contingent. Butler argues that the term "queer" can be useful for future imaginings only if it retains its sense of contingency and its meanings are never fully anticipated in advance (Butler 1993: 228). *Deshadana Kili Karayarilla* puts forward a critical process of queering that is threatening to the normative order because of its very instability and noncohesiveness. This is a sense of contingency worth retaining for a critical queer politics. In the next chapter I will continue the discussion on lesbian politics in post-90s Kerala by focusing

²⁸ Satapathy argues that the quick 'solution' of the empowered lesbian who says no to suicide in *Sancharram* is as unconvincing as the melodramatic celebration of lesbian suicide. In both cases the "significance of the deaths" is erased (Satapathy 2006: 142). Since *Sancharram* is motivated by an actual case of lesbian suicide she asks, "what in this story resists or escapes the attempt to narrativize it?" (Satapathy, 2006: 142). This is a complicated question I take up for investigation in the next chapter.

²⁹ This is not to argue for an erasure of the precolonial past but to critically reflect on the ways in which we mobilize it.

on an investigative project about lesbian suicides undertaken by *Sahayatrika*. I examine how the lesbian as a political subject in Kerala is a haunting presence that elides the language of identity politics and human rights. The contingencies and lack of resolution of queer politics is a central concern in the next chapter too.

Chapter 5

Living Together, Dying Together: The Politics of Lesbian Hauntings

In 1947, Kamala Surayya (aka Kamala Das), published the short story, “Stree” (“Woman”) which was effaced from Malayalam literary history and returned only after the writer’s death in 2009.¹ “Stree” is a bold declaration of lesbian love. “I might be a woman. But my friend, is there a rule that one woman cannot love another woman?” (1947:35) is the resounding statement in the story. This is a triangular love story that unfolds from the point of view of the male narrator Ravi, whose love for Prasanna is thwarted by the presence of her college friend Ramani. The lesbian lover, Ramani, is repeatedly described as a “magical creation” (35) and an “extraordinary creature” (34) whose memory haunts Ravi throughout his life. The writer here uses the tropes of a *Yakshi* story, in which the *Yakshi* is a mythical figure that is the manifestation of uncontrolled, threatening female sexuality.² His disturbing encounters with Ramani are in the dead of the night. She appears as “a female figure whose head was covered in a white

¹ “Stree” was published when the writer was only fifteen years old under the name ‘Kamala’ in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* and it was not included in her first anthology of short stories which came out in 1955. The story was republished in 2009 in the literary journal *Bashaposhini* under the title “the first lesbian story in Malayalam”. A write-up by E M Premkumar on the history of this story speculates on how norms of respectability might have been one of the reasons why this story was exorcised from her oeuvre (Premkumar 2009). More explicit depictions of lesbianism by Kamala Das in *Chandanamarangal* (Sandal Trees: 1988) and *My Story* (1976) have received critical attention by feminist scholars such as Rosemary Marangoly George (2000; 2002).

² In folk mythology in Kerala, the *yakshi* is a voluptuous female figure, with uncontrollable powers. The representation of the woman who bears markers of undomesticated sexuality as a mythical figure is a trope that is often used in Malayalam literature and cinema. S. Sanjeev’s analyzes the popular Malayalam film *Manichithrathazhu* (The Ornate Lock 1993) in which a dancer from the past possesses the body of the heroine and is projected as the negative disorderly, aspects of her femininity (Sanjeev 1995).

sari,” “her eyes glow like embers”, “she has a monstrous laugh” and “her face has an iridescent glow because of the full moon” (35). Her impact on the narrator is a bone-chilling sense of fear, “I felt afraid not just of her, but of all women, an indescribable fear” (35). She is a figure of sexual excess which he cannot comprehend and therefore it haunts his memory even after her death. An intimacy between two women that is non-normative and eccentric³ is represented using the literary form of a ghost story that plays on the interstices between presence and absence, past and present, visibility and invisibility. Misplaced bodies, out of time and out of place, have the power to raise radical questions that disturb the social order.

Carrying the traces of this ghostly story along let me move to the present. *Idam* (Space), one of the first public conventions on sexual minority rights in Kerala, was organized by the activist group *Sahayatrika* (Co-traveller) on September 20th, 2008. The daytime was dedicated to talks and performances by individuals and activist groups at *Sahitya* (Literary) Academy Hall, Thrissur. The convention ended with a candle light vigil and public meeting in memory of lesbians and gay men who had committed suicide in Kerala, held in front of the Thrissur Corporation Hall, the space for public protests in the heart of the city. As I stood in the back of a sizable group of demonstrators with a flickering candle in my hand, one of the slogans that struck me was ‘Lesbian Suicides, Down Down’. ‘Lesbian Suicides’ as the main topic of concern in the candle light vigil pointed to how the right to life is a demand that cannot be dismissed easily in the public

³ Teresa de Lauretis in “Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness” positions the lesbian as an ‘eccentric subject’ by which she refers to a critical, epistemological position “attained through practices of political and personal dis-placement across boundaries between socio sexual identities and communities” (de Lauretis 1990: 145). In my use of the term ‘lesbian’, I refer to the categories through which certain lives are framed for public circulation in the media and through activist interventions. My aim is not to fix individuals under any particular identity category. I examine how their position of ‘dis-placement’ shapes the trajectories of their lives and its documentation in the public sphere.

sphere where multiple claims for justice jostle for attention; the right to love or have sex is much more difficult to validate than the right to be alive.⁴

Lesbian suicides have been a foundational issue for queer mobilizations in Kerala. This is a movement built on the political valence of remembering and grieving for lives that are no more. In this chapter, I examine the activist discourses on lesbian suicides in Kerala to explore the following questions: What does it mean to produce a discourse around lesbian sexuality that has at its center the event of suicide and the specters of women whose lives could have been saved? What are the narrative tropes through which the lesbian as a figure surfaces in the public sphere of post-90s Kerala? How do the discourses on lesbian suicides in Kerala complicate dominant modes of thinking about sexuality, representation and subjectivity? As my opening to the chapter suggests, I pay close attention to the narrative forms that frame non-normative lives and examine the political stakes of such representational practices.

The juridical and governmental mechanisms through which sexual figures acquire meaning and legibility is limited in the case of the lesbian, both within the early period of nationalist reform and the post 90s transnational public health discourse.⁵ Within the AIDS discourse the lesbian “understood globally as a zero-risk demographic” (Dave 2006: 62) makes a limited appearance. The mobilization around lesbian suicides in Kerala deals with the relative absence of the lesbian as a juridical category, but complicates the assumption that visibility and open claiming of an identity is the only

⁴ In a state that has a long history of public protests and demonstrations, especially because of the Left movement, there are unwritten protocols about what issues matter. The organization of the convention acknowledged these protocols by having a public vigil on lesbian suicides.

⁵ The sex worker and the MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) are hyper visible categories in the post-90s economy shaped primarily by the AIDS discourse.

basis through which an issue can be made political.⁶ Multiple slippages and excesses surface when acts and bodies that cannot be easily classified become the basis for claims for justice and my analysis tries to retain these tensions instead of rushing to consolidate a stable identity. The mobilizations on lesbian suicides in Kerala are a useful site to locate the potentiality of a regional politics of sexuality that is not seamlessly tied to the global human rights and identity politics model. These regional interventions, draw on a transnational LGBT discourse, but also raise new challenges that cannot be addressed through the rights based model of politics were visible bodies have to claim the public sphere in order to be 'agential'.

In this chapter, I argue that the 'lesbian' as a mobilizable figure haunts the public sphere of Kerala and that it is necessary to examine this process of haunting to understand the complexities of sexual minority politics. I consciously stay away from more purposive verbs like 'emerge' or 'appear', and use the term 'haunt' because the lesbian is a figure that inhabits the shadow zones between visibility and invisibility and is constructed through multiple mediations. By 'lesbian haunting' I refer to transitive acts and practices which render vulnerable the regulatory norms of sexuality, but these practices are tentative and not solidified.⁷ They are not radical acts which will produce

⁶Within sexuality politics, anchored in metropolitan India, since the late 1980s there have been multiple attempts to build communities on the basis of lesbian identity. The 1996 controversy over Deepa Mehta's *Fire* was a significant event in the 'coming out' of lesbians as a political community in India. In the mobilization against section 377 that criminalized homosexuality in India, which was read down in a historic judgment in 2009, lesbian women were a significant category. Naisargi Dave's "To Render Real the Imagined: An Ethnographic History of Lesbian Community in India" maps the formation of a lesbian movement in India, while reflecting on the necessary 'effacements' of political communities (Dave 2010: 616). See also the introduction to Narrain and Bhan (2005) for a comprehensive picture of queer mobilizations in India.

⁷ My use of the terms haunting is different from Terry Castle's proposition in *The Appartitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*. Castle's tracking of the peculiar power of the figure of the lesbian in the Western imagination is a project of recovery of "bringing back into view, that which has been denied" (Castle 1993: 8) for the purpose of lesbian identity construction. My analysis foregrounds

stable categories of identity, but “something that is ‘in-process’” (Rodriguez 2003:34), and can cast a disturbing shadow on the domestic ordering of the social. My analysis questions the idea of subjectivity as a mode of self-awareness tied to an “illusion of coherence” (Khanna 2007: 169), and tracks it as a transitive, inconclusive, negotiated process. I do not use the term ‘lesbian hauntings’ only in a literal sense of women who are dead and whose memories fuel a movement and demands for justice. This is definitely a significant part of the picture. But as Avery Gordon argues so persuasively, ghosts are not merely dead or missing people, they are ‘social figures’ produced at the dense site of violence and exclusion: “To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects” (Gordon 1997: 17). Gordon’s call, to leverage the process of haunting to reach for a critical vocabulary in which the excesses and the ‘phantoms’ of the regulatory workings of modernity can be touched and recognized, motivates this chapter.

Documenting Lesbian Suicides

Kerala has the highest rates of suicide in India⁸ and there has been since the 1990s a series of newspaper reports of women whose deaths are tied to their intimacy with another woman. Many of these suicides happen when the two women face pressure to

strategies and acts that question the efficacy of rigid identity categories and strategies of rights-based activism.

⁸ According to state statistics Kerala’s suicide rates are triple the national average. Though the population in Kerala is only 3.1% of the national population nearly 10% of the total suicide in India takes place in Kerala. This statistics is from the Kerala State Mental Health Authority (<http://www.ksmha.org>). Accessed in May 2, 2010. Sibi Mathew’s (2008) study on suicides in the last two decades in Kerala points to how the number of men who commit suicide is more than that of women. According to his study, one of the significant reasons for women’s suicides are tensions within the home and the family.

marry or they are separated coercively. The founder member of *Sahayatrika* (Co-traveller)⁹ Deepa V N observes:

newspaper reports of double suicides among women companions who were unwilling to be separated are probably the most visible indicator of the difficulties endured by women-loving-women in Kerala. Other news stories have also appeared in the mainstream press, of women asking the court for permission to live together, or students being evicted from schools or hostels for having lesbian relationships (Deepa 2005: 182).

In the last decade, this pattern of lesbian suicides in Kerala has garnered attention at a national level also. A select list of lesbian suicides, reported in the print media in India from the 1980s to 2002, compiled by the Alternate Law Forum, an organization which works for the legal rights of sexual minorities, has thirteen cases and ten out of the thirteen are from Kerala.¹⁰ *Sahayatrika* has documented suicides reported in Malayalam newspapers from 1995 to 2003 and the number of female suicides in relation to their involvement with another woman is put down as twenty four.

Deepa locates the formation of *Sahayatrika* in the social and political churning of the late 1990s - the growing attention to reports of same sex suicides, the handful of 'renegade' voices emerging from the feminist movement of people ready to support sexual minority groups and the impact of the increased visibility of queer rights groups in urban centers in India (Deepa 2005: 176).¹¹ The earliest investigative reports about these

⁹ This is the first organization in Kerala that focuses mainly on the issues faced by lesbian and bisexual women in Kerala. *Sahayatrika* is currently a registered organization with an office in Thrissur. They initially worked by providing a helpline and a post-box number so that women could seek guidance and support through mail or phone. Since their founding in 2001, they have played an important role in making lesbian sexuality and more broadly women's sexuality a matter of political concern.

¹⁰http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/IN/PLD_IND_UPR_S1_2008anx_LesbianSuicides.pdf. Accessed on March 10, 2009.

¹¹ Federation of Integrated Research for Mental Health (FIRM) a sexuality rights based NGO formed in 1995 by a group of doctors and social activists, played a crucial role in supporting sexual minorities in Kerala. The *Snehapoorvam* (With Love) project housed at FIRM, currently coordinated by Sree Nandu addresses LGBT communities. Currently there are many organizations that address sexual minority issues in Kerala such as *Jwala*, *Vathil* and the Malabar Cultural Association.

suicides were conducted by a journalist and activist, K. C. Sebastian. He observes that in the early 1990s when he told feminist groups and women writers about the pattern of lesbian suicides, no one was willing to investigate it. Finally, in the mid 1990s, thinking of this as a “historical entrustment” (Sebastian 2003:2), he conducted the investigation himself. At that point, none of the print-media publications were ready to carry these reports. It was only in 1997 that *Sameeksha* a new journal started by K Venu¹² published these reports. “Thus through the first issue of *Sameeksha* the world knew that lesbians were committing suicides here” (Sebastian 2003: 2), says Sebastian as he reflects on his role in configuring these suicides as a public issue.

In 2002-2003, *Sahayatrika* conducted a series of fact finding investigations of select media reports on lesbian issues. These include an investigation of the expulsion of a group of seven girls from a government school in Trivandrum in 1992 after they formed a lesbian group called the ‘Martina Navaratilova Club’. They also conducted fact finding reports of many other cases of lesbian suicides and interviews with members of the MSM community in Kochi. Since the late 1990s, incidents of women who oppose their families and assert their right to live together have created debates about lesbianism in Kerala.¹³ But lesbian suicides are a core political issue in many of the campaigns on homosexuality in Kerala. In this chapter, I analyze a series of investigative interviews conducted by

¹² K.Venu is an important political figure in the radical Left history of Kerala. He was formerly a leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) but he renounced Maoism in 1991. *Sameeksha* was an alternate publication run by him in the late 1990s which focused on social and political issues that did not get space in the mainstream media. This was an attempt to keep alive small press publications which were more common in the seventies and eighties.

¹³ Sheela and Sree Nandu’s decision to live together in 2003 was the first incident of a highly visible ‘lesbian’ relationship in the public sphere of Kerala. This was a controversial event in which the intrusive and sensational media coverage raised questions about the “advantages and pitfalls of visibility” (Deepa 2005:175). Nandu’s assertion of his transgender identity showed up the slippages in the public naming of this relationship as lesbian. *In Search of Space: A Transgender Tells His Story* (2008) is Sree Nandu’s biography written by J. Rajasekharan Nair.

Sahayatrika on the suicide of two young women, Ammini and Meera, in a rural area in central Kerala in August 2001.¹⁴ These interviews were published as the central document of *Mithyakalkappuram Swawarga Laingikatha Keralathil* (Beyond Myths: Homosexuality in Kerala, hereafter *Midhyakalkappuram*) (2004), the first anthology on homosexuality in Kerala produced by an activist group, a milestone in the debate around sexuality in Kerala. The anthology is edited by Reshma Bharadwaj, who has been associated with *Sahayatrika* and was part of the team that conducted the interviews. This chapter straddles a close reading of the form and content of the interviews and a meta-critical analysis of the politics of conducting and publishing it.

In May 2001, two young women, Meera and Ammini, committed suicide by consuming poison. They were both from an *Adivasi* (tribal) community¹⁵ in a rural part of central Kerala, Moolamattam East. Ammini was a school student who was sixteen years old and Meera was twenty two years old. Their families were related and they lived in an interconnected community. Meera's family was less well-off than Ammini's and she supported her single mother by doing a range of low-income jobs that included domestic work and manual labor in tapioca plantations. The two women had expressed their desire to marry each other and faced much opposition, especially from Ammini's family. While both of them had basic education, it was difficult for them to find the resources to move out of their social network.

¹⁴ In order to protect the identity of the people they interviewed, the *Sahayatrika* team do not give details of the location or actual names of people involved in the published interviews. This information is given in Malayalam newspaper reports on the event. Since my analysis in this chapter is grounded on the published interviews, I use the names Ammini and Meena given to Ragini and Manju respectively by the *Sahayatrika* team.

¹⁵ 'Adivasi' literally translates as 'the original dwellers'. This is a term that refers to the indigenous communities in Kerala. The indigenous communities have been highly critical of the Kerala model of development and form a demographic group that has been heavily marginalized. The last two decades in Kerala has witnessed large-scale land rights struggles by indigenous communities.

In many of these incidents one of the partners did not conform to gender norms (Deepa 2005: 185). In this particular incident, many of the interviewers dwell on Meera's 'masculine' clothes, physical appearance and behavior. Her neighbor Shailaja, who was also her employee, says:

she would do all the work that men did, then when she also wore clothes like men she actually thought of herself as a man. She cut her hair extremely short. Her voice was just like a man's. She would talk really loudly. She would whistle and walk around. Really, what men did, she went around doing all that (Shailaja 2004: 65).¹⁶

The description focuses on Meera's clothes and appearance and also the way she occupies space nonchalantly with her loud voice and her whistling – all seen as markers of masculinity. She also says that Meera was seen as a person with “more mental power” (65), mature and willing to shoulder responsibility, “we had nothing to fear when she was around” (65). Meera's friends emphasize how she hung out with the younger men in the neighborhood. She could climb any tree and did hard manual labor, “you would really think Meera was a guy, if you saw her” (Prameela: 108). Shailaja explains how Meera's masculine behavior became more of a matter of concern and antagonism in the local community when she started the relationship with Ammini. She observes that before that people would talk about how Meera behaved like a man, “but she didn't have major problems because of that. But after this incident with Ammini, everyone started looking at her in a strange way” (Shailaja: 63). Meera's non-normative gender performance coupled with the seeming impossibility of a sustained sexual relationship between two women made Meera and Ammini the target of violent censure and disciplining.

¹⁶ In all the quotations from the interviews conducted by the *Sahayathrika* team I cite it using only the respondent's name.

Meera's appropriation of masculinity is a significant thread in the reconstruction of their relationship. But the relationship has been framed primarily as an intimacy between two women and their deaths are placed in the public discourse on lesbian suicides. Gayatri Gopinath argues that *Sahayatrika*'s use of women-who-love-women framework to analyze suicides in which one of the protagonists is a non-gender normative partner may be due to the way the organization "ultimately adhere[s] to a global LGBT and feminist rights-based discourse that fails to sufficiently trouble the category of 'woman'" (Gopinath 2007:346). Gopinath's critique of *Sahayatrika*'s categorization of the protagonists as a sign of the organization's blind adherence to a global discourse seems too quick a judgment to make. The term transgender, lesbian or women-who-love-women are all transposed from a global LGBT language, so replacing one framework with another would not make for an easy exit strategy. The form of the interview as a political strategy of intervention distinguishes *Sahayatrika* from other rights-based NGOs and points to their awareness of the challenges of the double-edged workings of identity.

The interviews about Meera and Ammini were conducted in two rounds in February 2002 and May 2002. The interviewers are activists who support *Sahayatrika* and have played an important role in discussions and mobilizations about sexuality in Kerala. My analysis is mainly of the interviews published in the book since my focus is on the mediated figure of the lesbian as it surfaces in the public sphere of Kerala.¹⁷ But I sometimes draw on the unpublished fact finding reports too, because the field notes by the interviewers reveal the dynamics of the interview process more than the published

¹⁷ The Fact Finding report circulated by *Sahayatrika* is in English. But my analysis is mainly based on the published Malayalam interviews, in the book, which I have translated into English.

material. For all the interviews, the interviewers went as a team and they talked to people in a communal setting. For example, the interview with Ammini's parents took place, "under the shade of an unfinished open thatch structure uphill from Manju's [Meera's] house" (2003: Fact Finding Report). In the transcribed notes about this interview it is mentioned that, "Several community and family members gathered around while we were conducting interviews; so they were not private interviews" (2003: Fact Finding Report). The list of people they interview is quite exhaustive. This includes immediate family members of the women, their friends, neighbors, Meera's employer for whom she did domestic work, a social worker in the area, the psychiatrist who treated them, the doctor who conducted the autopsy and police officers who investigated the case. The police officers do not allow them to record the interview, "we could not include the comments by the police. They did not allow us to record it. They mainly spoke about the 'abnormality' of this relationship and the crucial need for treatment" (Sahayatrika Team 2004: 60). In the interview with Ammini's mother, the interviewer's note that "there was much silence between questions" (2003: Fact Finding Report). They also reflect on the "tight and aloof demeanor" of Ammini's father, signaling the difficulties they faced in conducting these investigations" (2003: Fact Finding Report).¹⁸ Unlike the practice of ethnographers and oral historians who conduct their own interviews and interact with the speaking subjects directly, here I analyze interviews conducted by a group of activists. These interviews come to me framed by an introduction written by the *Sahayatrika* team and placed in the pages of the book *Mithyakalkappuram* (2004). The oral has been

¹⁸They were talking to immediate family and friends who were reeling under a deep sense of loss and were also suspicious of outside interventions. As Dr. Jayasree's observes in the introduction to Sebastian's book of journalistic reports on lesbian suicides "In a society which sees suicide and homosexuality as humiliating, the plight of families that experience both is quite tragic. In the midst of the flurry of media output that approach these issues without any comprehension or sensitivity, it is difficult to conduct direct investigations" (Sebastian 2003: 11).

transcribed, edited and arranged in a format that can speak to the reading public of Kerala. This allows me to examine the interview as a process and also the political stakes of why and how this act of storytelling, ethnography and history-making makes this suicide an event that is central to the the queer movement in Kerala.

Negotiations within the Interview Process

One of the long-standing theoretical concerns of Subaltern Studies historians and postcolonial theorists has been the status of the voice of the subaltern within historical narratives.¹⁹ This question resonates in a different way in this series of interviews where the primary subjects are already dead. There is no assumption of direct access to the concerned subject possible here. Meera's and Ammini's lives and deaths are mediated through the memory of an array of people associated with them. The interviews are presented before the readers as "narratives coming from different social, emotional and official positioning" (*Sahayatrika* Team, 2004: 59). The interviews are part of a larger project of Fact Finding conducted by *Sahayatrika* that is in the framework of human rights activism.²⁰ In the current economy NGOS play an increasing role as the guardians of human rights, "the increasingly swift movement of words, human beings, goods, and objects across boundaries of all kinds has contributed to a new currency of human rights

¹⁹ Ranajit Guha's "Chandra's Death" (1987) and Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) are foundational texts on this question.

²⁰ Such investigations play a critical role in determining what issues get to be known in an international network of human rights work. It is in the tradition of a mode of political mobilization used by civil liberties groups in India like People's Union for Civil Liberty (PUCL) which publishes fact finding reports on acts of violence against minority groups in different parts of India. These fact finding reports are appeals to a larger international and national body to put pressure on local governments to take the necessary steps to put an end to the violence. PUCL Karnataka's report, *Human Rights Violations against the Transgender Community: A Study of Kothi and Hijra Sex Workers in Bangalore, India*, September 2003, is a highly influential document in the sexuality rights movement in India.

discourse and its various implementations” (Balfour and Cadava 2004: 287). Political thinkers have cautioned that ‘the globalization of rights’ can at times reinforce the discrimination and violence that such rights are meant to redress, the deployment of the women from Afghanistan in the US war rhetoric being a case in point.²¹ Matters of authority and political power play a crucial role in determining the contours of categories like ‘human’ and ‘rights’ which are in no way universal. These interviews are both embedded in the human rights discourse but also pull against its conventions. They document narratives of violence for national and international attention, but point to the complexities and challenges faced by sexual subjects in a specific location, where the protagonists do not see themselves as part of a political cause.

The interviewers in the introduction draw attention to their position of privilege in relation to the members of the community that they interact with: “as outsiders there were many limitations that we faced in this investigation. Concerns about us and the fears and anxieties we caused definitely influenced people’s conversations” (*Sahayatrika* Team 2004: 59). Their political awareness about sexuality minority rights set them apart, as much as their status as educated women from more urban contexts within Kerala. This is brought to the surface most clearly in the interview with the psychiatrist who uses English words quite often in the conversation to build a bond of solidarity with the interviewers, “Then there were tribals. But they didn’t have the look of tribals at all. Did you see the *dead body*? Did you see the girls?” (‘Doctor’ 2004: 97). The interviewers reply in the negative, a quick ‘no’. The structure of the doctor’s question draws on the dominant culture’s assumptions about how a ‘tribal’ should look. When he asks whether

²¹ See Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind “Feminism, the Taliban and the Politics of Counterinsurgency” (2002).

the interviewer's have seen the dead body, he assumes that he and the interviewers would have in common the anthropologizing gaze of the 'civilized' on the 'native'. This easy bonding that the doctor exhibits motivates the interviewers to disrupt it by discussing the *Sahayatrika* project and their political investment in sexual minority rights towards the end of the interview.

The interviewers are sensitive to their positioning as outsiders to the community and attempt to address it. This comes across most strongly in the interview with Meera's mother who establishes a close bond with the interviewers as she says, "Only my daughter was there to help me. Now I have only two cats to help me [...] I don't have anyone to talk to – that's the saddest part. Now that all of you are sitting here at least I feel relieved I have someone to talk to" (Shantha 2004: 74). She seeks support from the interviewers and shares with them her sense of isolation in the community. The interviews produce a document that upsets the binary divisions at work in the rights discourse of the unenlightened victim and the knowing savior. I am not suggesting that there are 'utopic' pockets of interventionist work which magically undo the power dynamics inherent in human rights model of activism. These interviews are mired in these power structures, but the narratives that emerge from the memories of people, point to the limits of the very discourse of human rights within which this project is partly housed.

Since its inception, *Sahayatrika's* functioning is different from the target population based NGOs which work with specific identity based populations mainly on AIDS awareness issues. Ashely Tellis is critical of the style of functioning of many NGOs who "quickly append all local struggles onto an international human-rights

language that may have nothing to do with ground realities” (Tellis 2008). *Sahayatrika* does have national and transnational linkages in terms of funding and membership and also strategically deploys the political language of human rights. As Gopinath observes this is an organization that takes on the task of using a universal language of human rights to bring into “national and international visibility the unmarked deaths of scores of young people due to the violence of heteronormativity” (Gopinath 2007: 6). But the reflective writings by Deepa V N, interventions and public events organized by *Sahayatrika*, testify to their struggle to find a language for sexuality politics that engages with the complexities of the Kerala public sphere.

Deepa opens “Queering Kerala: Reflections on Sahayatrika” with comments on how this project “was problematic by almost every index of political correctness” (Deepa 2005: 176) because of the international funding that the organization had in its first phase and her own status as a non-resident Indian, whose prior political experiences were in Western gay/lesbian communities. But in this article, as well as in other writings, she emphasizes how a queer movement in Kerala has to take on the “specificities and conflicts of life in this region” (Deepa 2005: 196), even as it is open to other national and global influences. In their working, they engage with the intersections between caste, class and sexuality, the paradoxes of visibility and identity, the centrality of families and local communities and the connections between different sexual minority positions:

The experience of working for Sahayatrika in Kerala has been very different from that of lesbian groups in the urban centres of India. [...] we have contact with a diversity of women which may differ from the largely urban, middle class/ upper class make up of lesbian groups in other parts (Deepa 2005:177).

Making available these interviews as a document for public circulation and interpretation marks their political project as different from that of setting up an attainable target with a well-laid out, enumerable plan of action.

The book, *Mithyakalkappuram*, is designed in such a way that the interviews can be read alongside theoretical essays on homosexuality in Kerala and India.²² The glossary in the beginning of the book translates into Malayalam and gives a brief definition of terms such as ‘coming out’, ‘homophobia’, ‘queer’ and ‘closet’; foundational terms in a global sexuality discourse. But the project is not a pedagogic one where the ‘local’ is enlightened by a liberated, transnational discourse. The core of this book is the investigative report on the lesbian suicides, where dominant assumptions of global LGBT politics are questioned and reconfigured. The interviews demand a critical vocabulary, which exceeds the imagination of the politics of identity and visibility. The play between containment and excess, action and passivity, in the fragmented retelling of these lives impels the reader to search for a political language to navigate a “domain of experience that are [is] anything but transparent and referential” (Gordon 1997: 25).

There is a dispersed network of voices, memories and reflections in these interviews that enable the reader to access a complex field of how women lovers negotiate their day to day lives. Beyond a single voice of condemnation of same-sex love, what we see are different attempts to make sense of a friendship that is marked by what is perceived as an excessive and misplaced affection. It is by wading through these myths, by questioning them and locating the cracks in them that the interviewers document the

²² The book also has translations of articles written by activists and theorists who are prominent voices within a metropolitan gay lesbian movement. This includes writers such as Ruth Vanita, Nivedita Menon and Arvind Narrain. This is in addition to articles in Malayalam on queer sexuality in Kerala by activists and scholars such as Dileep Raj, S Sanjeev, Deepa Vasudevan and A K Jayasree.

story of Meera's and Ammini's struggle to survive. "Dedicated to the memory of lesbian lovers, whose lives rained away like a tragedy," is K. C. Sebastian's dedication to his book of reportage on lesbian suicides (2003). This narrative form of tragic loss, in which women are positioned as the ultimate victims of a non-progressive social order, is too reductive to fit the experiences and struggles of Ammini and Meera. The *Sahayatrika* interviews provide us with a complex alchemy of struggle and anger, refusal and desperation, passionate questioning and melodramatic love, which cannot be mapped on to the monolithic positions of 'revolutionary lesbian lovers' or 'passive, all-suffering victims'. There seems to be a need to feel for the gap, the pregnant pauses between the rains of certainties.

A Politics of Tears

Within the Kerala public sphere there are familiar forms that a political subject can take. Because of the firm links that progressive movements like feminism have with the Marxist movement, the feminist subject is seen as one who is oppressed by structures of patriarchy and has to be conscientized to progress from victimhood to become an agential, resisting subject. Liberal feminism and Marxist feminism both uphold the notion of the revolutionary political subject who demands freedom and autonomy. Susie Tharu raises the crucial question, "To what extent has the embodied and agential self – or a very similar one – also been the body-self unwittingly affirmed and renewed by historical feminism? What does that norming cost the feminist movement?" (Tharu 1999: 195). The entry into the public sphere by women also places on them a demand to strip themselves of the excesses associated with the private sphere like romance or sentimentality.

Lesbian politics in Kerala has not taken the shape of a large scale movement because it does not have a visible victim and because of the difficulties faced on forming associations of groups of women who court anonymity for their own safety.

Deepa in her reflections of working with *Sahayatrika* says how the ‘language of rights’ has been criticized on multiple levels, within sexuality minority movements and outside, as a discourse with its roots in the European Enlightenment that presumes universalist values and takes on an individualistic approach. But she goes on to qualify this statement:

But as one possible political language among many, it has been effective for raising awareness in the Kerala context as well, simply because it draws attention to notions of ‘humanness’ and personhood that are popularly, politically and legally denied to lesbians and other sexuality minorities (Deepa 2005: 187).

She acknowledges the complexities of working with the language of rights, while being aware of the limits of this mode of mobilization. My close textual analysis of the interviews bring to the fore the ruptures and slippages within the process of attaining personhood. The interviews are framed by rights discourse, but at the same time they point to the limits of this discourse. It is as if the very thread used to weave a political language gets knotted and shows its own unwieldiness.

There are conflicting impulses in this political project of using lesbian suicides as the basis of sexuality rights movement. The language of melodramatic love and mourning on the one hand and the claiming of rationality and rights on the other hand clash and complicate models of political subjectivity. One of the important questions that these interviews raise is what and who can be the subject of politics in contemporary Kerala? The political subject is conventionally associated with clarity of vision and a contained, rational behaviour. But I find Eduardo Cadava’s call to imagine “a politics of tears”

(Cadava 2006: 7) compelling in the context of lesbian suicides in Kerala. He argues that conventionally politics is based on the idea of vision, but if you look at the world with tears you are not looking at it clearly. A person melts and falls apart when he or she is crying and this calls for a conception of subject and agency that differs from that of an integral, unified identity:

A politics based on the model of tears, therefore, would be a politics that takes its point of departure from the presupposition that we always act without seeing things clearly, that we always act with tears in our eyes. It is also important to note that the tear that falls does so at the frontier between the public and the private. The tear signals a kind of dissolution or melting of the self at the moment when one is trying to make this or that decision. (Cadava 2006: 7)

Here tears are used to signal to bodily excess that produces an unruly subject who deviates from the model of rational containment. This model of politics radically reconceptualizes the punctual, self-knowing actor and opens up the possibility to recognize and make space for acts and deeds that are tentative and suspended. Through the metaphor of tears it troubles the boundaries between the public and private and draws our attention to how certain expressions of affect make a subject slip out of the mould of rights-based citizen-subjects.

Forms of Romance

The lens of romance through which Ammini and Meera are viewed makes them slip out of the norms of a political subject. The language of romantic love, sexual intimacy, conjugality and friendship gets entangled as the respondents describe the relationship between Meera and Ammini. Some of the respondents close to Meera, like her mother, Shantha, and her friend and employer, Shailaja, stress the intense love these women had for each other and oppose any suggestion of sexual intimacy:

They never had the mindset to live like a husband and wife. Two girls who really love each other. That was the only kind of love here. Then it's true that the *attachment* [in English] was more than usual here. They wanted to be with each other all the time, a special kind of love like that. (Shailaja 2004: 70).

Here Shailaja differentiates their intimacy from sexual desire; by stressing that was the 'only kind of love,' she tries to expel any suggestion of the sexual. She uses the English term of *attachment* to mark the relationship as 'special', unexpected and in many ways difficult to describe.

Many of the respondents move away from the realm of the linguistic and draw on bodily gestures of romantic love to describe their relationship. Shailaja uses an inscription on Meera's hand as a mark of the tight-knit relationship between the two of them, "Meera would inscribe the letter 'A' in her hand using *Henna*. One day I saw it on her hand [...] and I asked her who that A stood for. It's by questioning her like this that I came to know that A stood for Ammini" (Shailaja, 2004: 67). It is on her body that Meera inscribes Ammini's name; desire here is exteriorized on to the surface level. Prameela, Ammini's classmate speaks about the *premam* (sexual, romantic love) that Ammini had for Meera and her desire to marry Meera and live with her. The interviewers ask her, "Was it *premam* that Ammini had for Meera? Did she express it like that?" and she replies in the affirmative (2004: 107).

I suggest that *Painkili*, a vernacular sentimental and sensual romance, is a narrative form through which Ammini and Meera's love is retold. *Painkili* is a term used to denote a highly popular form of romantic writing, but through repeated usage it has come to mean a set of attitudes that is excessively sentimental. The term literally means a singing bird and entered into circulation in reference to the melodramatic aesthetics of the

popular, love story *Padatha Painkili* (*The Beautiful Bird That Does Not Sing*) by Mutathu Varkey, published in 1955. *Painkili* writings circulate widely in Kerala, often in the form of serialized novels that appeared in low-priced, Malayalam weeklies since the mid 1950s. These narratives of lovelorn couples, set mostly in high-range villages, were consumed avidly by the Malayali reading public. This immensely popular literary form is delegitimized within high cultural circles because of its investment in the titillating, the sentimental and the sensational.²³ Ammini and Meera's use of the conventions of romance draw our attention to the hierarchies within narrative forms of romance created by the sedimented divide between 'high culture' and 'low culture'.

Painkili is the term through which the first, investigative reports on lesbian suicides frame the relationship between two women lovers. Let me quote from Sebastian's journalistic report:

same-sex love exists among women in hostels in the cities. But it is rarely that these women become inseparable and go to the extent of ending their lives together. Most of these suicides happen in villages which are far away from cities. These women come from ordinary families and read *Painkili* publications". (Sebastian, 1999: 15)

In spite of Sebastian's pioneering efforts to draw attention to these suicides, in this comment he judges these women lovers as misguided. For an audience familiar with the registers of speech in Kerala, this is a description which triggers denigrating associations about the assumed consumer of *Painkili* fiction. This is usually a young woman from the

²³ The novelists who played a significant role in making reading a popular activity in the fifties and sixties later become sidelined and labeled as 'cheap' literature from the 1970s onwards. The devaluation of Mutathu Varki's *Painkili* novels is a prime example of the stigmatization of popular forms of romantic fiction. In a spirited protest against the erasure of Mutathu Varky from Malayalam literary history, acclaimed writer Punathil Kunjabdulla says, "I will say without doubt that if anyone writes a history of the reading practices of Malayalis the position that Mutathu Varky and *Padatha Painkili* has in it is unparalleled" (Kunhabdulla 2002: 50).

lower middle class to lower class, with a basic level of education, for whom reading is an emotional exercise of indulging in titillation and sentimentality. *Painkili* fiction is often seen as misleading young women into the world of sensory pleasures, “this form of fiction is part of a process that pacifies the vision of reality and destroys a sense of practicality” (Raveendran: 1986). The readers of *Painkili* fiction are characterized as over-involved with these textual narratives so much so that their life begins to imitate art. Sebastian’s comment about the women lovers as readers of *Painkili* writing also shows how he does not think they are equipped to become political subjects. They may be literate but their literary tastes are not evolved enough to mould them into individualized, agential subjects. Thus they are placed in the position of victims who need to be saved through outside intervention.

Reading is an important practice in the production of the Kerala woman as a progressive subject. As part of the state endorsed Literacy Movement²⁴, much energy was expended by cultural organizations to mold the literary sensibilities of the ‘public’ so that men and women read forms of literature that ameliorate them. In a culture that is heavily invested in print and visual aesthetic productions, there is an assumption that the performance of everyday living is complementary to practices of reading or viewing films. There is not a simple correlation of reading about an act of suicide in a novel and then trying to commit suicide, it is more that the structures of the affective realm of the fictional world, its ways of dreaming, desiring, loving and grieving, provide the reader with a mode of performing life itself. This is why a judgment on a literary form becomes

²⁴According to official state history, adult and non-formal education activities in Kerala started in an organized manner with the setting up of *Kerala Grandha Sala Sangham* (Kerala Library Association) in 1945 with 47 rural libraries. The state was declared a totally literate one on 8th April 1991. (<http://www.kerala.gov.in/education/liter.htm>) Accessed on June 1, 2010.

a judgment on ways of living too. As Jenny Rowena observes the cultural establishment in Kerala, that includes literary critics, zealously guard the borders between aesthetic forms, the well-perpetuated literary credence “in the high/low divide is used to delegitimize the writings, culture and lives of people who are not in the upper strata of society (such as women, Dalits and many others).” (Rowena 2005a: 60). The lesbian women in the suicide narratives lack political potential for Sebastian, because they read the wrong kind of novels and therefore their subjectivities are not shaped in a way that they can rebel in a ‘productive’ fashion.

But the interviews suggest that these very codes of *painkili* romance are redeployed by Meera and Ammini to stage a different kind of love story. The first published lesbian novel in Malayalam, *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1974), follows some of the conventions of *Painkili* writing and this points to the malleability of the form of the *Painkili* novel. This is a melodramatic, tempestuous love story of two school friends Kokila and Girija. Let me quote a short extract:

My golden beauty! Girija hugged Kokila’s warm, naked body tightly. Her fingers slowly caressed Kokila’s back. Then everything went upside down. [...] Both the young girls were drowned in the whirlpool of desire. In the end, they were soaked in sweat. They gasped, tightly clutching each other bodies, luxuriating in the moist aftermath of their emotional outflow. (Nandakumar 1974: 124)

The love story between Kokila and Girija unfolds through detailed descriptions of their externalized expressions of love; which includes their pleasure in dressing each other up and giving gifts to each other. The description of romance in the novel is highly dramatic, sentimental and associated with bodily excess.²⁵ It is such ‘surface-level’,

²⁵ T. Muraleedharan translated an extract from this novel for *Same Sex Love in India*, a pioneering anthology on queer representations in India edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai. This project of documenting same-sex narratives for a global audience played a significant role in recouping this novel

sensory expressions of love that respondents focus on when they illustrate Ammini and Meera's relationship. Prameela describes Ammini's performance of being in love, "Ammini would write Meera name in blood on a paper, she would cut her hand with a blade and write with that blood" (2004: 106). She later mentions how Ammini would write Meera's name on her hand with the sharp needle edge of a geometric compass. Their friends also mention the physical shows of affection between the two of them, how they would walk with their hands on each other's shoulders and how Meera would give Ammini money to buy things she wanted. Tears and blood, markings on the body, physical intimacy and consumption all become narrativized as part of their love story. These gestures and expressions are of a markedly different order from the more interiorized, poetic configurations of romance associated with a reified 'romantic' subject.

Udaya Kumar, in "Two Figures of Desire: Discourses of the Body in Malayalam Literature," analyzes foundational texts from late nineteenth century Malayalam literature in order to argue that a new form of agential subjectivity is brought into being through the formation of a desire that "move[s] away from sensual-gratification to self-restraint" (Kumar 2002: 135). This refined form of desire hinges on self-control and interiorized suffering that is not enacted through the senses. This move towards an interiorization of desire becomes important in the ushering in of a new form of individualized, agential subjectivity. The conception of the agential subject who enacts desire through interiority is contradicted in the sensory and bodily performance of love that we see in the

(Vanita and Kidwai 2000). In the preface to a new edition of the novel in 2006, the author acknowledges the renewed interest in this book after the English edition was published by an international press. Before the novel was revisioned in this fashion, one could safely assume that its networks of circulation were mainly as a *Painkili* novel. It was first published as a serialized novel in a magazine *Chitra Karthika* and the novelist mentions that his readers were mainly women and students (Nandakumar 1974: 2).

narrativization of Ammini and Meera's relationship. To arrive at a complex reading of their life and relationship there is a need for a conception of agency that is not tied to interiorized desire and individual autonomy and to imagine the possibilities of a "politics of tears"(Cadava 2006: 7).

The interviews conducted by the *Sahayatrika* team function as a rich archive which shows the limitations of a global gay/lesbian discourse and a dominant liberal feminist framework that are both invested in a rarefied conception of desire and action that will lead to self-empowerment. These narratives have the potential to rupture political frameworks that recognize only certain forms of living and loving and also point to the risks of what is lost and erased in the "normalizing imperative of identity" (Dave 2010: 598). There is a need to re-engage with the complex trajectories of the *Painkili* form to arrive at an understanding of how transgressive love is narrativised and performed using devalued forms of romance. Ammini and Meera's use of sentimental forms of love point to what often has to be expunged in order to consolidate the lesbian as a political subject. Dave, in her study of lesbian political movement in metropolitan India, observes that the consolidation of a stabilized political subject also involved a process of loss, "one such loss was a circumscription of the affective space of politics such that sex, pleasure, and desire were gradually deemed less than fit for this emergent, newly politically aspiring, lesbian community" (Dave 2010: 608). The performances of *Painkili* romance raise the political implications of retaining such affective excess, even when these markers make the protagonists deviate from the norm of a suitable political subject.

The Ghostly Lesbian

These interviews, instead of setting up the lesbian as a stable identity category, put forward a map of the ways in which intimate relationships between women are viewed and how such a relationship questions dominant “structures of feeling”.²⁶ These narratives have a disruptive potential only if we retain the tensions and instabilities in them. Agency as action that will lead to self empowerment is complicated in Meera and Ammini’s story. Their desire to live together and resistance to plans of marriage place them in opposition to existing social structures. They push against the social contract of “family, inheritance and child rearing” (Halberstam 2005: 2) as they assert their desire to live together and not get married.

In the shaky trajectory of their lives there are incidents of direct conflict with regulatory institutions such as the family, the police and the psychiatric system. While Meera’s mother does not directly oppose her daughter, who is her main source of emotional and financial support, Ammini’s family repeatedly controls their daughter’s mobility and admonishes her not to spend time with Meera. There are violent verbal and physical conflicts between Meera and Ammini’s family. One of the most confrontational episodes involves Ammini going to Meera’s house and staying over in the night. Ammini’s father comes to the house, accompanied by prominent men in the community and forcefully demands that Ammini leave with them. Meera’s mother’s notes how Ammini remained silent that night, “One had to put a twig in Ammini’s mouth and poke it if she had to speak” (Shantha, 2004: 80). She hugged Meera and cried and did not make

²⁶ In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams defines ‘structures of feeling’ as meanings and values in a particular time and space that are actively lived and felt, “specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity” (Williams 1977: 132). The live tensions and transitivity of social structures are emphasized in this formulation.

a move to leave. Ammini's father lodges a complaint in the police station when Ammini refuses to leave and the next day the two of them are taken to the police station and later to the psychiatric hospital.

When Ammini and Meera are taken to the police station there is a clash with state institutions where the opposition to their relationship becomes more formalized and consolidated. In Meera's mother's evocative recollection of the traumatic day when they are taken to disciplining institutions of the police station and the hospital, there is a complex play between action and passivity, resistance and despair. "Even in the police station the children were holding hands and sitting like that. They held hands when they got into the jeep, all the way to the station and inside the station too," (Shantha, 2004: 81). Meera's mother captures the intensity of the relationship by focusing on their immobile physical posture, the hand-holding that lasted for hours. When the police advises the two of them to give up this relationship and get ready for marriage, Meera resolutely says that they only wanted to live with each other, "we are only going this way sir, no marriage for us" (Shantha, 2004: 82). But a few moments before this, Meera attempted to commit suicide, by jumping in front of a bus. Thus there is a quick shuttling between angry words of resistance and her desperate act of attempted suicide. Gordon's observation that "those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents," (Gordon 1997: 4) captures the necessity to track and retain the tensions in the negotiations by Meera and Ammini. The subjectivities of Meera and Ammini cannot be mapped through a liberal humanist lens in which victimhood and agency are both contained categories.

From the police station they are both taken to the psychiatric hospital and in Shantha's account of the hospitalization there is again the juxtaposition of a powerful tirade against what is being done to her daughter and an overwhelming feeling of desperation.²⁷ The quick transition between anger and despair is palpable in her recollections, "they gave her so many pills. She was sane, they made her insane. Then I remember I felt I just wanted to die. I didn't want to live." (2004: 82). The mother's death wish here cannot be read as a passive one, for it emanates from anger against a medical system that makes her sane daughter insane. She goes on to describe her daughter's frantic fight to get out of the hospital ward reiterating that she had no disease, " 'I want to walk. I should not be locked up like this. Where have you locked me up?' she got up from the bed and started walking around and told me, 'let's go, let's go' repeatedly" (Shantha, 2004: 83). This enactment of resistance is a complicated one where the longing for self annihilation cannot be pried apart from the dissatisfaction with social norms that makes some 'ways of living' not count as a life (Butler 1993:16). In the very articulation of this desire to end one's life there is also a laying bare and drawing attention to the systemic ways in which certain ways of living are delegitimized.

Meera is not ghostly only after she dies; even alive she does not fit into the mould of a recognizable subject. Her transgressions of gender norms and her 'externalized' love for Ammini mark her as someone who cannot be contained within existing disciplinary structures. "Haunting is a constituent element of social life," (Gordon 1997: 7) because Meera's acts of 'excess' radically threatens the ordering of the social. Even as Meera asserts her sanity and her ability to function and negotiate the everyday world - her need

²⁷Gender and mental health, specifically the violence and abuse within the psychiatric system, is an issue that has received critical attention in India in the last two decades. See Davar, 2001. For discussions on women and mental health in Kerala, see Kalathil 2005.

to get out, move and occupy the world outside - she also holds on to the possibility of dying. Her mother who feels akin to her daughter and intensely mourns her loss says:

After Meera almost went under the bus my *uyiru* (life-force)²⁸ went up and was frantically running around there. My child's life-force was also shuttling around like that. Mine also. My soul is even now wandering around like that. Wherever my child's soul goes, my soul is just going there too (Shantha 2004: 83).

Meera's mother is not just haunted by the dead daughter's spirit, she pictures herself as a ghost too. Her soul is unmoored from its physical habitation and frantically follows her 'daughter's soul'. In her narrative of the hospital episode, she and her daughter both become ghostly presences.²⁹ The body is wrenched away from the 'life-force' which restlessly shuttles around. This excruciating experience of being torn apart body and soul and the slippage into the language of spectrality and haunting, demonstrates how haunting here is a mode of narrating social exclusion. It points to the struggle to exit a violent system but also stakes a claim to it and rages against it.

The interviews deal with the complexities in articulating a claim for justice, when the bodies at the center of the discourse are marked as excessive, out of bounds in multiple ways. The lesbian that emerges in these interviews is not a figure of abjection, as suggested by Devika, who argues that the 'objects of development' are those bodies on to which sexuality is projected (Devika 2009). According to her the prostitute, sexual minorities, the AIDS patient, are all pushed into this realm of abjection which is beyond the pale of reform (Devika 2009). Devika analyzes the positioning of sexual minorities

²⁸ The literal translation of *uyiru* is life. But it assumes a division of the bodily and the spiritual and *uyiru* refers to core or essence of life. So I have translated it as 'life-force'.

²⁹ This sense of desperation Shantha feels is linked to her long history of exclusion and displacement. She tells the interviewers about her struggle to survive after her husband's death at a young age, "Even with me...now for about ten to twenty years I have been taking care of myself and family. Everyone has a weird attitude after my husband died. People want to push me out of here. Should I agree to that? You tell me. I have said so much. Why don't you say something?" (Shantha 2004: 75). In contrast to the other respondents, Shantha repeatedly seeks support and affirmation from the interviewers.

within state discourses of development where she points to a neat divide between the center and periphery. When we look closely at the mediated life stories of Meera and Ammini and their interactions with the community, the category of abjection is not quite apt. These social figures occupy the grey areas between the inside and outside and disturb the normative ordering of their life-worlds in a tentative fashion. Their life-stories are imbued with the threatening power of “haunting, ghosts and gaps, seething absences and muted presences” (Gordon 1997: 21). Ammini’s tears and refusal to speak, the frozen hand-holding that lasts for hours, Meera’s quick transitions from open rebellion to attempts of suicide – these shards of memories of their lives give us a complex narrative marked by gaps and silences, and acts that cannot be classified easily as ‘agency’ or ‘submission’.

There are multiple conflicting registers in which the act of suicide is placed in these interviews. This is a remembered conversation of Meera with one of her friends, Mini. This oral statement about suicide characterizes the act as destabilizing and threatening:

Meera would say she is not frightened of anyone anymore. I don’t want anyone, I am strong by myself, she would say. And when I asked her why she said these things, she said ‘simply, without a reason’. One day after drinking coffee in the morning Meera told me, ‘maybe the earth will quake tomorrow’. She died the next day. She told me not to tell anyone anything. [...] I never told anyone. Now I am telling you (2004: 91).

Here suicide is a final gesture of strength and refusal. It is a premonition of an earthquake; a death that will cause tremors in the life-world that Meera occupies. But this is not the only register in which Meera refers to the act of suicide. Her mother describes her desperate words to the police officer after her foiled suicide attempt, “I don’t want

tea, I don't want anything. Now our life is completely falling to pieces', Meera said. She was the one who was talking. Ammini didn't say anything. She was crying. 'Why live now, sir. Everything is so complicated, sir'."(2004: 81) Here her decision to end her life is grounded more in her sense of being caught in a situation where movement is impossible.³⁰ The debilitating 'complications of life', the lack of options to live their life together makes her fall back on suicide as the only option. These shades of desperation and confrontation intermingle in her statement to Shailaja who recounts how Meera wanted Ammini to come and live in her house and have a more peaceful environment to live in,³¹ "But people did not like it. They would say all kinds of things, 'they won't let us live together, so we will die together' she would say" (Shailaja 2004: 64). Here the act of dying together is both in defiance of people who will not let them live together, but also a suggestion that there might not be any other way out for them. As for Ammini's reference to suicide, her classmate Prameela places it in a narrative of sentimental, romantic love, "She did say that she would die. [...] If we opposed her, she would tell us why does it matter to all of you.[...] She would write on her hand, right here, 'Meera' with a compass" (Prameela 2004: 108). From rebellion, to desperation, to melodramatic love, there are multiple registers in which this suicide is placed. There is a need to ward off the urge to name their deaths as martyrdom or murder,³² tragedy or rebellion. Instead of reallocating this act in familiar frameworks, we have to see their lives and deaths in its own terms as acts that are suspended between multiple, seemingly oppositional

³⁰ This resonates with Spivak's definition of the subaltern as "those removed from lines of social mobility" (Spivak 2004: 531).

³¹ Shailaja mentions how Meera was even ready to support Ammini and get her married to someone else later in life. She only wanted Ammini to have a better living environment (2004: 64). We should remember that Shailaja was supportive of Meera, but she insisted this was only an emotional and not a sexual attachment.

³² Meera's mother defines the death as a murder "Yes my daughter died because of all those fights. They deliberately beat my child to death. That is how I will say it is..." (Shantha 2004: 78).

frameworks. Such reallocations into the legal framework, as in the case of murder, or the romance of resistance will erase the complex “*significance of the deaths*” (Satapathy 2006: 142).

Arguing for the need for a more nuanced language to engage with the links between sexuality and subjectivity in India, Ashley Tellis observes: “we might have to redefine our conception of desire, take it out of some simple understanding of pleasure and situate it in the various conflicting and coalescing fields that inform and constitute it” (Tellis 2003). Meera and Ammini’s subjective performances of desire have to be placed in the conflicting fields in which they were positioned. The *Sahayatrika* team is cautious and aware of the risks of appropriating these women as political subjects for a lesbian cause. They observe that this is not an investigative, fact-finding project which will unearth the ‘truth’ about lesbians in Kerala, but an attempt to map the ‘common sense’ conceptions about same sex love and the struggles women face as they shape their own strategies of resistance (*Sahayatrika* Team 2004: 59).

The narratives about their suicide and their love for each other break down the conception of the subject as an intersecting vector of identities held together as a stable entity. There is no center that holds these conflicting social scripts together, nor is there a possibility of an exit from these structures that house them. Meera and Ammini are subjects who shuttle between these different scripts which they inhabit, but also exceed; their lives are marked by this never-ceasing movement as “bodies [...] that shuttle, always deficient, always in excess” (Tharu 1999: 203). Suspended between scripts of subjectivation that they hold on to, but also slip out of, they coalesce as eccentric, “melting”(Cadava 2006: 7) figures that inhabit the cracks between available modes of

being. The suicide as an act should be read as part of these complex, broken negotiations – an act that demands a suspension of quick judgment and a willingness to hold together the threads of divergent scripts through which the subject is made and “annihilated”.³³ Lesbian hauntings that do not follow the teleology of progress demand a revisioning of conventional models of politics.

Relational Politics

Sahayatrika's political mobilization through the interviews is part of a search for models of politics that engages with networks in a local community and a couple's rootedness in their immediate circle of friends and family. The form of the interview is a relational, collective activity that does not focus solely on individual rebellion. The only way in which the young women's lives could be recorded after their death was by relying on the memory of others associated with them. The interviews are produced in a participatory space as the respondents interrelate with the interviewer's questions and comments. It is often a group activity, rather than two people having a formal question-answer session. This is from the notes on the Fact Finding Report circulated by *Sahayatrika*, “Interview with Pushpa, Manju's second sister. Present at interview: Jayasree, Reshma, Meena, Deepa. Pushpa's cousin Manju, Pushpa's three children and a neighbour lady (Shobana) & daughter were also present. Villasini, her husband, and Madhavan were also present.”

The first four people Jayashree, Reshma, Meena and Deepa were the team from

³³ Susie Tharu in her reading of Baburao Bagul's short story about a dalit widow argues that this drama of life and death in the scene of the family brings into being a world where nothing can be taken for granted. Here there is no occasion for “con-solid-ation for reader or story teller” (Tharu 1999: 198) and the subject is “impossible because it is continuously annihilated” (Tharu 1999: 198). By introducing caste into the feminist scene of desire she points to the necessity to rework classical objects of political theory.

Sahayatrika and this team consisted of at least three women for most interviews. Villasini was their contact in the area, associated with a women's organization *Stree Vedi*. The interview here is with Pushpa, but she's joined by her extended family, acquaintances and neighbors. The format of the interview encapsulates the overlapping and close-knit lives of the speakers. As Ranjita Biswas argues this intersubjective sociality is connected to the notion of identity as work-in-progress "formed and claimed in connectedness with, as also in exclusion of, an other" (Biswas 2007: 277).

The interviews conducted by *Sahayatrika* map the social and institutional structures that housed Ammini and Meera which ultimately also lead to their deaths. Many of the respondents appreciate the role Meera played as a strong person who was a major support for her widowed mother and also helped other families in the neighborhood. Meera's mother's narrative of her own life is closely tied to her daughter's life and death. At no point in the interview does she question her daughter's decisions in life, "They could have taken care of their affairs. Meera could have taken care of herself. No one can say they did anything wrong" (2004: 85). Meera's embeddedness in her own community and her struggle to negotiate her space within it is evident in the interviews. Mini recounts how Meera came to her with an article in a popular Malayalam Magazine, *Manorama*, about same sex relationships in order to educate Mini about the fact that such relationships exists:

Women shouldn't go around together like that. But I have read about such things in *Manorama*. That between the same sexes such things happen in faraway places. Meera would read all these magazines and would show it to me and tell me, 'look at this, such things exist, then what's the problem with people here' (Interview with Mini 2004: 89).

By using an article published in a non-elite magazine such as *Manorama Weekly*,³⁴ which also publishes *Painkili* writings, Meera seeks validation of her desire for Ammini. The *Sahayatrika* team in their introduction to the interviews describes this incident as a heart wrenching moment of resistance, “in the context of the absence of a community or movement we can see this as a moment where a woman single-handedly resists the rejection of her self-expression” (2004: 60). What is significant in this exchange is also that Meera uses the knowledge that she gains from the magazine, not to validate herself in her own eyes, but to negotiate with members of her community. She wanted to use the article to argue her case to Ammini’s mother, who firmly and violently opposed the relationship. Her process of etching herself as a subject is intricately tied to making herself recognizable to a relational web of people around her. As the *Sahayatrika* team observes, the absence of a queer community is palpable here, but what it also shows is that under the circumstances Meera struggled to communicate with her immediate community.

Her struggles are very located and there are proximate networks that both sustain and curtail her:

Meera thought of her family, her neighbors, the people she knew around her... that small social network is the only thing she thought about. She never entered into the larger society. Her desires and lifestyle were so limited. She might have thought it was not too difficult for them to live together in that society. (Shailaja 2004: 71)

This is Shailaja’s understanding of Meera’s attempt to find a space for herself and Ammini in the society she lived in. Sexuality politics, in regional contexts, struggle to address this entangled fabric of lives. The model of an individual rights based politics,

³⁴ Publications like *Manorama*, *Mangalam*, *Manorajyam* commonly referred to as ‘Ma’ publications play an important role in popularizing *Painkili* writing.

with protagonists who can break out of the ‘home’ and march ahead in search of a new horizon, such as Kiran in *Sancharram*, does not map onto lives arranged in a different grid.³⁵

The interviews point to how the sexual domain is a “*force-field*, an intersubjective realm [...] where much more than sexual freedom or lack of sexual expression is involved” (John 1998: 371). By conducting and publishing these interviews, the *Sahayatrika* team gestures towards the need to examine the coercive fabric of domesticity and heteronormativity in Kerala. People who were otherwise sympathetic to Meera and Ammini also opposed their intimate relationship. Ammini’s father is the most direct in articulating his opposition: “Because it was between two women we were terribly opposed to it. How can we get a woman married off to another woman? So we opposed it. If it was a man, we could have considered marrying them off” (2004: 93). A social worker in the area, Saraswathy, says that the problem between two women living together would be that they will not have children. Meera’s mother who is usually more supportive of Meera’s decisions, advises her against bringing Ammini home to stay for the night:

Both of you go around together in the day. But don’t bring her here to stay overnight. They’ll fight with us on that. Because of that let her just sleep there. I just told her that it’s fine to go around in the day. I never told her to bring Ammini home for the night (2004: 79).

³⁵Organizations such as *Sangama* in Bangalore, Karnataka, have played a significant role in providing a supportive space for sexual minorities who migrate out of Kerala. This has been a life-sustaining exit point, but activism within Kerala points to the need to engage with local communities, to make any change possible. In my conversation in July, 2008 with a member of *Sahayatrika* who had to leave home at a young age because of her relationship with another woman, she mentioned her reasons for staying on in Kerala and not leaving to Bangalore or other urban centres. She explained that she would feel out of place and rootless in Bangalore, everything including the language would be alien to her. She has opted to live in a small city in Kerala and negotiate the boundary lines between visibility and invisibility at an everyday level. She stressed how this was a difficult option, but there were no easy exit strategies.

On one level her advice stems from her concern about how Ammini's parents would respond, but on another she suggests that in the daytime if Ammini and Meera went around it would be more public and therefore more easily described as a friendship. But their desire to share the night and also the domestic sphere of the home was more risky since it is associated with sexual intimacy and a clear crossing of the boundaries of friendship.

Meera, at times, works within this framework and deploys it to assert a lack of risk in her relationship with Ammini, "Let us go around in each other's company like this. It's not as if we are going to give birth to a child together – so what's the problem?" (2004: 79). As the interviewers attempt to track how 'lesbian' relationships are read by the people in the area, what emerges is how a relationship like Meera and Ammini's disturb assumptions about the inevitability of marriage and sexual attraction between a man and a woman. Meera's mother counters the allegation against her by asserting Meera's essential femininity using her body, "As if Meera has a man's thing hanging on her. Did your daughter see that and set off with Meera?" (Santha 2004: 76). Even as she argues about the impossibility of a sexual relationship between Meera and Ammini, her statement also points to how Ammini's attraction for Meera goes against accepted norms of sexual desire. Their relationship in a tentative, fleeting way destabilizes the common sense about normative heterosexuality, and in documenting it the *Sahayatrika* team makes these instances of dissonance more public and available. The critique of normative heterosexuality also points to the necessary alliances between feminist and sexuality movements and the need for feminisms that "question male dominance which operates

through different structures of power – caste, religion, ethnicity, class and sexuality” (Rowena 2005b: 27). A relevant feminist and sexuality politics has to engage with the fractured negotiations of women who straddle multiple modes of exclusion.

Lives Worth Grieving For

The publication of these interviews is a crucial move in the political movement on sexuality rights in Kerala because it etches this suicide into the collective memory of Kerala. This recording of oral narrative is an ethnographic and historical project that believes in the need to record the present and the ruptures within it in order to engender new possibilities for the future. History making here is a mediated process filtered through the perceptions of the community. That is why the ethnographic and oral history methodologies get interlinked. The series of interviews counter the general trend in the media where a lesbian relationship is reported as an isolated spectacle that “consume[s] itself in its own sensationalism and leave no traces of the life that was its context” (Sukthankar 1999: 15). The prolonged, everyday struggles and negotiations that formed the fabric of these women’s lives are reconstructed through the interviews instead of focusing only on the spectacle of their death.

Maya Sharma in *Loving Women*, a collection of oral narratives of working class women in same-sex relationships, observes how in India “women who came into the public gaze as a result of the sexuality issue were mostly women from the working class” (Sharma 2006: 15). In the case of the suicide of Ammini and Meera, their bodies are the texts which are violently inserted into the public gaze at the scene of death. Shailaja, Meera’s employer, speaks of the intrusive gaze of the people who come to see the dead

bodies of Meera and Ammini: “when the death happened a huge crowd came there. The reason why such a crowd gathered was mainly to find out if Meera was a man or a woman. That was the main reason they came” (Interview with Shailaja, 2004: 71). Shailaja’s recreation of the scene of the suicide is one in which through death Meera’s body is displayed before the public gaze to be objectively measured. There is an attempt, once and for all, to settle the ambiguities of Meera’s gender performances. The interviews produce and record narratives of the relationship between these two women and the negotiations they undertook and thus create a broader, complex framework to place their lives and deaths. By placing their bodies back within a wide, conflicting web of narratives, the interviews foreground the power of narratives in sustaining tensions and producing complex understandings of issues on the ground.

At this particular historical moment in Kerala, remembering the lesbian, memorializing that ghostly presence, holds a mirror to the hegemonic social structures within which only some lives count as lives and only certain bodies matter. The memories of these suicides and the circumstances that lead to their deaths when deployed by collectives like *Sahayatrika* expose the heterosexual foundations of hegemonic structures. Butler asks:

What challenges does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as ‘life’, lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving? (Butler, 1993: 16).

The narratives produced by the *Sahayatrika* team function as a significant political move because they mark a return of the ‘abjected realm’ in order to question what lives are counted as human. By undertaking this task of grieving, the interviewers push against the

devaluation of non-normative lives and bodies. It is by holding on to the memory of lost struggles and tentative resistances, that the lesbian movement in Kerala forges a different futurity. Lesbian hauntings is not only about death and dying, it is tied to “vision and remembrance” (Rodriguez 2003: 38) and the necessity to forge more relevant modes of politics.

My close reading of the representational practices, narrative forms and textual codes in the interviews and the metacritical analysis of the interview process pushes against the reallocation of these lives, desires and acts into familiar paradigms of interpretation. I place my interpretative exercise in the context of the activist project of using these interviews for an immediate, political cause. I hope my analysis demonstrates how such activist and academic endeavours are essential and can co-exist to shape a grounded, regional politics of sexuality. In my reading of both the interviews and the strategies used by *Sahayatrika*, I have tried to be “wary of shorthands” (Gordon 1997: 19) and neat resolutions and reflect on the political value of blurred ways of seeing the world. There is a need to occupy this spectral zone to imagine a “politics of tears” that can engage with the complexities of subjects who spill out of the conception of the liberal individualist mould. Feeling the wayward trajectories of lesbian hauntings is a significant part of the collective enterprise of revisioning the political.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Unruly Scripts and Suspended Readings

In the spirit of the non-linear organization of this dissertation, let me conclude by recollecting the beginnings of this project. As in the case of many other first shots at a book-length project, the making of this dissertation is entangled with my own political and intellectual trajectory. One of the significant back-stories is my interview with Nalini Jameela, in 2001, in the small office of the sex worker's organization *Jwalamukhi* (Volcano) in Thrissur, Kerala. When I reflect on my meeting with Jameela, before she gained celebrity status, two things come to my mind. One was her physical location in that office and how that signaled her embeddedness within the AIDS awareness machinery and the second was her strategic use of narrative. She was an expert in the art of story-telling and though she was addressing me directly, she seemed to be talking back to a larger public network and its positioning of the sex worker. I was not surprised when she published her autobiographies four years later because she seemed to be well aware of the power of cultural practices to question normative sexual arrangements, especially in the context of Kerala where print and visual culture play a crucial role in creating the public sphere.

This interview was part of my two-year Master's of Philosophy project on the public reception of the Malayalam film *Susanna* (2000 dir. T. V. Chandran) by sex workers' organizations in the state and the links between cinema, the public sphere and

the politics of sexuality. I gravitated towards this dissertation project because I was curious about how a breathless endorsement of domesticity in Kerala co-exists with cultural practices, whether in the form of viewing soft-porn cinema or reading sentimental, sensual fiction where the excesses of disciplined reproductive sexuality come to the fore. Initially my focus was on the family woman who is the foundational figure upon which Kerala makes its claims as a progressive state, but as the project developed it became organized around the “others” of the family woman, the sex worker and the lesbian, and their challenges to normative sexual arrangements. I also found it productive to move away from contained textual representations and fixed identity categories in order to track the transitive cultural practices through which sexual figures are produced in the public imagination and how these figures are accessed and deployed by marginalized sexual subjects. The dissertation tracks subjectivities-in-process as they are formed through cultural practices. This is reflected quite literally in the grammar of my chapter titles, which use gerunds such as ‘remembering the prostitute’, ‘claiming the day’ and the ‘politics of lesbian hauntings’.

On July 2nd, 2010, one year after the Delhi High court decriminalized homosexuality, the rainbow flag was unfurled in Kerala and other parts of India amidst Queer Pride celebrations. This was Kerala’s first Queer Pride March. The leading banner in the march stated “From Silence to Celebrations,” which marked this as a turning point in Kerala history. As the politics of visibility and rights get mapped onto different locations in the world, this dissertation posits cultural practices in Kerala as a site that troubles the neat progression from silence to speech. My analysis foregrounds the significance and necessity of organized, sexuality movements in Kerala to counter the

violent policing and regulation of sexuality. But I point to how the unified subject, at the center of identity politics and rights-based discourses comes undone when we take into account the struggles by marginalized sexual actors.

I analyze the fraught mediations by non-normative sexual subjects who demonstrate the need for models of politics that are not rigid and foreclosed. The acts and actors one encounters in this dissertation disturb regulatory norms but are not tied to stable identity categories. They cannot be contained within neat paradigms of liberation as they shuttle between multiple scripts of being. The tentative and fleeting movements through which they exceed these scripts and spill out of them point to the ruptures of identity categories and gestures towards the ‘potentiality’ of sexual politics.¹ This dissertation captures the need to revision politics so that the path is not set but holds within it different possibilities. Mourning and loss, failure and rewriting are integral to itinerant political topographies.

In order to map the workings of sexuality in the regional, it is crucial to engaging with the public sphere as an interconnected, affective network that is created through visual and literary practices. With my focus on cultural practices, I move away from a politics of progress and visibility and toward forms of resistance that are tenuous, tactical and marked by affective excess. Many of the journeys that I track never reach a destination; the protagonists in the film *Deshada Killi Karayarilla* are on the run, in search of a safe space that they never find. The trajectories of this cinematic journey gesture towards the mobile, precarious sexual imaginations within a regional public sphere. This tension and flux within the region form a significant thread in all the

¹ Jose Esteban Munoz argues that queerness is an ideality, “an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (Munoz 2009: 1). My analysis points to how this anticipatory structure is crucially linked to the process of re-membering the past and present.

chapters because I foreground the unruly movements that occur within a ‘small place’. I argue that the critical challenge of examining the regional lies in paying close attention to the possibilities and impediments within a located space. It is the dense network of the region that sustains the sexual actors in Kerala, even as it curtails them in violent ways. There is a defining ‘together-ness,’ whether it is in the acts of living or dying, loving or mourning. This embedded positioning of the lesbian and the sex worker, in the relational network of the public, has to be taken into account to forge a regional politics of sexuality that questions the conception of the individualized political subject.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

A central axis of this project is the nexus between the AIDS network, sexuality movements, discussions about the new, unprecedented sexual boldness of post-1990s globalised India. My discomfort with this neat narrative of progress—where all pockets of the world can learn to be sexually liberated in the right way—has fuelled this project. This dissertation insists that there is a longer history to the processes of how cultural practices become inter-linked with the governance of sexuality. Globally circulated representations of Kerala often position it as a ‘progressive pocket’ in India ensconced in memories of matrilineality. My attempt has been to question these narratives of exceptionalism and to point to the risks of presuming a unidirectional flow of liberatory ideals. I demonstrate how the cultural realm becomes *the* unsettling site where the disjunctures of a universal human rights language and the politics of visibility surface. For example, in my analysis of oral narratives of lesbian suicides I demonstrate how the political is re-envisioned when acts and bodies that do not fit into the liberal-humanist

paradigm make claims for justice. I ward off the temptation to fix these protagonists as heroic nay-sayers or tragic victims and argue for the importance of retaining unresolvable tensions between agency and victimhood.

I demonstrate that there is an alignment between sexual health development programs, regional identity construction, the discourse of liberal feminism and sexual identity politics in that they all reify the empowered subject and a linear trajectory of coming into consciousness. I examine the more fraught, tentative processes of subject formation that trouble set blue-prints of agency and development. This theoretical move structures my over-arching argument that the relation between the post-1990s and pre-1990s is a complex, interpenetrated one. The organization of the preceding chapters thus troubles the linear chronology of time and questions the assumption that the 1990s is a break-point where a new language of sexuality bursts forth. In my analysis of the state processes of the disciplining of sexuality I point to the continuities between the post-90s and pre-90s period. I show how the developmental discourse of ‘model’ Kerala since the early period of state formation regulated women’s sexuality and how the dominant figuration of the domestic woman shapes Kerala in the present too. The violent mechanisms of the state work to exert control over women’s bodies, especially through the institution of the police, which is an area of continuing concern for sexual minorities even as they are now re-positioned as targets of governmentality. I also examine how institutions of modernity such as the psychiatric hospital, schools and colleges continue to function as sites for the disciplining of sexuality. But in spite of these regulatory processes, non-normative sexual figures cast disruptive shadows on the edifice of the domestic woman through the volatile cultural practices that produce the public sphere of

Kerala. The domestic woman in this dissertation is continually disturbed and reconfigured by her ‘others’.

The fifth chapter on lesbian suicides is focused specifically on the process of haunting as a means of disturbing the domestic ordering of the social, but the workings of cultural memory and the after-lives of cultural texts and events are a consistent concern in all the chapters. I examine the intermedia and intertextual connections that cut across time periods and that play a formative role in disrupting the foundational narratives of Kerala and its privileging of the reproductive family. Acts of remembering and reiteration are crucial to the composition of sexual subjects in the post-1990s period. My research also participates in this process of tracking the ruptured network of cultural memory. I examine the charged trajectories within *Avalude Ravukal*; particularly the prostitute figure reading a controversial novel from 1940s and the dispersed aura in the reception of heterogeneous elements of the film. These shifting public networks provide a complex mapping of how disruptive cultural practices can rock the “scenography of reason” (Butler 1993: 52). This dissertation argues for the need to look more closely at the recent past and the vernacular cultural archive that animates the present.

I also examine more conscious attempts to produce historical accounts in which the currents of sexual and affective excess are not written out. *Sahayatrika*’s oral narrative project on lesbian suicides and Nalini Jameela’s dual autobiographies create an account of the present that captures its seething struggles and irresolvable tensions. These collaborative exercises in history-making differ from statist projects of orchestrating a neat, orderly, account of the region. The shuttling movements in this dissertation, between the pre-1990s and the post-1990s, embody a dense, enmeshed connection

between the past, the present and the future. The non-linear trajectories of cultural circuits play an important role in creating a regional discourse of sexuality that has possibilities of unrest built into it, and this is crucially linked to my argument about the region as a dense, layered and complex space. These vernacular imaginations of sexuality intervene in the dominant frameworks through which global modernity and development frame a 'small place'. Cruz-Malave and Manalansan ask, "How should queer critical studies and activism intervene [...] in the multiple rhetorical operations through which globalization discourses manage the local differences they promote?" (2002: 7). This is a question central to my regional study of sexuality, a project that interrupts knowledge formations that seek to render local differences intelligible by translating them to universally understandable frameworks.

My work can be broadly classified as 'Cultural Studies', but I think there are significant ways in which I move away from Cultural Studies scholarship on contemporary South Asia, especially writings that become well-circulated in the US context. These academic readings are primarily grounded in disruptive textual strategies, but the text itself is presented as if it exists in a vacuum. I push against the autonomous status given to cultural texts. Rather I look at the practice of representation. It is through the intertextual and intermedial traffic in the public sphere that representations acquire meaning and significance. My focus is not on externalized global flows but specifically on how the contingencies of a region determine the imagination of sexuality and subjectivity. My work provides a thick description of the regional public sphere and pays close attention to the tensions within it.

Situated in the US academy and working on a regional public sphere that is in-

formation is a challenging task, because one is perpetually negotiating multiple languages and theoretical registers. But this shuttling is part of the critical task of this dissertation because I argue that it is important to inhabit unsettling terrains, where political options are not foreclosed. My focus on the detailed analysis of the recent past through a vernacular archive also questions the nostalgia for an organic, fluid pre-colonial past and the quick celebration of post-globalization representations of sexuality. Between the romanticized past of *Kamasutra* and the global-radicalism of *Fire*, there are multiple unsettling imaginations of sexuality in the recent past in India that are alive in public memory. We can locate these only if we look closely at regional cultural production. One of my contributions to the field of Postcolonial Studies is the cautionary note that a yearning for a precolonial past runs the risk of erasing the complexities and tensions of the post-independence period. While this dissertation is aware of the political and theoretical need to keep alive memories of the past, it also argues for a critical awareness of our relationship to the past and how we mobilize it.

The labor of this dissertation has been to forge reading practices that retain the tensions and incompleteness of technologies of subjectification. I insist on the need to be wary of the longing for closure and worked-out strategies of political action. I select sites of analysis and methods of interpretation that enable me to navigate the shifting zones in which unresolved struggles are not re-appropriated and transformed into heroic tales of agency. Such suspended readings are necessary to create a politics of sexuality grounded in the fragment of regional life-worlds. Pushing against the rush for enumeration and the quick consolidation of identities, this study on the politics and practices of regional sexuality is a call for an intellectual practice that pays close attention to the details of

mobile networks within a region. The journey that I ask the reader to undertake with me is one that values the confusing, painstaking process of movement itself. These are visions of unrest rather than a reaching for clarity. This is a dissertation that has faith in the power of unresolved questions and interstitial spaces and that maps the stuttered movements of shadowy sexual subjects. Investigations at the edges of the social and the global cannot risk neat endings, for they point to the need for suspended readings and situated knowledges.

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