Introduction

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

Warner 1993, 169

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

The thesis will begin from reform discourses of morality and non-normative sex in the Malayali public sphere during colonial period. The significant changes in the way sexual morality was contested in the post 1940s and how the earlier debates, concerns, tensions and
even images revisit the contemporary are then analysed. Despite shifts and discontinuities in this space the thesis will attempt to show how debates about morality are also always debates about becoming modern and progressive. This frame, it will be argued, has a predominant role in rendering all other forms of sexuality as non-normative and deviant. The thesis further maps this to contemporary male to male relations and practices, and observes how subjects in subversive, albeit hidden, relations borrow from the same terminologies that are inherent constituents of this frame in the public realm.

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

---

1 See Narain and Bhan (2005) to understand the extent to which rights discourse have transformed public debates in the Indian context over issues concerning people in homosexual relations.
Whereas the local is inherently located amidst transnational networks it is also a terrain constituted by different social, historical and political processes which merit analysis of its own.

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

However sexual morality is recognized here as a highly contested field where such overwhelming ideas of modernity as nation and progress works together and produce definitions of legitimate and illegitimate forms of desire. The thesis progresses through different periods in
the modern history of Keralam when the normative foundation of this sexual morality was gathering shape in public perceptions and when those were contested in the regional public sphere with varying consequences. The invocation of this term, or its Malayalam equivalent \textit{sadacharam}, conjures a constellation of meanings that are deeply embedded in the local histories which, albeit, have popular existence in the form of memories, beliefs and knowledge systems. Far from being an abstract configuration it provides the essential ground for contesting non normative elements in the local culture.

Sexual morality is understood here as a modern term generated from the interface between the colonizer and the colonized in the 19th century; this was then usefully projected, by the colonizer and the local elites, to the local cultures in order to identify and define the non-normative elements in their customs and practices. This doesn’t imply that such normativisation didn’t exist in the previous, pre colonial, period. However during and post the colonial regime conceptual articulations by the local intelligentsia of notions of sexual morality not only inherited the colonizer’s perceptions of civilizing through disciplining the body but also popularized it as an essential component of a progressive modern society. The ideological circuits of progress is conceived here as primary disseminating notions of body and desire. The thesis will chart the intimate relationship between these two conceptual entities, sexual morality and progress, as they are constantly figured in the public domains. I will argue that not only the rubrics governing the public understandings of unconventional, non-normative sexual practices but subjects engaged in such practices and their representations also have to draw from this complex relationship, its historical trajectories, contestations and the related cultural practices.
From the early modern times in Keralam sexual morality was configured as emblematic of language nationalism and social progress. While this was given heavy propaganda during the reformation period in the late 19th-early 20th century period it became a heavily contested ground in the subsequent periods. Texts produced from early 19th century to the most recent periods will be looked upon in this thesis in order to arrive at how Keralam is perceived and imagined as a region from the early colonial period to the contemporary. These perceptions are central to the cultural practices, especially reading and writing practices, that constitute its public sphere. They are also critical in modeling the “subjective mediations” (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999; 445) in the context of subjectivities outside the heteronormative boundaries. At the heart of the perception of Keralam as a region linked through its language of nationalism lies a shared abstraction of sadacharam especially lyngika sadacharam or sexual morality. This, under connotations of progress, has massively been imparted in pedagogic and non pedagogic fashions and through governmental and other popular mediums.

I will argue that the reproduction of sexual hegemonies, resistance to the meta-narratives of sexuality, and even the specific subversive acts and subjects draw from the long and complex regional histories. In throughout the historical and cultural spaces I will attempt to look at the specific modus operandi through which voices of resistance and subversions are melted down and/or neutralized. How crucial is the discourse of rationality and progress, as also the discourse about pre modern sexual anarchy, deployed during the colonial reformation period in understanding the current regional sensibilities? How, during the colonial phase, region was predominantly conceptualized as a modern territory to prioritize normativisation above all caste and communitarian interests? How does region become an apperceived phenomenon whereby it
is consistently configured in terms of past experiences and contestations? How central these imaginations of a region are in determining subjects’ negotiations with their life-worlds? Through what links does circularity of the argumentative space around the questions of body and sex become possible? My thesis is an attempt to address these questions. Before I give an overview of my thesis let me introduce the reader to how Keralam as a region is configured in academic and popular perceptions.

**Perceptions of difference**

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

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

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

---

\(^2\) See chapter 3 of this thesis for a detailed discussion of the implications of the 19th century interpretations of these practices as also *sambandham* practice – a hypergamous relation between Brahmin males and females from certain selected lower caste groups.
the central attention of development theorists who debated about the links between economic and social development especially in the context of third world countries (Parayil 2000; Oommen 1999; Dreze and Sen 1997; Sen 1992; Subramanian 2006).

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

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

Certain other paradoxes were concomitantly invoked towards the end of the 20th century against the already popularized development paradox of Keralam. In her paper presented at the 7th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women at Tromsø (Norway) in 1999 Monica Erwer argued that a second paradox (the first being the development paradox where the economic and social development went in different, rather contrasting, directions) clearly displayed the fragility of the famous Kerala model. She referred to “gender paradox” as a
situation where the high indicators of social status associated with women in Keralam never reflected upon their participation in political and public arena in the state and in civil society (Erwer 1999; also see Erwer 2003). The growing uneasiness with Kerala’s social development outcomes linked to non conventional indicators such as the rising visibility of gender based violence and so on was highlighted by scholars like Praveena Kodoth and Mridul Eapen (Kodoth and Eapen 2002 and 2005). According to Sharmila Sreekumar by the end of the 20th century gender paradox has become the overwhelming context for imagining women in contemporary Keralam. She argued that the Utopian narratives of Keralam as having constructed itself upon principles of social justice and human development are significantly disrupted by narratives of dystopic content around questions of gender violence and AIDS. According to her paper the real paradox remained in bringing these two worlds – utopic and dystopic – together by reckoning the internal dynamics of the local cultural configurations (Sreekumar 2007).

Narratives of progress

In a working paper that was later published as a book Devika argues that the concept of development has been deeply ingrained in the mindsets of Malayalis from the mid 20th century onwards. The region was fragmented into three pieces during the colonial period for administrative reasons. This was primarily required to be set aside through a unification process in the immediate post independence period in order to crystallize the imaginations of a nation. The hectic discussions that led to such unification were mainly premised upon the progressive potentials of remaining united under a single title. These “progressive” imaginations of a nation were considerably influenced by the socialist ideologies that favoured even distribution of resources and were later translated under the buzzword development. The whole cultural configurations and practices within the region had to address development as a primary goal
The contemporary cultural practices in Keralam testify this argument. The projection of the region as superior to other similar contexts has been a familiar and common enterprise in both domestic and social science circles. Writings in the newspapers and magazines, discussions in television channels and in latest technological mediums like internet blogs – spaces where the collective consciousness of Malayali identity gets articulated in much axiomatic fashion – constantly carry and reproduce this progressive image of region. The notion that Keralam signifies a region at the higher end of progress and development is consistently underlined in those public articulations.

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

---

3 See for instance the work by Brian Street about ethnographic perspectives on literature and development (Street 2001). In an ethnographic study conducted by Dianne Jenett about practices associated with menstruation of women in Keralam draws, in the modern context, from this correlation between high levels of literacy among women in Keralam and such practices existing in the region (Jenett 2005). Plenty of development literatures have already centralized literacy (“universal literacy” as expressed in a document released by UNICEF in 1999- quoted in Street 2001, 152) as the core feature of development by instantiating the experience of Keralam. See Ramachandran 1997, Dreze and Sen 2002, Pillai 1995, and Chakraborty 2005.
and reading rooms\(^4\) (Jeffrey 1992). In a book published in 2000 about newspaper revolution in India Jeffrey draws from the instance of Keralam and traces the genealogy of newspaper reading practices among Malayalis.

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

(Jeffrey 2000, 32).

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

\(^4\) Vayanasalas- mostly associated with local libraries established as part of the granthasala (library) movement that swept across the region and resulted in the establishment of libraries in multiple locations during the mid twentieth century even before the state was formed by merging the erstwhile Travancore, Cochin and Malabar regions. See Radhakrishnan 2006.
Instead all media representations made use of the already available discourses of progress to quibble over questions of caste and gender. The framework of progress through which Keralam has been represented since the 70s and 80s is used not only to initiate discussions about caste, gender and sexual violence but also simultaneously to cut short and regulate such discussions rather abruptly (Rowena and Christy 2007).

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

\(^5\) Discussion about Walter Benjamin and his writings in Hanssen, Beatrice 1998, 50-60.
A concerned public

Narratives of paradoxes of progress especially instances of sexual violence and gender has been intense in the public domains of contemporary Keralam. By the end of the last century debates around the questions of sex and gender was already highly visible in Keralam through newspapers, popular magazines and journals. Sex scandals, incidents of sexual harassment⁶ and sex workers’ and sexual minorities’ rights are issues that have already become part of an average Malayali’s common consciousness⁷. This rendezvous where the public is gathered around certain definite issues in Keralam has been made possible by the late 20th century revolution in technologies of representation- both in print and electronic media, especially television. Reports of harassing women in both private and public places turned out to be a regular event in the everyday social existence. Another significant issue developed at this point was the rising number of suicides committed by lesbians in different parts of the state⁸. From being seen and understood as casting shades over the promises of development the situation quickly became part of the common perceptions of the region.

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

⁶ Ratheesh Radhakrishnan in one of his paper attempts to make a detailed analysis of a sex scandal which was also an instance of sexual harassment of women in public places in Keralam. His paper shows the extent to which such issues capture the public imaginations and are vulgarized by the popular media. Apart from surveying practices that were commonplace in Malayalam media in the representation of these issues the paper also traces the historical legacies of this argumentative space. See Radhakrishnan 2005.
⁷ In his doctoral thesis Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observes that “the existence of such a commonsense was evident from the responses, in most cases skeptical, gender issues and especially feminism seemed to elicit in popular media – in films, comedy shows and through articles and letters to the editor in various magazines” (Radhakrishnan 2006, 6-7).
⁸ In chapter 4 of this thesis I have discussed the contemporary popular forms of addressing these issues.
Although initially foregrounded in a language doused in rights discourse the local intelligentsia writing in such elite Malayalam magazines as Mathrubhumi, Pacchakuthira turned the table to assay the local structures of gender and family. At the centre of this terrain were questions of sexuality that were by and large indubitably categorized under the popular expression sadacharam. Contestations around these issues have been an integral part of Malayali public sphere in throughout the modern history of region.

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

---

9 See Praslithil (2006) for an exhaustive survey of the historical events that preceded the massive public library movement in Keralam during the mid 20th century. This movement combined with certain other factors as the popularization of print as a medium that could be used to address the public at large, growing literacy rates, leftists’ interventions in the various social spheres and so on produced the necessary environment to constitute a reading public that simultaneously intervened actively in issues those were presented as having high social significance.
According to Warner an idea of public remains at the centre of modern life and it consistently informs our literature, politics and culture; that the public is a formation mediated through different cultural forms and in different periods of time. “Without the idea of texts that can be picked up at different times and in different places by otherwise unrelated people, we would not imagine a public as an entity that embraces all the users of that text, whoever they might be” (Warner 2002: 51). Elaborating further from these theoretical propositions one also identifies what is implicit in the Habermasian models of normative public sphere\textsuperscript{10}, that the public sphere and public discourse are also mediums for the state and legal establishment to conduct a test run of their own legitimacy before the eyes of the public\textsuperscript{11}. In the context of Keralam the earlier literary public sphere attempted to amass and transform public opinion to embrace a new rational order that defied in clear terms the earlier jati specific sexual systems and conjugal arrangements. Instead a modern sexual moral order was prescribed and presented under the promises of modernization and a progressive future.

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

\textsuperscript{10} In the first chapter I have discussed the problems associated with the Habermasian claims regarding public sphere.

\textsuperscript{11} See Pollock 2009, where he argues that the widely acclaimed egalitarian and inclusive nature of the early English public sphere was in fact forming public opinions to favour the state ideologies.
that the contestations in the contemporary and the formation of sexual subjects – both clandestine and outside the territories of normativity – draw from the previous episodes of contestations around questions of body, desire, sex and so on.

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

**Postcolonial significances**

As many historians have already shown Indian attitudes towards sex, gender and male-female relationships have undergone radical transformations during the colonial period. This thesis engages in considerable length with the historical transformations during colonialism in Keralam. This, in order to see how this history could usefully be extrapolated to make sense of the post independent commotion in public sphere over questions pertaining to gender, sexuality
and non-normative subjectivities. A vast array of academic enterprises produced in the post
“Orientalism” (Said 1978) period have already addressed the inoculation of “gender” in colonies
as a troublesome issue embedded in the colonial politics. In the context of India studies have
attempted to examine, and consolidate, the deployment of gender and gendered practices within
the interface of the colonizer and the colonized in the 19th and the early 20th centuries (Cooper
and Stoler 1997; Lewis 1996; Stoler 1991, 1995 and 2002) and in the subsequent periods
(Altman 1999 and 2001; Enloe 1993). The meta narrative of the ‘decadent, degenerated and
uncivilized conditions’ that prevailed in the colonies provided the colonizer with necessary
justification to intervene in the indigenous people’s lives (Latamani 1998; Chatterjee 1989;
Bacchetta 1999).

Production of new social histories and reading, and vulgarizing, the locally embedded
caste and gender relations from a modern perspective was part and parcel of the 19th century
colonial projects. Disciplining the individuals and bringing in place new social demarcations and
status systems that ordered the society on the basis of ‘secular’ values as opposed to the religious
and caste based ones went in tandem with the reformist agendas during this period. Nationalist
thoughts and provincial politics were combined in this reformist agenda and the inculcation of a
new value order, both by the British and the nationalist elites, was justified through narratives of
decadence, revival and progress. David Washbrook in his analysis of provincial politics in the
Madras Presidency during the late 19th-early 20th century period observes that the 19th century
political society was divided along the lines of caste and community politics. He further
elaborates that the colonial administrative mechanisms like Census and the European social
sciences’ orientalist attitudes sanctioned the view that Indian society is structured by a series of interlocking blocks of caste and religious groups (Washbrook 2008).

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

Research on gender and sexuality has increasingly become intersectional over the last two or three decades, especially in contexts like India where various lines converge in the process of consolidating the sexual. According to Flavia Agnes the ‘second wave’ of feminism in India in the 1980s has made sexuality an open topic in the public albeit as an arena for discussing patriarchal violence upon women and seeking (with or without success) refuge in the legal
apparatuses (Agnes 1992). The focus of research in this area remained for yet a longish period of
time on questions of violence inflicted on the feminine bodies but nevertheless still expanding its
scope by attempting to theorise sexuality in various terms; this at large included, to borrow from
Nivedita Menon’s brief arcade of research enterprises in this area, reproductive health, rape and
domestic violence, caste and communal conflict worked out on the bodies of women, state
violence that takes the form of sexual assaults by army and police, and about the more quotidian
forms of gender violence as manifested in sexual harassment, especially in the workplace
(Menon 2007, xiii). However this was also a period when sexuality was redefined, in the larger
academic context of India, to include within its scope questions of desire and the hegemony of
heteronormativity.

Nineties, especially its second half, was a period when terminologies like gay, lesbian and
queer, considered unconventional until then, started becoming a common part of feminist
projects intended to openly address, if not change, the cultural and material landscapes of gender
and sexuality in India. The commonsensical assumption about the goodness of transformations
during the colonial period was continuously questioned by these projects. These projects
foregrounded gender and sexual subjectification as central concerns of the colonial and
nationalist projects in the 19th and early 20th century periods. For instance the colonial framework
of building an ‘Indian tradition’ on the basis of selected scriptures in the different regional
contexts, to project their ‘sexually uncivilised and reprehensive’ moral systems was one relevant
theme that dominated this trend (Latamani 1998; Bacchetta 1999; Chatterjee 1989; Sangari and
Vaid 1989).
Projects about how different sexual systems, that deviated from the modern norms, existed in the pre-modern Indian contexts also started appearing during this period (Thadani 1996; Vanitha and Kidwai 1996). In their postcolonial archaeology of sexuality John and Nair, however, discount feminist projects where colonial practices are identified as homogenising a rich array of familial and sexual practices as “yearning for a golden age” or as “narratives of decline” (1998, 11-12). Nivedita Menon counters this claim by suggesting that such works should be read in the light of the “realisation that the values of modernity have not been unambiguously emancipatory, have often eradicated spaces of relative autonomy, and produced new spaces of subjection” (Menon 2007, x-xi). Following the lines opened by this stream of academics this thesis attempts to identify how the early discourses of morality, liberalism and progress exert a crucial influence on, and provide new significances of understanding, the contemporary forms of local body politics.

The production of new forms of subjectivities during the colonial interface and the translation of power to the sites of newly produced indigenous texts – and thus to a newly constituted public domain with its own caste, class and gender configurations – constitute the main theme in the first section of this thesis. Individualisation, normtivisation and the production of a value centered platform to make interpellation of the subject a constant and continuous process of modernity are core themes discussed in this section. The inauguration of sexuality as an open category available for contestations in the public domain under what could be labelled as a second phase of reformation process around the mid 20th century is discussed in the second section. A new set of writings emerged around this period mediate the contemporary forms of subjectivisation and the previous, colonial, structures of sexual morality. While the thesis has
basically relied upon texts produced during different time periods its last chapter contains an ethnographic analysis of clandestine male homosexual subjectivities in the contemporary Keralam. Representation, the ruptures in the meta-narratives of progress and reformation in the regional public sphere, the extent to which such registries impinge on subversive actions of non-heteronormative subjects are the core themes discussed in the second section.

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

John and Nair in their study refuse the idea that sexuality is a question of silence. Following Foucault they argue that this focus on the “conspiracy of silence”, both within activism and academia, has turned us blind “to the multiple sites where “sexuality” has long been embedded” (John and Nair 1998, 1). However this shouldn’t lead one directly to sites where sexuality has a massive presence and where it is constricted to imply biological genitality-
spheres of law and medicine for instance. Only through a reconceptualisation of sexuality in the Indian context can this parochialism be done away with. They suggest that we think of sexuality rather as “a way of addressing sexual relations, their spheres of legitimacy and illegitimacy, through the institutes and practices, as well as discourses and forms of representation, that have long been producing, framing, distributing and controlling the subject of “sex” ” (John and Nair 1998, 1-2). The authors suggest three sources which operated to consolidate the field of knowledge about sex and the body in 19th and 20th century India: demography, social reform discourse, and the anthropology of family and kinship. In contrast to the metropolitan counterpart, in modern India:

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

(John and Nair 1998: 8-9).

A number of studies in the different linguistic and cultural contexts of India have already addressed colonial transformations and the meticulousness with which body was assigned new meanings by the reform discourse. Reform movements in colonial and post colonial periods involved conspicuous attempts to reform the indigenous culture from its supposedly ‘degenerated’ conditions. Several authors have analysed the formation of a new gender order and sexual moralities during the colonial reform period in the region of Keralam (Devika 2002, 2005 and 2005a; Kodoth 2002; Arunima 2003; Kumaramkandath 2011), as well as in the rest of India and other Third world situations (Jayawardena 1986; Chatterjee 1989; Bacchetta 1999). The colonial transformations have indeed critically remapped the sexual and gender topographies in
the colonies; this apart from introducing new bodies of ideas about sociality, self-discipline, nation, and so on which remained at the heart of constituting new subjectivities. This was also a period when newly emerged interests of caste and class conjoined the Victorian patriarchal moral notions to constitute modern gender forms.

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

Sharmila rege in her work on lavani performance in Maharashtra in the 19th century, shows how the upper caste interests in urban theatre worked both to neutralize and assail the “licentious and immoral folk forms of the natives” within the framework of Victorian theatre
(Rege 1995). The lower caste kolhati women who not only performed lavani but also earned the daily bread for their families and even managed the financial activities of the troupes they were performing, were gradually alienated from the roles they were performing. By the 1940s the process of reforms ended up in the banning of all forms of entertainment those were categorised as ‘obscene’ and the ex-female lavani performers had to turn towards prostitution as a sole source of livelihood. Although, as Rege analyses, the early lavani performance involved the customary bidding for the sexual services of the performers where the upper caste, elite interests still held an upper hand, the very prevalence of lavani performance as such gave the women artists to remain in exclusive control of their material resources and their sexuality. Thus beyond the questions of subversion and/or empowerment Rege observes how the “modern Victorian values” were deployed to alter the rationale behind the lavani performance and to abolish such performances (Rege 1995, 23-26)

Similar case has recurred in the context of the debate over the abolition of devadasis – a tradition in which young women from certain specific lower caste groups were dedicated to the local Hindu temples – in Tamil Nadu, another South Indian state, in the 19th to 20th centuries. Kannabiran investigates about the different positions assumed in this debate and observes that the non-monogamous nature of devadasis predominantly controlled the common and wider perceptions about them and led to the belief that “they could contract sexual diseases”. While this remained so on the other hand a few devadasis who were also “performing artists of repute” were heralded as exemptions from the rest whose identity were configured solely on the basis of their sexuality. Kannabiran observes that this selection was simultaneously rooted within the caste, class formulas that were dominant during the period (Kannabiran 1995, 58-59).
Kannabiran shows how three different discourses of the period 1860-1935 in the Madras Presidency – the social reform movement, the nationalist movement and the non- Brahmin movement – had overlapped with each other to arrive on shared suppositions and perceptions about the devadasi tradition (Kannabiran 1995).

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

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

Keralam in the grid of transitions

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

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

Another interesting paradigm, attended to by a rich array of scholarship, in the context of Keralam is in relation to the matrilineal system of family units that several communities in the region have followed. Recasting matriliney in order to construct patrilocal family as the base unit for the society of Keralam to enter into modernity is considered as a milestone in its modern history. It is by now widely accounted that nearly 50 percent of the Malayali population belonging to different castes and communities followed matriliney in, and in the period before, the 19th century. Arunima in her study about Nair matriliney in Keralam testifies that the matrilineal
The kinship system in Keralam has so far been the only kinship system in the world that was abolished through legal measurements (Arunima 2003). The enactment of the Malabar Marriage Act in 1896 – considered to be the first and most important step in the direction of abolishing all non-monogamous, non-normative conjugal relationships in the region now known as Keralam – was an event that occurred amidst a liberal discourse of progress, freedom and individual identity.

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

While this specific history of Keralam opens a rich treasure for conducting analytical investigations it also becomes problematic for the extent to which it guides the researcher to
unproblematically stress upon matriliny, or at least this episode in its history, either as a source of Keralam’s exception to other similar locales or as testifying its liberatory history. This often results in what could be easily recognised as a stereotypical reproduction of the region of Keralam as always and already different. In the context of her discussion about *Sancharam*, the Malayalam short film that depicts the story of a lesbian relationship between two young girls in Keralam, Gopinath argues that Keralam exists as a digressive “other” in relation to the Indian nation. Thus a film like *Sancharam* can draw from the obliterated histories of a matrilineal past that “stubbornly refuse to reconcile themselves within a national present” (Gopinath 2007: 352).

In her Ph D thesis Navaneetha specifically draws our attention to the risks involved in returning to this past which in itself is “memory of an upper caste pre-colonial past” and “results in an erasure of the challenges faced by sexuality politics in the present” (Navaneetha 2010, 50).

This form of critique has special relevance since it addresses the complexities involved in dealing with the contemporary politics of sexuality and queer movements. There are two significant dimensions of this generic criticism, one which posits that the concerned history of matriliny helps invoke only the upper caste memories of a past and, two which views resorting to this past as unduly shifting the focus from the contemporary regulatory mechanisms of sexuality. However the very proposition that matriliny and the associated history – of its origin and existence in pre colonial period and its transition towards a complete disappearance during and after colonial times – is just a reflection of upper caste memory itself is a colonial construction. That matriliny is always remembered as an offshoot of the hegemony of the Nambutiri community (Brahmins of Keralam) was an essential part of the colonial propaganda. According to this knowledge the traditional land relations, systems of conjugality followed by different
communities and property relations were all located, in what was predominantly interpreted as, a pre colonial power hierarchy of which Nambutiris were undisputedly placed at the top rank. I have discussed at length this part in the history of Keralam which still exerts critical influence in the current technologies of sexual subjectification in the second chapter. For instance the context of smarthavicharam and the image of Thathrikkutty were productions of this colonial history. This has become, over a period of time, part of the popular memory which consistently reproduce those images to remind an uncivilized, non-progressive pre modern regime of sexual anarchy.

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

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

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

12 Internet copy. Page number not available.
particular historical event was originally occurred. Popular culture becomes an important element in the reproduction of the various imageries of the past and knowledge about it arrived at through historically specific processes deeply rooted in power relations. According to Rosenweig and Thelen popular culture in contemporary societies forms an important source for learning history and in constituting collective memories (1999, 15-16).

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

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

This also, as I will argue in this thesis, helps one to address how the subject is interpellated and through what structures do such interpellation and regulatory mechanisms attain the status of being progressive. The thesis interrogates the claims initiated by the processes of globalization and economic liberalization about liberal, post modern sexualities in the various Indian contexts. While globalization is indisputably a cultural force bringing in with it radical transformations in the people’s living conditions, cultural perceptions and politics of sexuality these transformations are also inevitably embedded within the local social, cultural, political and economic conditions. Ritty Lukose in an article on consumption practices among youth in the contemporary Keralam argues that “such conditions are profoundly shaped by colonial and nationalist categories such as “tradition/modernity” and “public/private”’” (Lukose 2005, 915).
Thus beyond the understanding of globalization as “homogenizing” the local, the spaces and practices of consumption “are structured by specifically postcolonial preoccupations about tradition and modernity” (Lukose 2005, 930-931).

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

The cultural context of progressive modernity with its own specific historical configurations helps one to recognize the nuances involved in the reorganization of the politics of desire. The critical and reflexive ethnography of flute – a derogatory metonym for male homosexuals in Keralam – in the social and cruising spaces and popular perceptions of
homoeroticism show how individual subjectivities and meanings of sex and desire are devolved on the continuing, habitual and inveterate subscription of the popular knowledge about the past. The subscription of this progressive modern history, performed predominantly in the Malayali public sphere, assumes the form of local resistance against a constructed notion of sexualities imported from elsewhere, mainly the West, under the aegis of globalization. In the thesis I observe this as an offshoot of multiple discourses all of which work incessantly towards disciplining the body, perpetuating ideas and engendering a cultural context that are congenial to progress. The discourse of reformation, as I discuss in the first and second chapters, commonly understood as triggered off during the colonial regime in the 19th century, has multiple stages in the modern history of Keralam. Definitions of sex, gender and public and private continue to occupy central place in the anxieties and preoccupations about reforming the society.

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

Although it is not uncommon nowadays to find academic enterprises refuting the rigid chronology of history, as Kamala Ganesh observes in her introduction to an edited volume on culture and identity in contemporary India, “a demarcation is generally kept between the three phases, colonial, nationalist and post-independent” (Ganesh 2005, 15). The current project, to a certain extent, surpasses such demarcations and shows how things – events, narratives, debates – played out in the past revisit the regional public culture and critically reshape its contemporary forms; the passage from the colonial to the postcolonial fails to produce any critical impact on the larger process of consolidating the normative and cultural grounds – this in order to rationalize the existence of body and to keep it within the circuits of progressive ideologies. I have attempted to focus on how the different contestations about values, norms, representational practices and non-heteronormative subjects have borrowed from previous debates and writings in
the past, especially those produced during the colonial and post colonial periods. Even though the arrangement of this thesis has followed the chronology of the contestations it analyses, each of these sites are foregrounded with regard to the multiple discourses that have produced them and those they have caused to be in place. Thus the definition of time in this project is at the same time a problematic one and opening up new possibilities.

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

---

13 Hanssen observes how such a chronological concept of time upholds the ideologies of progress against which Benjamin would hold the radical temporality and discontinuity of the shock and the dialectical image (Hanssen 1998, 49-60).
For instance the site of smarthavicharam, a pre modern practice the modern interpretations of which are analysed in the second chapter, clubs the 19th century colonial discourses, the paradigm of progress inculcated into popular imaginations through the reformation enterprises in the late 19th – early 20th century period, and the contemporary writings that goes back to this practice and its constructed history in an attempt to caution about a possible context of sexual anarchy that non-heteronormativity, and any deviance from the progressive moral structure, might call forth. The ethnography in the last chapter of clandestine same sex intimacies and subjectivities returns their formation as deeply implicated within the progressive narratives of family and reproduction. Similarly all the sites under analysis here surpass their immediate time periods of formativity. What accompanies them in throughout these shifts is a material definition of progress combined with cultural constructions of body and desire, East and West and an uncivilized, sexually anarchic past and a progressive present. Rather than imagining time as frozen within a mess of ideologies this helps to re-map the local terrains as embedded within a constellation of such constructions that keeps coming back and forth in those cultural terrains.

**Thesis overview**

For the purposes of the thesis I have chosen sites from different time periods that have been crucial in consolidating the sexual moral framework within this regional context. By exploring these sites I try to understand the common (popular) perceptions of subjectivity and the (un)contested grounds of heteronormativity. The thesis is structured into four chapters apart from this introduction and a conclusion. The remaining four chapters are discussed under two broad sections. The first section, titled “Shaping Desire in the Modern Way: Registers in History”, is intended to bring to light the intensity of the earlier propagandas in Keralam. I undertake a
discussion of how a logical framework was set by the earlier reformers in order to promote a rational basis for a modern progressive society. This was crucial in the intense normativisation process undertaken during the early periods through which pre-modern and community/caste specific practices of conjugality and property relations were totally eradicated.

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

In the second chapter, titled “The Making of Thathrikkutty: smarthavicharam, sexual morality and more”, I undertake an elaborate discussion of smarthavicharam, the pre-modern practice of trialling women charged with adultery, a practice that existed among Nambutiris in Keralam: the practice was abolished in the early decades of 20th century. I take up for analysis an
incident of *smarthavicharam* that took place in the first decade of 20th century; a first time incident in the history of Keralam where individuals trialed for sexual offenses were targeted in public. State administration had to directly intervene into the proceedings due to the unprecedented public interest accumulated around this incident and the modern ideological apparatuses including newspapers and magazines had a key stake in the issue. I will also draw from various narratives produced on this practice in the preceding and subsequent periods, including contemporary narratives, of this incident. This incident, in the early 20th century, brought *smarthavicharam* to the centre of the ongoing contestations around matriliny and *sambandham*. It also functioned as a major factor in transforming the nature of intercommunity relationships in Keralam, especially those existed between Nambutiris and the other communities. The narratives of, and contestations around, *smarthavicharam* was critical in resolving the intricate links between caste, gender, sex and conjugality and hegemonised heterosexual monogamy as the only valid form of sexual union.

*Smarthavicharam* was a useful site for the reformist enterprise to address the ‘public’ as a homogeneous body related through language nationalism as opposed to the erstwhile caste oriented locations. I will argue that *smarthavicharam* and Thathrikkutty – the woman who was trialed in this particular incident – function as the crucial link between the 19th century colonial descriptions of the indigenous culture as degenerated and the thriving modern moral regime in the 21st century. With the help of materials drawn from archives I will attempt to show how the incident under discussion was manipulated to construct models of a past that was sexually anarchic. These models are significant to the extent they are constantly reinvoked and used as tropes in the current contentions. The past editions of contestations and images of aberrant
sexuality have been critical in the subsequent periods as well. The hegemonic language of morality has consistently maintained the overwhelming ambitions for progress as an uncontestable area in the social and cultural spheres by foregrounding images of a ‘dark past’. These images and models and a constructed history are consistently deployed in the public domains to characterize progress as an inherent offshoot of the modern public morality. The chapter also examines how smarthavicharam as a site mediates between early 19th century colonial and anthropological writing practices and the 21st century local moralists’ writings. This ‘postcolonial blindness’, a factor that I will argue is the key behind the unmediated appropriation of earlier narratives in order to recast sexual subversions into those earlier constructed models, is the other side of the obsession with the progressive moral structures.

The second section, titled “Re-forming the Hegemonies: Postcoloniality, Sexual Morality and Homosexuality”, will deal with narratives emerging from the dawn of social realism in Malayalam literature from 1930s onwards to the contemporary in addition to an ethnographic account of the male homosexual figure within the cultural spaces of Keralam. The third chapter, the first in this section and titled “(Hetero) sexual excesses: social realism in mid twentieth century”, will map the emergence of social realism and the contentious space around the question of representing non-normative sexual practices, especially homoerotic intimacies and practices, in literature. In conventional academic spaces social realism is understood as being crucial in democratizing the representation of life experiences in literature and other art forms. However I will argue that the various contestations around social realism during its emergence and thereafter transformed it into a space where the cultural politics of sex assumed candid forms under the guise of wider participation of the public. Social realism in Malayalam effectively
mediated between the earlier progressive/reformist writing practices and shifts in representation towards exposing the differential levels of vulnerabilities under capitalism. There were multiple publics actively participating in the much heated contests and each claimed to produce the region through their set of moral perceptions.

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

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

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

Finally the concluding part will reflect on how this thesis has re explored historical and sexual sites in order to point towards new horizons of knowledge about modernity in Keralam. Rather than looking at agency and resistance I have focused upon how the discourse on
sadacharam was brought in as a cultural nostrum and survived, and still held in the local cultural negotiations, with the same significance. The regional public sphere is a dialectical constitution where questions of body and cultural practices are repeatedly overshadowed under concerns of morality and progress. This overarching concern not only helps heteronormative structures to survive in the society but also critically regulates the conditioning of subjective consciousness. It also renders contemporary in a state of apperception that consistently picks from previous narratives.