Chapter 3

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

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

Regin 1992

Introduction

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

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

The mid 20th century debates signify the creation of multiple layers of a middle class public sphere all of which were separated from each other by the methods they proposed to build
a progressive society. These methodic concerns were very often articulated in the language of progress and heterosexual subjectivity, the commonly given goals of reform discourse, which continued to remain uncontested. In other words the space of social realism from its beginning in the 30s and 40s of twentieth century was closely surveilled to resist any shift from the heteronormative foundations. The widely acclaimed revolutionary connotations often attributed to social realism in effect were consistently pushed back in the public sphere while dealing with its subversive effects. In this chapter I attempt to show how questions of subjectivity were brought back with a different twist in the public domain during the movement towards social realism from mid1930s onwards. While I briefly look at the classical scholarly discourse of social realism my main attempt in this chapter remains with addressing the complexities involved in this space and how questions of heterosexual subjectivity survive through these complexities. The progressive writers’ movement (Purogamana Sahithya Prasthanam), that inaugurated the emergence of social realism in Malayalam literature, marked a space where the prevailing economic structures and moral centralities were often problematised with varying results.

The emergence of realism in literature is marked by the sudden surge of questions about desire and pleasure as also the quick interventions that followed to ‘straighten’ this space of representations. I make an attempt here to understand how body, sex and pleasure were contested with meanings specific to the emerging modernity and how the colonial versions of progress and reformation were once again rendered a central significance in the ongoing contentions. The outcomes of these contestations have had lasting impacts in shaping the varied cultural contexts in Keralam where gender and sexuality, especially those concerning same-sex practices, is
constantly projected as a major issue requiring the sanctions of the heterosexual progressive frameworks. There were different and multiple circularities of argumentation getting shaped in this sphere where the older, colonial, notions of body and subjectivity often revisited as ideal models in order to regulate and make sense of the ongoing transformations.

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

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

In the 1930s social realism was primarily addressing the reform oriented conceptions of subjectivity. A new and distinct phenomenal world, in terms of ethical practices, bodily affairs, conjugalities, lifecycles and so on – that contrasted the early community based life practices – for the people to inhabit was rendered familiar and natural during the first half of 20th century in
Keralam\textsuperscript{1}. This period is also mentionable for the methodical concerns around the modernizing enterprise in Keralam\textsuperscript{2} apart from legal provisions made in the realm of industrial relations, caste related practices, women’s education and so on\textsuperscript{3}. It was precisely against this backdrop that a movement in the literary sphere was gaining momentum in the 1930s with the sole intention of using this space for the well being of subjects across class and caste differences.

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

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{1}] According to Geertz, subjects embody culture not as simply as it is situated and imposed by culture as such or by the personality development classes; rather it is in the sense that people live in a distinct phenomenal world access to which is exclusively determined by a set of embodied practices (Geertz 1973, 1983; also see Good and Good 2004).
\item[\textsuperscript{2}] See my discussion of Devika’s article on Family Planning Programme in Keralam cited in chapter 1.
\end{itemize}}
relations considered morally reprehensible until then. However as I shall elaborate later in this chapter neither the ‘new’ literature nor the contentions that erupted following their publication were free from definite ideological orientations that centered around questions of building a modern progressive society.

Although the novel was heralded as a mainstream literary expression of aesthetic experience with the publication of *Indulekha* by Chandu Menon in 1869 historians of Malayalam novel generally agree that the emergence of fiction, especially novels and short stories, as a popular form in Keralam was a development in the mid-thirties (Das 1995, 281; George 1998, 102-110). Between the publication of *Indulekha* and the death of C.V. Raman Pillai – a well known Malayalam novelist in the early phase of modernity who wrote historical novels – in 1922 only a few novels were published in Malayalam. George (1998) writes that the Malayalam novel received “a new lease of life” only in the 1930s when the progressive writers’ movement was gathering momentum in the state. According to him this was a period when the influence of the West was felt more directly on the works that were produced in Malayalam. He calls this period the second phase of modernity in Malayalam literature when the writers were inspired by western literature and leftist ideologies and wrote more closely about life (1998, 105). This was also a period when the art of the short story became popular in Malayalam. Avasthi observes that, during this period, “writers… used short story both as an effective means of propagating their humanistic beliefs and ideas as an expression of a new aesthetic” (Avasthi 2004, 8). The short story was even considered to be an effective tool of informal education for the whole population and the publishing industry also rose to the occasion. “Literary periodicals like
Mathrubhumi, Kesari, Samadarsi, Mangalodayam and Chitrayogam did yeoman service to the establishment of the short story as a respectable and influential artistic medium” (9).

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

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

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

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

One of the most evident ways of challenging the established moral world was to include characters and incidents considered as over-the-top, immoderate, deviant and perverse. It was often the case that the plots in these fictions sketched a world that overturned and even destabilised the moral universe and the usual caste, class and gender hierarchies. In his story Thotti (Scavenger), published in 1943, author Nagavalli R. S. Kurup gives a detailed description of the life of a scavenger. Banned in the year of its publication by the princely state of
Travancore for its ‘revolutionary content’, the narrative involved the romantic and sensual experiences of a scavenger’s life depicted against the daily routine of a scavenger, focusing on the collection, transportation and disposal of filth. The author, Nagavalli Kurup, in his foreword to the third imprint of the story wrote that “they [stories and fictions with similar themes] were part of efforts that were deliberately undertaken to shift the focus of narration from the lives of the upper caste, wealthier people” (Kurup 1955, 5).

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

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

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*^4^* *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal* (Mal- Five Bad Stories), 1996 (1946), Imprint Books: Kollam

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

*^6^* *Ibid*
Although the book was banned for its vulgar content there was also a significant political flavor added to the whole controversy. This was a period when Keralam came under the strong influence of the leftist-communist ideologies and there were sporadic but strong peasant movements in different parts of the region. Alappuzha, the district from where the book was published, was one of the main areas where the revolution reached its heights in the form of the famous Punnapra-Vayalar revolt. The constitutional reforms proposed in 1946 by the then Diwan of the princely state of Travancore, Sir C.P. Ramaswami Iyer, was opposed by the communists who maintained that the reforms intended to create an American model of executive in Travancore. The slogan “American Model Arabikkadalil” (Dump the American model into the Arabian Sea) was popular during those days in the different parts of Keralam, which was still not a unified territory. The region around Alappuzha was a Communist stronghold and the communist workers organised a mass uprising in October 1946 against the authority of the Diwan, and practically established their own government in the region. This led to attacks and the deaths of Travancore police officials and government officials in that region. Martial law was declared in and around the district of Alappuzha and the uprising was brutally suppressed with the help of police and the navy on October 25, 1946.

Interpreted variously as the struggle for freedom against the oppression of the Diwan and as the coir workers’ opposition to the prevailing feudal system and the proposed constitutional reforms, the Punnapra-Vayalar struggle played a significant role in bringing communist ideologies into the mainstream intellectual life of Malayalees and in the growth of the Communist Party as one of the main political force in Keralam. This growing influence of communist ideologies, the full force of which started to be felt strongly from the mid-1920s
onwards, had a lasting impact on the genre of literary production, initiated by the progressive writers’ movement, as well as on the constitution of a reading community. In fact the association between leftist ideologies and the progressive writers’ movement in Keralam was so close that, as one author observed, “the main inspiration [of Jeevat Sahityam] was left wing politics” (Nagendra 1988, xxiv). Jeevat Sahityam, which was founded in April 1937 in a conference held at Thrissur, was later renamed Purogamana Sahityam (progressive literature) in 1944 in order to signify its proximity to the idea of progress (purogamanam) (Chandrasekharan 1999, 104). The growing influence of the leftist ideologies was felt in the constitution of reading groups also. This was particularly so in the public library movement which started in the late 1940s when libraries for public access were set up in different parts of the region. These spaces were often accused of catering to leftist ideologies and political activities under their influence.

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8 It was not uncommon in those days to find columns in newspapers and magazines that wrote openly against the functioning of public libraries for their overwhelming leftist orientation. Malayala Manorama, a leading Malayalam daily, wrote that “at present the libraries of the state are turned into communist centres and that the collections of these libraries are mainly communist literature which are irreligious and immoral” (Editorial, Malayala Manorama, 1952 May 22); Deepika, another well circulated Malayalam Daily, wrote that “the libraries of the state were working with the sole intention of spreading communist ideology and these libraries are filled with Russian literature which were actually spreading communism in the name of progressive literature” (Editorial, Deepika, May 30, 1952). What concerned these writers was not merely the spread of leftism and its activities in the state as much as it was about instigating an immoral ground where the modern progressive literary practices took place.
It was precisely against this background that the book *Five Bad Stories* was banned. It is noteworthy that the book was published from Alappuzha which was one of the strongholds of communist party at a time when the revolution reached its heights in the region. All the contributions in the collection dealt with sexually explicit themes against the background of the lives of the economically and socially deprived classes. The book, along with other similar ones, was an unconditional declaration of the era of social realism in Malayalam literature and displayed a deliberate attempt to deal with down-to-earth realities, albeit from a different ideological perspective. *Five Bad Stories*, through its very title, neatly conveyed the intentionality behind its production. Produced during an era when “moral values were considered precious and stories and fictions were essentially considered as vehicles of the same” the publishers themselves “announced it as a bad book”. This implicitly carried the subtext emphasising not only the authors’ intrepidness and the morally violating themes in the collection but also the fact that the “readers can choose to decide whether or not to read it”\(^9\). The “bad” in the Bad Stories was necessarily a signal about the morally offensive themes and the language deployed in the book – representing a common strategy adopted by the progressive writers to confront the disciplined moral language of the erstwhile literatures. Thakazhi, another well known Malayalam writer and a Jnanapeedam award winner who authored one of the Five Bad Stories during the early stages of his writing career, wrote in the foreword to the 1996 reprint edition that “the attempt was mainly to write and publish slang and folly”\(^{10}\).

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

As I have already suggested the new trends was not free from the influence of new ideologies. On the one hand, the progressive realists endeavoured to project the realities through their class based definitions of the social world. On the other hand they articulated a universal approbation of modernity and ideologies of progress as reciprocal and mutually fulfilling. Concerns of progress remained at the heart of these shifts. For instance the concerns addressed
during the period between 1937, when the *Jeevat Sahityam* was formed, and 1944, when its name was changed as *Purogamana Sahitya Prasthanam*, were about inaugurating an intimate relationship between literature and ideas of social progress\(^\text{11}\)\. Attempts were also undertaken to define the very concept of progress\(^\text{12}\). These concerns were shared by not only those who actively took part in the movement but also by those who resisted the movement in literature on different grounds. It was precisely amidst these complexities around questions of progress that social realism as a major feature in the history of literary and artistic representations emerged in Keralam in a full-fledged manner.

Social realism in Malayalam literature was not something that was confined to the progressive writers’ movement alone although the influence of leftist ideologies especially in the form of addressing the economic realities was dominant in the production of literature and other art forms in this period\(^\text{13}\). The literary sphere in Keralam was divided between writers who

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\(^{11}\) Chandrasekharan 1999 pp. 216-274. The concerns were quite visible in writings that addressed the contemporary literature and about the status of the movement.

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

\(^{13}\) Nagavalli R.S. Kurup, who wrote *Thotti*, a novelette that was banned in the early 40s, was one among the contributors to the collection of good stories. It is interesting to note here that Kurup, who touched upon themes that were equally unconventional as those dealt by the progressive writers, considered his story as ‘good’ as opposed to being a ‘bad’ one. See Kurup’s story “Veli Kettal” (The Making of a fence), in *Anchu Nalla Kathakal* (Mal: Five Good Stories). Kozhikkode: K.R. Brothers (1947).
belonged to the progressive camp and those who declared themselves against the movement. In the aftermath of the publication of *Anchu Cheetha Kathakal*, this rupture came out openly when those who belonged to the latter camp published a collection of short stories that was entitled *Anchu Nalla Kathakal* (Five Good Stories). However, the changing economic structure, its impact on social relations, poverty and hunger played a major role in the stories in this collection also. What determined the difference between *Nalla Kathakal* and *Cheetha Kathakal* (Good and Bad Stories) was mainly the presence of the morally unconventional and sexually explicit elements in the stories of the latter collection. The historical juncture at which the production of both these collections took place is significant as the debates that surrounded their production and circulation clearly articulated some of the lasting concerns which dictated the production of literature and other art forms in the subsequent periods. A closer reading of both these collections enables one to understand the nuanced differences that led the authors to define their collections as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ respectively. Body, sex and practices were alluded in a rather explicit manner in ‘Bad Stories’ of which the title was a generic but brief synopsis of the trend that the very authors of these stories, along with others, had set a few years before. On the other hand these practices remained implicit or completely absent in ‘Good Stories’ which were nevertheless still struggling to remain close to represent the social and economic realities.

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

\[14\text{Ibid.} \]
stories, was a later invention when progressive writings started depicting practices outside of heteronormativity. In other words the use of language, the subjects, practices and relations were not identified as points to be contested so far the progressive writing restricted itself to depicting heterosexual subjects under the metanarrative of monogamy. In this context criticism against authors who wrote ‘bad stories’ was highly complex and dense with contradictions. The writings of P.C. Kuttikrishna Marar, another renowned literary figure in Malayalam, deserve special mention in this regard. Marar who was one of the main sources of this criticism in Malayalam literary world, accused the writings emerging from those authors as “spreading darkness in human lives which are already dark . . . what good culture and motivations will it create in our minds? What progress will our society and literature attain as a result of these [writings]?”15.

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

15 Quoted in Chandrasekharan 1999, 121. The article was originally written by Kuttukrishna Marar in 1948 in the Malayalam magazine Kaivilakku. All the references to this article are quoted from Chandrasekharan 1999 and the page numbers refer to this book.
making any compromise quite impossible”¹⁶. Marar further summoned the writers to publicly declare their political affiliation “instead of being intimidated by the question whether or not they belong to the progressive camp”¹⁷.

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

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

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

¹⁶ Ibid 111-120.
¹⁷ Ibid 134.
basically addressed the social and economic transformations in a rather nostalgic tone. The question of sex and desire was only implicit in these stories which, on the other hand, stressed the earlier traditions of romantic and ascetic love that did not consider body as an active agent involved in it. This space of realism had indeed negotiated between these earlier traditions and the new trends that stood for unrestrained depiction of sex in aesthetic representations. The famous lines *mamsa nibaddhamalla ragam* (love is not bound by flesh/body)\(^{18}\) written by the Malayalam poet Kumaranasan (1873-1924) needs to be specially discussed in this context. Asan, whose role as a poet was crucial in transforming Malayalam poetry from the metaphysical to the lyrical in the late 19\(^{th}\)-early 20\(^{th}\) century period, was a continuously critical presence in debates around the question of depiction of sex and love in literature and other art forms. The category of love without sex was introduced in modern Malayalam poetry by Kumaranasan. An active participant of reform movement in the early 20\(^{th}\) century Kumaranasan was the first general secretary of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) movement – started by Sree Narayana Guru in 1902 for the welfare of Ezhavas of the region (Parayil 2000; Mathew 1989).

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

\(^{18}\) From the poem *Leela* written by Kumaranasan in 1914. (Kumaranasan 2009 (1914). Kottayam: D.C. Books)
fictions – and other art forms, especially films in the subsequent periods – were measured on the basis of the importance they attributed to sex as an essential component of love and life at large. In other words the flesh-bound love has kept recurring in the public sphere of Keralam as a conceptual schema that could be projected onto literature and other art forms in order to classify them as salacious and otherwise. This was not as much part of the official discourse as it was to preoccupy the internal spaces of the local intelligentsia where ascetic love was still valorized to a considerable extent as opposed to open descriptions of sex. The imagery of flesh replacing asceticism and concerns about the changing economic proportions of the region were to become fertile grounds for tackling and for dealing with questions of homosexuality and its representations in the public sphere. I will come back to this argument later in this chapter and in the next chapter also.

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

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19 The writers who were often accused of writing in obscene language were still recognized with state awards and other honorariums. Vaikom Muhammad Basher, Madhavikkutty, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and so on were writers who belonged to this category. While their books continued to be the best sellers in the market the charges made against them ran parallel.
and modern (Surendran 1950). Surendran’s article was an early articulation of these anxieties around the depiction of sex in literature. However a clear instance of deploying concerns about the question of social progress as an effective tool for dismantling writing practices on a selective basis emerged, again in 1947, in the aftermath of the publication of *Shabdangal* (Voices) written by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. *Shabdangal* was the first piece of fiction in modern Malayalam literature that touched upon the topic of homosexuality. The debates that surrounded the publication of this short novel by Basheer, and certain subsequent writings that were produced on the question of *asleelam* (obscenity) in Malayalam literature, resulted in the formation of a prolific space. The investments made in this space during this period were critical that public contentions in the subsequent periods consistently borrowed from its basic formulations.

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

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20 In this article, published by *Mathrubhumi* weekly in 1947, Surendran clearly brings out some of these early concerns where he raised this question in an attempt to mediate between these two differing traditions of social realism (Surendran 1950).
formation of *Jeevatsahityam* in Keralam, that depicted sexual practices more openly. 

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

*Shabdangal*

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

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

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

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

23 Sabhyatha and Sadhacharam (Nair 1947(1994), 152) - these two words represent the common parlance around
Shabdangal. Although these terms were part and parcel of the critics’ writings on the novella in the aftermath of its
publication they were first coined, in the context of Shabdangal, by the author and the publishers themselves as
catching phrases in order to advertise its arrival preceding its publication. It was advertised as a severe challenge
against sabhyatha – decency, respectability – and sadhacharam – morality. See the foreword to the novella written
by Kesari A. Balakrishna Pillai in the 1948 edition of Shabdangal, (Kottayam: National Book Stall. 9-16)
involved in it, the frustrations of the soldiers, questions of desire, sexual diseases and moral perversions in fairly open and ideological terms. Basheer promotes different hypotheses in this short novel through his answers to the soldier’s questions. The experiences and situations narrated by the soldier are also made more clear to the reader by seeking clarifications by the author. Basically presented in the form of a conversation, the novella assumes the proportion of an ideological treatise that critically reviews the official explanations given for these situations. The unrelenting mordacious descriptions remains intense throughout the novel affecting almost all the situations that it covers, from scenes of war to the scenes of the street lives of prostitutes. The strikingly realistic language of the narrative however takes the novel beyond the paradigms of the normal fictional language of the period and confers on it an aura of chronicle; every shocking incident that confronted the narrator in the past is elucidated with the help of explanations that breached the overwhelming commonly held, progressive notions of nationalism, morality and a foundational economic structure. For instance take this piece of conversation between the author and the narrator from the chapter entitled *Premabhajanam* (ladylove) in *Shabdangal*

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

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

S: Yes.

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

A: ........
S: Have you felt that there is always an economic problem behind the practice of prostitution?
A: There must be some such thing!
S: Why do women become prostitutes?
A: Probably because there are men.
S: Is that any reply?
A: Why should men go to them? Let us not waste time in pointless discussion. From the point of view of male the fault is always that of the woman. Looked at from the female point of view the fault lies with the man. Either the fault is in both sides or in neither. On what basis are you going to decide between right and wrong?
S: On the basis of morality.
A: Morality of which part of the globe, of which people?
S: I don’t know. Isn’t there something we ordinary call morality? Don’t look at other women, monogamy, chastity and so on.
A: Morality is different for different religions. Take monogamy. Some religions allow polygamy. Some allow polyandry too. There have been kings and people among whom mothers and sisters could be taken as wives. That was their morality. Among animals and reptiles and birds mothers and sisters become mates. Among humans too, even today, such practices go on. A sister could conceive from her brother, a mother from her son, a daughter from her father.
S: Isn’t that terrible?
A: Why?
S: Well, I don’t know why?
A: I'll tell you why. You have a philosophy of life. You were wrong saying that you had no such thing. Wasn’t your foster father a priest in a temple? He has taught you. About good and bad. That is your philosophy of life.

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

A: In sexual matters?

S: Yes.

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

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

A: Nothing bad, why do you ask?

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

A: Who said this?

S: An eminent military doctor.

A: He must have said it to frighten soldiers.

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

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

A: Meaning?

S: The picture had lips, eyes, breasts, navel and thighs. (20-23)24.

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

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

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

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25 My discussion of polyandry in the previous chapter.

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

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

However the critics' attack against the book focused upon the one single episode depicting the soldier’s sexual encounter with a hijra whom the soldier had apparently thought was a

27 The term that the author uses is aan vesya (male prostitute). The male in question, apparently dressed up as a female, later explains to the soldier about the collectivity he belongs to and the customs that all members including him undergo before they are initiated into this. A clear reference is made to that of hijras although the narrator, as well as the author, continues to mention him as a male and not as a hijra.
female. The mistake is realized only after the encounter. The narration of the contretemps and the utter dismay of the soldier after he realizes the mistake committed do not involve any reference to gay desire or same-sex love. In fact immediately after the realization, the narrator’s tone shifts to that of a disappointed client, as opposed to a despaired lover, and there is a sudden and precipitous movement of narration from love to sex. The logical corollary of this event in the narration is the narrator’s, the soldier, getting inflicted by gonorrhea as a result of this encounter. As opposed to the usual sequence of seeking explanation from the author for all the incidents narrated, in this particular instance, there is absolutely no explanation sought or given. The only discussion that follows the description of this incident is the narration of soldier about his conversation with male prostitute about how he was initiated into becoming a sex worker. Thus the author bypasses the risk of commenting upon a non-heterosexual union. Even the encounter is narrated as if it were a heterosexual one rather than to imply the opposite. Although severely criticized, during the period of its publication and in the subsequent periods as well, a closer reading of the text enables the reader to identify strong heterosexual foundation that articulates itself during the soldier’s narration and the authorial interventions.

The narratives and counter narratives reflect upon the text being reticent on the issue at its disposal opening both to its subversive and non-subversive readings. On the one hand the text, through its very discussion of this event, discredits the predominant status of heteronormativity in plots produced then. On the other hand it simultaneously evades from the obligation of explaining the same leaving the question to the readers. However the design of its narration of this whole event is particularly capturing for its style as the whole episode of the soldier with the male prostitute is presented in a heterosexual fashion until the sudden realization after the sexual
encounter; thus evidently sketching it as an accident, an unusual incident or an unfortunate turn of events in what was until then thought of as a romantic, heterosexual, relationship. This is not in any way meant to discard the subversive nature of the text produced during a period when reformation discourse was still on its heights. Nevertheless the text at the same time reveals the hidden frames for understanding sex and body those were rooted in the commonly held ideals involved in the production and reception of a text.

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

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

28 Op.cit. FN 25; p.11
This passage at the beginning allows the text to sink into the consciousness of the reader where both the text and the reader are synchronized to take on the hypothecated grounds of morality. It is precisely here that the historical discourse of morality in the reformation period is reaffirmed in the public consciousness under the guise of a discussion of bodily hygiene. In the first chapter we have already seen how such hygienic practices of body were made into an effective tool by the reformers to focus on the body. In the book *Shabdangal* this association has a non-enigmatic and unambiguous association with questions of morality, especially later, inside the text, when such an association is extended to the question of sexual diseases as well as to personal standards of hygiene.

*Shabdangal*, by all means, was, as Pundey described, a critical text that, “reveal[ed] the worldliness of criticism” and was “constructed according to the critic’s location” (Pundey 2003, 141-142). The short novel reflects upon the conditional existence of desire amidst a constantly negotiated field of culture. The making of its texture is a significant element in the modern history of representations of non-heterosexual relationships in Keralam. By not deviating from the common standards of realism in literature *Shabdangal*, at the same time, has dissociated the same-sex encounter from any standard or acknowledged mechanisms of desire. That the representation of such relationships was to be confined to sexual acts in spaces that are well beyond the mainstream social circles and to be depicted only in the margins as constantly violating the social morals became an accepted practice in writings that touched upon these issues later. *Shabdangal* also inaugurated the practice of representing ‘the homosexual’ as an essential persona that is nevertheless a social construct.
In other words the homosexual is to be identified only through his sexual habits which were inculcated into his body and soul through abnormal socio-sexual intercourses. *Shabdangal* inaugurated many trends in Malayalam literature especially in the context of representing homoeroticism. The logical association of this practice with sexually transmitted diseases and the ‘need’ to justify one’s sexuality are one among the few. The post-encounter biographical descriptions of the *hijra* takes the reader to the homo-social spaces like schools and hostels where children are initiated into masturbation and same-sex intercourse. Justifying one’s alternative sexuality here invariably assumes the form of stories of exploitation. However the much larger space of negotiations that surrounded the publication of *Shabdangal* comes to visibility only if one were to visit the different temporalities when such negotiations actually took place. Also the discursive impact of *Shabdangal* cannot be read solely with reference to the constitution of its text. The heated debate that its publication caused about the kind of experiences that could be and could not be represented in literature and the enterprises to define sex and obscenity in literature was equally important in cementing the reading and writing practices.

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

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29 In the context of the contemporary sexuality politics where narrations of homosexuality emerge from a more subjective perspective, such descriptions often touch upon this aspect of ‘one’s “becoming” a homosexual’. A strong instance is the book *Oru Malayali Hijadayute Aatmakatha* (Autobiography of a Malayali Hijra) published in 2006. A substantial portion of the book deals with the question how Jereena, the author, became a homosexual persona during her school life. See Jereena 2006.
Shabdangal thus became incidental in articulating the discursive limits of representing desire. Typical of the writings that emerged from the progressive realists’ camp, Shabdangal went further than others in speaking about desire in its extreme forms simultaneously displaying the limits of such articulations. The shared ground for the realism enterprises was a heterosexual, monogamous morality with reference to which only the articulation of desire was sensible. Sex, love, adultery, promiscuity, prostitution, chastity and so on became prominent issues where the fluidity and dynamics of cultural practices were often discussed. Body was re-centered as a site to discuss these varied manifestations of desire cutting across class and caste divides which nevertheless compressed the sexual moral sphere to that of a one man, one woman context. Such recasting and the intense debates that followed in the public sphere, nevertheless, witnessed certain circularities where prerogatives of progress and reformation were still rendered pristine and unchallengeable. This effectively relocated sexual practices and desire back at the centre of the discourse of progress also inaugurating the second phase of reformation in Keralam.

The reform narratives in the late 19th-early 20th century addressed concerns around a degenerate culture in prescriptive but hegemonic language. It was invested beneath the progressive equations of corporeal practices and attempted to efface the heterogeneous cultural practices followed by different sections of society. Social realism in the mid 20th century, on the other hand, aimed to alter the caste and class centricity of the preceding discourses. It was precisely here that the leftist models of social conflict on an economic basis hijacked the centre stage by diffusing the focus to ordinary human experience. Desire was an effective tool to capture the dynamics of those daily experiences and to reveal the subtleties behind them. The apparent paradox behind this revolt against the preceding narratives on an economic basis was
that it granted the heterosexuality, monogamous model of morality, that the previous regimes tried to impose upon society, an unchallenged status. This worked as an implicit model of reference and as a source from which definitions of rights and wrongs flowed.

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

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

However such resistances had already become “a thing of old times” and was attributed a faint existence that no longer deserved to be followed. See the response to this article in the subsequent two editions of *Mangalodayam* in the same year.
realism on other accounts. This caused critical changes in the axis of debates in the Malayali public sphere.

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

It was against this context that Shabdangal was produced which further incited open discussions and debates on the ethical dimensions of depicting desire in literary representations. The debates were thus far restricted to the way social issues were defined; definitions of reality that guided the production of literature and creative art. The issue of asleelam (obscenity) was only in the margins of this space of negotiations as we saw in the context of the publication of
Anchu Cheetha Kathakal and, subsequently, Anchu Nalla Kathakal. Post Shabdangal social obligation of the writer was reexamined in the public sphere in terms of the way body was narrated, the use of language, and the pedagogical possibilities of such narration in order to educate and spread social awareness among the readers. There was a huge uproar against Shabdangal immediately after its publication; the opposition to the book came from all corners of the society including from within the progressive writers’ circles (Chandrasekharan 1999).

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

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

Following the production of Shabdangal the liberties of representational practices under the umbrella of progressive realism writing were critically debated. The site hosted discussions that articulated the links between questions of desire and modernity’s promises of progress through an overwhelming reinvention of reform narratives. This eventually resulted in a new regime of
representation where restrictions in subtle forms were put in place over the question of desire and its depiction. The angry response against using representation to depict desire outside ‘normal’ forms was vented on the very first appearance of homosexuality in Malayalam literature. Even the slightest appearance of same sex content was received with much hostility; out of all the instances depicted in the novel, commonly referred to as “wastrels and fornications” (Nair 1947/1994, 153), homosexuality was selectively identified as a theme that failed the potentials of progressive writing practices. The familiar question ‘which writing practice was more progressive’ was most effectively deployed in reconditioning the representation of desire in literature.

Ideologising progress became a contested territory with various claims simultaneously complicating the scenario. The net effect of these debates was that the language of those who supported and criticized Shabdangal merged on several points. For instance the supporters claimed that the function of same sex relation in the story was to signify the degenerated moral grounds that commonly prevailed in the society rather than to depict its practice as such.

Sahodaran Ayyappan (1889-1968), a renowned social reformer and journalist-politician, praised Shabdangal as “a new venture both thematically and methodically . . . Social reformation shouldn’t be restricted to the superficialities and instead should clean the internal parts of the society by removing the dirt from it”31. Ayyappan expressed his opinion in a speech delivered to a public gathering in 1948 assembled to discuss Basheer’s novella. Ponkunnam Varkki, one of the contributors in the Anchu Cheetha Kathakal and present during the occasion, stated that “[P]rogressive writers like Basheer are inviting the readers’ attention to the festers beneath this

beautiful blanket . . . creating an impression in the readers’ mind that such diseases should be cured”32.

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

32 Speech in 1948 quoted in Sanu 2007, 153. The author K.M. Sanu was also present on this occasion.
In his book published in 2003 Raghunathan Nair writes that “Shabdangal unveils the horrific images of the overt sexual instincts of a young man who was an offspring of a prostitute. . . [where] the young man, who caught sexual disease as a result of his unfettered sexual life, is describing his life experiences to the author in a confessional language” (Nair 2003, 58-59). Here all the background details provided by the author including the prostitute mother and the young man’s unfettered sexual life are factual mistakes. In the novella the soldier is described as having no idea about his parents and the sole occasion when he lost his control over his sexual instincts was when he met the male imposter, apparently dressed up as a woman. However such misreadings, in the early 21st century, are silently consumed in the public sphere irrespective of Basheer’s huge reputation as a writer. The generic reprehension against the depiction of same sex contents in literature comes onto surface through such writings. The deployment of Shabdangal within this larger discursive space invites our attention to the multiple ways through which not only same sex relations and practices but also differences in sexuality, especially their articulations in representations, are brutally attacked.

The site of Shabdangal was remarkable for the extent to which it initiated discussions on obscenity in literature and later in other creative arts. During the very early days of its publication the unanimity in labeling same sex relations and practices as ‘social sores’ have had an immediate effect in terms of eradicating homosexuality as a theme from all mainstream spaces of contestations. As I mentioned in the previous passages there was absolute unity in interpreting this practice as unethical and outside the purviews of decent social existence. There were other concerns around which contestations did occur and which were still crucial in constituting a vigilant public eye that constantly examined literature and other works of art for
their obscene contents – what is commonly called in Malayalam as *asleelam*. The space of critiques around *Shabdangal* was quick to shift its focus to this issue which, by default, was identified as pertaining only to the depiction of male-female relationships. Sukumar Azhikkode, another prominent critique in Malayalam literature, has written substantially on this topic. In a book published in 1952, an elaborate critique of progressive literature (*purogamana sahityam*), an exhaustive analysis of the term *asleelam* and its influence in Malayalam literature was undertaken. According to the him

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

(Azhikkode 1952, 28-30)

The mid 20th century critics combined the old reform concerns with the recently emergent questions in practices of representation. Definition of desire and the pedagogic potential of representation were debated alongside. Azikkode’s book, from which the above quote is given, was a direct offshoot of the controversies erupted in the aftermath of the publication of
Shabdangal. Azhikkode had indeed addressed several concerns that marked this controversial space. It was literally an attempt to consolidate the status of obscenity in Malayalam literature by bringing under one umbrella all the arguments that remained scattered across this space. The general antagonism against obscenity in progressive literature was mainly grounded on the earlier aesthetic concepts of love as free from sex. It was precisely here that opposition to ‘flesh bound love’ was consolidated in a full-fledged manner as a conceptual schema to liquidate the realism writers’ arguments which claimed sexual practices outside the normative forms to be an inherent component of love and life at large. Within the former composite that claimed the legacy of Kumaranasan, the famous poet who wrote the lines *mamsa nibaddhamalla ragam* (love is not bound by flesh/sex)\(^{33}\) in the earlier decades of 20th century, desire was often depicted as mere craving for flesh. It often involved romanticizing the traditional literatures of the past simultaneously negating the streams of obscene contents that were involved in those depictions\(^{34}\).

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

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\(^{33}\) *Op.cit.* FN 19

\(^{34}\) For instance Azhikkode in his essay considers Venmani Kavitha – referring to the tradition of erotic poetry that assumed the proportions of a movement in 19th century Keralam with simple and natural poetic diction in place of Sanskritised "Manipravaalam" on the one hand and pure Malayalam songs on the other – as emerged from the authors’ intentions for a time pass. Responding to the argument that obscene depictions were part and parcel of earlier literature he replied that “one mistake doesn’t eliminate another. If it existed in the past it cannot sufficiently justify its existence in the present . . . [A]lso those exemptions cannot stand as examples for the traditional literature” (Azhikkode 1952, 28 & 43-44).
bloodstained flesh. Sex involved in a romantic relation, on the other hand, were (and, on several occasions, still are) often symbolized by turning the camera to some picturesque background of flowers, gardens or snow clad mountains. The symbolism of these depictions captures sex in negative and positive implications respectively although sex as such is visibly absent on most of these occasions. Apart from soft touches those visuals are completely devoid of any reference to nudity. This is not to discount the huge collection of cinemas produced under the banner of ‘soft-porn’ films. However they do not enter into the mainstream public sphere discussions and the erotic depictions that fill their canvass are indubitably granted meaning as pornographic. The same is applicable to novels and stories labeled as pulp fictions. For instance in the foreword to his anthology of fictions that contained open depictions of sex Raghunathan Nair excuses himself from selecting pulp fictions written by authors like Pamman and Rajan Chinnangath by saying that “my topic is not pornography. My aim is to capture and examine the strategies deployed by writers who have taken the natural desire for sex to the levels of spirituality” (Nair 2003, 6.)

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

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

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

The reform paradigm of progress and the newly invented progressive potential of social realism were inevitably the predominant frames within which these multiple contestations occurred. There was a clear division of the public along these lines and, ever since, the synonymous existence of the mental imageries of desire and flesh, or the excess of desire outside the allowed limits of monogamy, continued to be deployed in different forms as an effective tool to regulate the representational practices. The figure of prostitute and economic inequalities
continued to be the effective tool for progressive writers to claim for their realistic approach and to challenge the dominant moral scripts. However these realism enterprises were not beyond the dominant regulatory modes constantly articulated in the public sphere through different forms and representations were restricted to the accepted modes of depictions. Later the production of popular art especially Malayalam films in the 70s and the 80s were absorbed into this larger trends unleashed by the earlier debates. Tales of exploitation as a result of economic inequalities and invasion of women’s bodies, especially women of a lower class, were recurring themes in the area of cultural production.

**Intertextuality**

*Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights; directed by I.V. Sasi) released in 1978 was a film that openly reclaimed the legacy of social realism in Malayalam literature of the 40s. A comparatively open depiction of a prostitute’s life against her economic and poor family backgrounds the film ran into packed theatres. At the time of its release the film was heavily criticized for its “indecent exposures” and for being “responsible for launching soft-porn cinema as a *genre* in India” (Maruthur 2011, 274). The insightful account of Maruthur draws from the circulation and reception of this film in different time periods and in different contexts and the challenge it raises against any essentialised understanding of the structuring logic of the regional public sphere. While this remains so, on the other hand, the film represents the logical structure of a public morality that has indeed learned to remain silent about issues that are, by definition, outside the boundaries of heteronormativity. In one of the scenes in this film Rajamma (Raji), the central character performed by Seema in her debut role, openly expresses her fascination for the writer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer and is shown as reading the novel *Shabdangal*. According to Maruthur this “reference to Shabdangal and the creation of a reading prostitute” helps to
“establish the director’s realist, literary credentials even as he is crafting a commercial film” at the same time as “morally uplifting” Raji’s status from that of an ordinary prostitute (2011, 282).

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

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

The hegemony of heteronormative moral sense that dictated these contestations erased the possibilities of even contesting with any public significance literary works that depicted same sex relations as a theme during this period. At least three Malayalam fictions, published between 1960 and 1990, belonged to the category of openly depicting same sex relations- Pennu (Woman) Written by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and published in 1968, Rantu Penkuttikal (Two Girls) by V.T. Nandakumar in 1975 and Chandana Marangal (Sandal trees) by Kamala Das in 1989. These literary representations, although mostly confining homoeroticism to the status of a subplot in their mainstream heteronormative narrations, were still ground breaking enterprises. Despite the overarching tone of normativity these works, especially Pennu and
Chandana marangal, endeavoured to normalize the simultaneous existence of sexual practices without sufficiently accounting for their homo-hetero divides. Against the prevailing climate of progressive writing these were challenges in an absolute form not only because of their strong homoerotic flavour but also because they emerged from authors who were vanguards of social realism in Malayalam literature.

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

In his introduction to a 1997 anthology of modern Malayalam short stories, Satchidanandan, poet, editor and critic in Malayalam, made the following appraisal of Kamala Das’s work: “Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das) explores the innermost recesses of the female psyche in her uninhabited portrayals of man-woman and woman-woman relationships” (quoted in George 2002, 117). George observes that “this one phrase inclusion of “woman-woman erotics” is the only serious mention in literary criticism of same-sex dynamics in Das’s work” (118). On the other hand Nandakumar’s novel, initially published in serial format in the Malayalam magazine Chitrakarthika between 1973 and 1974, was commonly accredited as close to pornographic which did not require any further thoughts. Later when this novel was adopted in film format37 in 1986 “its erotic content was completely removed” (Vanitha and Kidwai 2001, 313). The novel which narrated the story of two young girls in school who fell in love for each other was changed altogether in its film version. The elaborately described sexual scenes and even the explicit theme of love between the girls in the novel were missing from the film which changed the central plot of the story to show the girls running away from the school to avenge their schoolmarm.

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

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

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

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

In fact a large number of short stories, novels and poeties were produced during this
period from 1940s to the 80s that contained open depictions of alternative sexualities and sexual
practices within and outside of heterosexual frameworks. Some of the best short stories written
by Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987) and K. Saraswathiamma (1919-1975) concern the
double standards of sexuality and other gendered issues entrenched in the social mores of upper
caste Malayalis. In his story *Thiruseshippu* (Divine relics)\(^3^9\) written in 1967 Ayyaneth depicted
the story of a nun who possessed quenchless desire for sexual intimacies even after her initiation.
In yet another story *Bhramanam* (Revolution)\(^4^0\), written by the same author and published in the
year 1977, a young woman was depicted as having strong sexual feelings for her female hostel
mates whom she seduces one after the other. She eventually commits suicide as a result of her
failure to backout from the “unnatural pursuits”. P.G. Johnson in his novelette *Nercha*
(Oblation)\(^4^1\) similarly narrates the story of a nun who desired for a married, worldly life and
whose dreams were destructed with her father deciding to offer her services to the church as nun.
She finds solace in same sex relations with other sisters inside the same cloister and in
masturbation. However these narratives could not initiate any vibrating discussions in the
prevailing public sphere of Kerala and there were also other factors at work which conditioned
their reception within an already established framework.


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

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

\(^{42}\) See my commentary on the story in the previous chapter.


\(^{44}\) *Ibid* p. no. 10. Also see the commentary in Raveendran 2010, 62-65.
of the period\textsuperscript{45}, attempted to interrogate the ‘moral integrity’ of Lalithambika as a writer through one of his short stories published in the late 50s. In the story titled \textit{Adarsakathmakathwam} (Idealism) “Thakazhi depicted the author [Lalithambika] as an antharjanam [Nampoothiri housewife] who wrote stories as a result of her unsatisfied sexual cravings” (Raveendran 2010, 68)\textsuperscript{46}. Similarly Saraswathiamma, another woman author during the period who wrote at considerable length about issues concerning the oppressive patriarchal structures, was “completely sidelined in the name of her feminist orientations” (Joseph 2010, 20).

Saraswathiamma’s writings were powerful depictions of women’s oppression in the society questioning such celebrated ideals as chastity, monogamy and so on. In one of her stories the protagonist says, “[W]hat remains here are some of the photos and letters sent to me by some men. I think half of my chastity is already gone through these relationships. I am only half chaste”\textsuperscript{47}. Joseph observes that “she [Saraswathiamma] was far ahead of her time in terms of questioning the patriarchal structures. This was precisely the reason why she was so effectively sidelined” (2010, 19).

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

\textsuperscript{45} In the next section of this chapter I have dealt with Thakazhi’s novelette \textit{Pennu} (Woman), which depicted same sex intimacy between two women against the rural agrarian backgrounds, in an elaborate manner.

\textsuperscript{46} Later Thakazhi wrote an article in confession of this. See \textit{Thakazhiyute Paschathapam} (Mal: Thakazhi’s confession). In \textit{Kalakaumudi} (1987, March 1): p 11.

\textsuperscript{47} From the story \textit{Pathi Pathivrathyam} (Mal: Half chastity, 1965) written by Saraswathiamma. Quoted in Joseph 2010, 17
That is to promulgate the idea that women make themselves ridiculous by creating art, or that painting or writing is immodest (just as displaying oneself on stage is immodest) and hence impossible for any decent woman, or that creating art shows a woman up as abnormal, neurotic, unpleasant and unlovable. She wrote it alright -- *but she shouldn’t have.* (Russ 1983, 25: Emphasis author’s)

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

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

**Text and context**

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

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

As I mentioned in the previous section during the period of social realism in Keralam from late 1930s onwards it was not quite uncommon to find references to homoerotic situations in Malayalam literature. Nevertheless there was certain definite narrative praxis that usually accompanied such depictions. Whereas same sex intimacies between women was a more common theme than among men it was more often than not projected upon as constructing images of women with unquenchable amount of sexual desire. Except Kamala Das woman authors who touched upon homoerotic themes were more or less completely absent and except in Basheer who wrote about an accidental sexual encounter between two males there were not
much reference to same sex intimacy between males. George Marangoly in her commentary observes that even in Kamala Das “homoerotic situations were evoked only to be put aside again and again”. According to her Kamala Das consistently transit through these pleasures of disciplining that could easily be interpreted as “ultimately homophobic”. That her fictions were replete with “this backtracking and crisscrossing over into same-sex relationships and back to heterosexuality with the possibility of return left open” (George 2000, 754).

This situation in fact resulted in a neat and uncontested paradigm of realism versus pornography; that the works were either read as authors’ projection of his own desires onto his female characters or that same sex relations were considered as incidental and/or as subserving the mainstream progressive plots of the narration with the former being easily classified as pornographic and the latter falling into the progressive frame of realism. Of those mentioned in the previous section Ayyaneth’s and Johnson’s stories, and to a greater extent Nandakumar’s story as well, were generally interpreted as pornographic and as enterprises suggesting patriarchal depictions of exuberant feminine sexual desires. At the same time works by authors like Thakazhi and Kamala Das were valued for their realistic potentials, and thus progressive, and homoeroticism in their fictional works were often casted underneath their superficial elements of hetero-patriarchy. As I discussed earlier in this chapter the conceptual alignment of texts as pornographic and realistic relieved the mainstream public sphere from any obligation to invoke same sex relation as a major topic to be discussed. This in fact was a rather effective method deployed to turn a blind eye towards the subversive potentials of those fictional works.
While this continued to remain so the production of texts were taking place within this larger framework invoking interesting equations that were of paramount significance to their contemporary socio-cultural context and blending them in order to overcome smooth categorizations. On the one hand pursuits for pleasure were denied any independent existence, unless they were sufficiently embedded within the normative plots and addressed what were predominantly concluded as the most pertinent social concerns. Inserting homoerotic situations on the other hand demanded that such insertions be made under the cover of an overwhelming, even if superficial, heterosexual plot. As George in her article about same sex desire in the autobiography of Kamala Das *My Story* argued that when same-sex desire floods the pages it is often depicted as “indulged in because heterosexual options for sex are closed. This is often the course that female sexuality takes in the South Asian narrative in which lesbian desire is an explicit feature of the story” (George 2000, 754). As in the context of *Shabdangal* progressive and normative concerns revisit the realm of textual production and deny social realism any independent existence.

On the first onset let me clarify that I do not consider text as an unproblematic representation of the context. I also do not simply imagine the relationship between the text and its context as something that is or is not self-evident or as clueing the historical backdrop in any absolute terms. Harold Bloom suggests that “the relation of text to context (as though to bring the historical “background” a little closer) is a false problematic and has produced . . . an illusion of narrative intelligibility. The problematic . . . its stead recognizes text as itself a historical event” (Bloom 2003, 204). Andrew Taylor argues that “the annexation of writers from the historical and social milieus in which they lived and worked serves only to assign to a particular
text a false independence from the rest of the culture, such that text and context have little, if anything, to say to each other . . . [T]he context can have a productive, even if sometimes problematic, relevance to the literary text under discussion” (Taylor 2002, 14).

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

While addressing concerns surrounding analysis of literary works, especially in gay/lesbian and queer theoretical works, Steven Seidman (1997) suggests that deconstruction has
been a source of inspiration, especially for queer theory. That “literary texts are viewed as social and political practices, as organized by social and cultural codes, and indeed as social forces that structure identities, social norms and power relations” (147). The categories of knowledge around which they are organized, in turn, structure the way we think and organize our experience.

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

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

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

Thakazhi was one of the foremost Malayalam writers belonging to the tradition of early social realism. He won the Jnanapeetam award in 1984 and the Sahitya Academy award in 1957. In 1968 he published a short novel Pennu (Woman) which narrated the tale of two young women
who happened to fall into an intimate relationship with each other\textsuperscript{48}. Even though the novella had elaborate sequences of sexual intimacy between two women depicted in it, the emerging feminist patterns’ interventions opened alternative possibilities of reading it. The new readings focused on the oppression of women articulated in the novel and completely sidelined the sense of homosexuality that it invariably invoked. Sumathi, the protagonist, having abandoned by her husband and later by the protector who was ruthless for her ill fate, happens to fall into an intimate relationship with the concubine (Gaurikkutty) of the latter. The intimacy very soon transforms into a sexual relationship between the two.

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


\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Ibid}; pp 54-55
In an essay titled "The Burden of English", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak urges that we pay due attention to the "implied reader" of any text. She argues that “[t]he figure of the implied reader is constructed within a consolidated system of cultural representation. The appropriate culture in this context is the one supposedly indigenous to the literature under consideration” (Spivak 1992, 276). The regional public sphere and cultural production are invariably embedded in a mutually reciprocal relationship, to the extent the one constitute and configure the other. However, as opposed to what I have been doing in the previous sections, here I will analyse how the different moral anxieties unleashed in the public realm in the post Shabdangal Keralam have effectively regulated and mitigated narratives in the subsequent periods even when they were dealing with subversive and destabilizing plots. The passage quoted above from Pennu has a critical role in straightening an otherwise subversive narrative where a relationship established on mutual pleasure is further translated into its economies and the inherent power relations. The dynamism involved in the relationship between two women gets immediately transformed into a mere instance of heterotaxy, where a female supersede the role of ‘husband’, albeit embedded within the very same power relations that characterize the familiar husband-wife relationship. The clear demarcations in terms of duties and obligations and their performance within the space of family enfolds the narrative of a relationship ‘without a name’ with heterosexual order. In other words the logic behind the ordering of desires, the ‘legitimate’ sexualizing of bodies, the conversational practices that reproduce heterosexual order in everyday lives, all recur in the text transforming the incidence of same sex intimacy between Sumathi and Gaurikkutty into one that was accidental, unintentional and disoriented to itself. This, in one sense, is a short cut for the author to avoid questions regarding the immoral and unnatural nature of the relationship being narrated.
The text gathers its legitimacy by reserving spaces inside its narrative so that it could be read as a chain of accidents and absences. The same sex intimacy between the two women, Sumathy and Gaurikkitty, is a result of definite absences. Such a relationship is completely unintentional and is made possible by the series of absences in both of their personal lives. It is precisely in translating the intimacy between the two women into the subsistence economy of their existence, and in describing the transformations from definite vacuums that marked their lives towards a more progressive and morally plausible existence that the narrative assumes the power of a legitimate script. Paraman, the protector, fills the gap in Sumathi’s life after Divakaran, who was originally married to Sumathi and who never returned home after one of his regular weekly trips to other places in search of livelihood, although what exists between Sumathi and Paraman is an asexual relation. Sumathi was more frigid with Divakaran because, as she narrates to Gaurikkutty later, for him sex was merely a “rite after dinner whenever he was home”\(^{50}\). Paraman’s intention is to make Sumathi’s life better for reasons that he makes known only towards the end of the novella; what took him to her was his disappointment with Gaurikkutty, the village prostitute, whom he patronized for a long time before shifting his attention to Sumathy. Paraman also works elsewhere (everyone in the village thinks he is located in Bombay or some other distant locations because he visits the village after long intervals sometimes spanning for more than a year) from where he sends regular money orders, first to Gaurikkutty and later to Sumathi.

\(^{50}\) *Ibid:* p.no.40
In the village everyone thinks Paraman as a lewd because of his relation with Gaurikkutty although he had an asexual relationship with her too. Because she was not willing to change her lifestyle, nor to mend her life as Paraman wished, despite all the money orders that were sent, he abandoned Gaurikkutty on one fine morning and approached Sumathi as his new destiny. His providence has a turbulent beginning precisely because an asexual relation was even beyond imagination. Sumathi was still keen to reserve her body for her husband-in-absence despite the privation she and her child experienced. She too subscribed the villagers’ beliefs about Paraman. Her skepticism lasted until Paraman left the village filling her with advices on how to live a better life (the main conditions included taking regular baths and eating good food) and the first money order actually came in search of her, in lieu of Gaurikkutty. The latter, having lost her charm and failed to attract clients as she once did, approached Sumathi for financial support in a desperate move. This very soon led to an intimate relationship and they start living together. Both of them being women the neighbours and villagers don’t have much to doubt about their relationship.

What attracts Sumathi to Gaurikkutty is her naïveté and inexperience in leading, and ignorance about, a ‘normal’ family life. The contrast in the ideals that appeal to both of them individually blur in the similarities that mark both of their existence. While for Sumathi chastity is the foremost ideal for a woman, for Gaurikkutty being unchaste is part of her life. Both were abandoned by their previous benefactors and both have a new one – for Sumathi it is Paraman, and for Gaurikkutty it is Sumathi herself. A severely complicated plot the narrative touches vividly upon the political economy of every-day lives and spaces, family life, conjugal expectations and obligations, cultural encounters between people of different class and sex,
negotiations about sexual and asexual intimacies, the construction of effeminate male and female and the masculine female and male, the contrast between the *kulasthree* (the chaste woman) and the *kulata* (the prostitute), the conventional and transgressive erotic spaces and the abstract and feverish desires.

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

Even today Sumathi doesn’t belong to another man. But she has become the property of another woman. That woman’s name is Gaurikkutty. This woman, Gaurikkutty, has had
relations with hundreds of men. Gaurikkutty has already performed a part of obligations that Divakaran had, being the husband of Sumathi. Is it possible, then, for Sumathi to deny herself as the wife of Divakaran or Gaurikkutty? Being a husband of Sumathi Divakaran had another social obligation- To build a home that is systematic in order to ensure the proper bringing up of the children he has produced- Divakaran couldn’t fulfill that also. Then who fulfilled it? Paraman, the one who made Sumathi a good housewife by not only saving her from deprivation but also by guiding her with advices . . . Then who is Sumathi’s husband? Is it Divakaran, the one fat guy who tied a tali around her neck and produced a child? . . . Who has the courage to say that [Divakaran is her husband]? The society and religion may say so. Is it Gaurikkutty, the coquette who has destroyed many men, their families and at last herself and who, now, has helped a woman for whom the indivisible element of wifewhood is lost by showing her the erotic world at least through the backdoor? Is it not possible for her also to claim to be the husband of Sumathi? But today Gaurikkutty has become a wife . . . Does this sufficiently fulfill husband’s role? After Divakaran, the father [of her child], and Gaurikkutty, the lover, someone is required to take care of the family- that is Paraman . . . Sumathi’s husband is this triad – Paraman, Gaurikkutty and Divakaran51.

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

51 Ibid; pp 57-58
configuration in a univocal moral language retains the shadow over the expression of same sex desire leading to the common conclusion that the author does not render any legitimacy on it. The pleasure mechanisms in the narrative can only operate against the restrictions already imposed on it. Thus even while homoeroticism is consistently projected as a significant event of the story its narrative just devalues its purchase as well.

In the passage above from *Pennu* Thakazhi unambiguously situates sexual pleasure in the realm of Sumathy’s relationship with Gaurikkutty. This is ascribed independence even amidst the crowd of descriptions that problematise the many absences in Sumathy’s life, the foremost among them being the absence of husband. In fact the author observes Gaurikkutty’s position more fit for a wife than a husband indirectly showing that such an intimacy would have been possible even in the presence of a real husband. However there is a retrieval evident in the narrative of its main plot surrounding Sumathy’s subjectivity amidst an oppressive patriarchal system. This actually guides the narrative’s practice of shifting from questions of desire to questions of subsistence and patterns of oppression in a heteronormative system interchangeably and consistently monitored under a definite tone of moral anxiety. Thus to the common reader the novella simultaneously conveys the impression that desire has always been, and needs to be, interlocked in the pragmatics of individual subsistence and social existence; that pleasure derived from such relationships even while fulfilling one’s sexual needs can’t be a part of her social existence.
It is at this point that the above quoted passage appears in the text where there is a return to the husband factor in Sumathy’s life. The author here intelligently dissipates the attention of the reader to the multiple absences operating in her life, projecting sexual pleasure as just one among them. This brings it back to the meta-narrative of family and conjugality and the multiple obligations involved in it. There is also the narrative of power operating underneath in the novella. The reason why Gaurikkutty has become a wife rather than a husband of Sumathi, despite her primary role in availing sexual pleasure for Sumathi, is because of Sumathi’s being the chief provider for the family – both through her work in the paddy fields and the money orders that come in search of her. Gaurikkutty is no longer able to attract clients as she once did and is at the mercy of Sumathi for her livelihood. Sumathi’s treatment of Gaurikkutty varies from deep emotional involvement to utmost contempt – something that is characteristic of a husband’s treatment of his wife in a conventional family space. There is a stark absence of power in Gaurikkutty for two main reasons; one that she is not familiar with familial space and is not a “completely family woman”\(^52\), and two that she is economically dependent on Sumathi.

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

\(^{52}\) *Ibid*; p.no. 44.
and impressions in a same sex relation are narrated with complete disregard for the social attitudes. Also there is a sense of normalcy attached to both Gaurikkutty’s and Sumathy’s impressions about their intimacy. The reason for their separation is placed outside the circuits of desire. Yet the narrative quickly returns to Sumathy’s self-complacency about her “unchaste body” categorizing sex in a same sex relationship as not sex at all53. Another element of paramount significance in straightening the narrative is the immaculateness with which it projects ideals considered sacred in a monogamous, heteronormative system.

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

53 Ibid; p.no. 81.
54 Ibid; p.no. 96.
have labeled as momentary without affecting questions of chastity whereas sex with a man who is not a husband could invoke serious questions about the very moral base of the text.

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

According to Butler every time an individual, a text or a group practices, thinks or presents sex and gender in such a way as to undermine, erode the heterosexist paradigms then there is a possibility of subversion (Butler 1990). As already stated Thakazhi’s short novel *Pennu* possessed all the qualities of a subversive text that evidently described patterns of desire from outside the usual heterosexist perspectives. Apart from all other factors described so far the text does not endeavour to define the relationship between the two women implicitly reading it as
inherent in the daily social intercourses. Thus it does not subscribe to the dominant heterosexist accounts which rely on the very process of defining, labeling and regulating “different” sexualities (Krupat 2001, 45-46; also see Connell 1995, Ingraham 1996, 1999, 2005 and Hacking 2002). However it is noticeable that the novella was still received as a normal realism literature and, unlike Shabdangal or even Anchu Cheetha Kathakal, Pennu failed to invoke much discussion or even debates in the Malayali public sphere. Although the novella captured average readership, and thus not a complete flop, it was neither questioned or challenged for the non normative patterns of desire it depicted nor was any of its thematic concerns openly endorsed. This was not because transgression and/or its representation was being accepted as an essential phenomenon of social existence. Rather such presence was already resolved as having a pedagogic value to the extent it made such ‘social sores’ visible and singled out heterosexual morality’s significance in a modern progressive society. Above all Pennu has remained successful in presenting the progressive, heterosexual part in its story as the main plot to the reader even while a substantial part of it remained in depicting the relationship between the two women. Reading Pennu beyond the postmodernist disdain for the authorial intentions helps one extricate a solid script of subversion that nevertheless failed to capture wide attention or to stir any discussions about desire outside normativity.

**Conclusion**

The democratization of body and experience in the field of literature could not challenge, in any considerable manner, the fundamental moral economies and patriarchal structures. Beyond the impact of the democratization condition remained in place that constantly regulated expressions of desire. Nevertheless these restrictions were rather thin to the extent that body was
re-invoked in new terms and phrases in this genre of social realism where a shift in morality was visibly taking place. This shift transformed the place of body as the focus of narrations as opposed to describing it as serving the larger social purposes although it still took more time to free itself from the economic concerns as such. The provocative intersections of class, caste, gender, sexuality and representational technologies in the writings of the realists in the mid-20th century were heavily contested on the grounds of remaining insensitive to the question of reforming the society. It was precisely from the midst of debates around questions of representation in the mid 20th century Keralam that a “disembodied public subject” (Lee 1992, 406) that is outside the frame of any moral challenges was constituted. We see how the erstwhile reform centric notions of body and subjectivity revisited this space of debates that counterpoised, and remained considerably successful in mitigating, the challenges raised by the progressive realists’ camp. However beyond the stark disagreements and the deeply implicit concurrencies that led this space there were also other complexities involved. My analysis has mainly attempted to bring to focus how differently monogamy and heterosexuality were contested in the mid 20th century and onwards.

On the one hand the movement from debates around tradition to representation had resulted in removing completely the question of traditional (non monogamous) practices from debates in the public sphere. This in effect resulted in accepting reform definitions of tradition as true and genuine and considered outside the purview of controversies. The resurrection of Thathrikkutty in the common social imagery and her glorification in the 1930s and 40s was an event that had taken place against this backdrop. As mentioned in the previous chapter new readings of Thathrikkutty had started emerging from this period after the long silence that
followed her trial in 1905. Despite those new readings\(^55\) being radically different from her own statements there was a total consensus in acknowledging the ‘sexual anarchy’ of tradition in opposition to which Thathrikkutty’s image was built. This was primarily because there was a shift in the attention of the public sphere in this period towards other questions concerning the emergence of modernity in Keralam and tradition was already a resolved issue.

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

\(^{55}\) Lalithambika’s and VT’s writings covered in the previous chapter, for instance, which were fundamental in building Thathrikkutty’s image in modern Keralam.
However such visibility was heavily restricted and the reform narratives had succeeded in determining such practices’ location outside the frameworks of desire and pleasure and even outside questions concerning obscenity in literature. The mid 20th century debates were crucial in essentialising the social exteriority of same sex practices the expressions of which, whether in literature or other art forms, could be negotiated, debated and discussed only with regard to their social implications. The endangering capacity of such practices for the local moral regime and progressive subjectivities was a recurring theme projected against them. The mid 20th century debates had far reaching implications in Keralam. I have attempted in this chapter to put the complexities of representing body as an agent capable of subverting and destabilizing the conventional models of sex and desire in an analytical framework. We have already seen the thin lines of distinction between pornography and “natural sex” (between opposite sexes) – a minute elaboration of the earlier scheme of love without sex – revisiting the 21st century critics’ writings. The complexities involved in assigning positive and negative meanings for sex are however still absent in the context of depicting practices outside heteronormativity.

Such practices are by default categorized as outside the local moral frameworks. In other words both the negative and positive allocation of “normal sex” involving men and women in representations has implications for pleasure at different levels, albeit again defined in terms of social sanctions. Nevertheless there was a level playing field determined commonly for projecting same sex intimacies in representations as well as for negotiating them in the public domain. This was consistently working even behind such groundbreaking enterprises as Shabdangal, Pennu and later Sandal trees. With this I do not intend to argue that open and unconditional depictions can only be counted as subversive. On the contrary, as I have already
mentioned in the chapter, such works were significant and impactful for projecting models of intimacies outside the conventional norms. However their reception in the public domain and the strategies deployed by authors to escape public vigilances help us understand the nuances of postcolonial modernity in Keralam.

In the making of Pennu we identify the subtleties involved in representing other forms of desire. The lines of distinction between realism genre of writings and pornographic writings are well manipulated in the narrative by adhering to the economies of desire. In the post mid 20th century Malayali public sphere there is a near absolute silence about homosexuality despite it being a strong subtheme, sometimes even as the main plot as we saw in the context of Rantu Penkuttikal by Nandakumar and novels and stories of authors like Ayyaneth and Johnson. This was mainly because the Malayali public sphere had already arrived at the conclusion that homosexuality was a ‘social sore’ during the contentions that followed the publication of Shabdangal in the late 1940s. Later, in the post 1990s, as I will attempt to show in the next chapter, the progressive connotations of economic inequalities in the early realism genre were to revisit the public domain with apparent contradictions. I will show that a blend of early reformation concerns and leftist progressive realism is in excess in the contemporary to counter the emerging gay/lesbian identity politics. Simultaneously progressive morality prevails as an overwhelming concept regulating notions of desire.