Chapter 2

An Event in Excess: The Discursive Production of First Night

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An Event in Excess: The Discursive Production of First Night

1. Locating First Night

When I started this inquiry around the practice of ‘First Night’, I was faced with the question of the significance of the study and people were suggesting that I was talking about a ‘vanishing tradition’. I was told that modern day brides and grooms do not find it a serious or significant moment or event, or even consider it as a rite of passage in the traditional sense of the practice. Such responses suggest that the advent of personal communication devices in the market in last two decades have caused the ‘First Night’ to lose its ‘aura’ since the bride and groom are ‘familiar enough’ with each other for ‘normal’ human interaction. My attempts to unpack the notions of familiarity and normalcy invoked in these accounts presented me with two different types of First Nights – a ‘conventional First Night’ which belongs to the ‘past’, where the bride and groom are two strangers and the night is all about ‘sex’ or to be more specific, the groom having or not having penetrative sex with the virgin bride. And second, the ‘modern’ First Night which is presented as a pleasant and pleasurable culmination of a courtship aided by
technology. These accounts placed the practice of First Night itself as a less evolved moment in marriage, and virginity as a not so progressive concept.¹

But this was also the time when the “18 again” advertisement started appearing on Indian television revealing many cracks within the liberatory narrative of the sexually progressive globalized India in the post nineties period. 18 again is a cosmetic product which claims that it helps re-establish vaginal tightness for women who might have lost it. The advertisement for this product equated vaginal tightness to virginity and connected it to penetrative sex and defloration. The advertisement was telecasted at prime time in all the regional and national channels. The advertisement is set in an extended family household, where a woman who is in the middle of chores suddenly starts a seductive dance in the internal courtyard with her husband. She repeatedly sings the lines, ‘ooh, I feel like a virgin’ and, ‘it feels like the first time’. Her husband grabs her waist and sings out, ‘oh, yes it’s true’. This dance is witnessed by the rest of the family in a seemingly aghast manner. Later the eldest couple, probably the parents-in-law of the dancing woman, order the product online.

It is possible to argue that the advertisement took away the cultural importance of virginity by making it something that could be re-established with a minor cosmetic re-arrangement. On the other hand, it faithfully reproduces one of the constitutive

¹ This exploratory phase also helped the project to realize the centrality of virginity in understanding First Night. Whether they called it modern or primitive, people invariably talked about their notions on virginity in these initial explorative discussions. This specific focusing on virginity from among the many possible themes related to an event that is presented as the pinnacle of romantic intimacy has helped the project to arrive at the question of virginity from the much larger and sweeping questions with which it began.
assumptions of patriarchy that the female body is classifiable as virginal and non-virginal. The advertisement by projecting vaginal tightness as virginity treats it almost like a physiological reality and also attributes a concrete bodily referent to it, thus foreclosing any possibility of signifying the ambiguous status and multiple meanings of virginity. This advertisement re-surfaced many anxieties carpeted under the narrative of sexually progressive globalized India. The media discourse around this advertisement foregrounded questions around virginity, hymen, and penetrative sex. The advertisement carried many tacit suggestions about the desirability of the female body where virginity becomes a crucial signifier and women were reminded of how they had lost their value by losing their virginity. It endorsed a female body that had somehow re-established the characteristics of a virginal body – namely vaginal tightness.

This advertisement hints towards a new cultural location and the emergence of a new kind of erotic speaking. This speaking acknowledges carnal pleasures. But while trying to address the proliferative economy of pleasure it invokes regulative ideals that seek to control pleasure. It is not the sanitized conjugal space that comes as the regulative force in the advertisement, but the very idea of the female body deployed by the advertisement serves as a regulative mechanism. The sexual dynamics of this new cultural location is more complex than that suggested by a liberating narrative of globalization and technology. This cultural location can be further complicated with the introduction of the regional which can have a disrupting relationship with the global and the ‘pan Indian’. Here I do not introduce the regional to make a case for geographical exception, but to make a grounded analysis of the interaction between the sexual and the cultural. The next sections make an attempt to engage with the regional circuits of cultural and media
production, where the sexual and the cultural come to a face-to-face encounter. The first event engages with mediations around a popular murder case to show the significations around the figure of the virgin and its ability to fuel cultural imagination. The next two events try to access the cultural anxieties around night.

1.1. The Sister Abhaya Murder Case: The Techno-Scientific Discourse around Virginity

The media representation of the ‘Sister Abhaya Murder Case’ provides a useful entry point to start the discussion around the sexual politics in Keralam and help to understand why the First Night is a crucial site for examination. The Sister Abhaya Murder Case or Abhaya case is a 22 year old case, and probably one of the most infamous murder cases in modern Keralam which attracts public attention to this day. Even now, every detail connected to the investigation and the legal actions taken on the case receives great attention and makes headlines in newspapers in Keralam. The case was handed over to the CBI who in Keralam enjoys the reputation as the most credible investigation agency and as one that employs the most modern methods for crime investigation. This analysis

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2 Sister Abhaya Murder Case is related to the death of Sister Abhaya in 1992. She was an inhabitant of St. Pius X convent, Kottayam, Keralam. She was found dead on the premises of the convent. The local police concluded that the death was a case of suicide. But the case was re-investigated by the Central Bureau of Investigation and they concluded that it was a murder. Sixteen years later, in 2008 the CBI arrested two priests and a nun with charges of murder, destruction of evidence and defamation.

3 This image of the CBI comes partly from the hugely popular movie series known as the ‘CBI Series.’ It starts with *OruCBI Diarykurippu* (A note from the Diary of CBI, 1988) and the last released film is *Nerariyaan CBI* (CBI to know the Truth, 2005). In all of these movies the Malayalam ‘Megastar’
does not try to chronologically track the media representation of the murder case; instead it looks at the renewed interest on the case with the submission of the charge sheet by the CBI in 2009 after almost two decades of investigation. The analysis reveals the immanent tensions involved in thinking and speaking about virginity in contemporary Keralam, and thus shows how the trope of the virginal is crucial in understanding culture.

How newspaper reading and circuits of mass cultural production contributed to the formation of the public sphere in Keralam is well documented (Jeffrey, 1992, 1993; Menon, 1994). Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observes that print in Keralam, along with other cultural forms such as theatre and cinema “at once made possible a spatially organized public and a narratively constituted one” (Radhakrishnan, 2005, p. 190). The narrative public sphere forged around this investigation suggests the position virginity holds in the way womanhood and honour is defined, understood and experienced in a community.

Two of the three prime accused in the case were priests and the third was a nun. The CBI probe into the case suggested a possible sexual relation between the accused nun and the priests as the motive for the murder. This reference to a sexual relation received much media attention and contributed to the revamped interest of the media in the murder case. To substantiate their speculations regarding the motive behind the murder, the CBI carried out a virginity test on one of the accused nuns, Sister Sephy. The CBI charge sheet was published with much fanfare in newspapers in Keralam and they have faithfully reproduced the CBI narrative of the virginity tests. The New Indian Express

Mammootty plays the role of the principal investigator. The Sister Abhaya Murder case has also inspired the crime thriller Crime File (1999). This is also a CBI story.
quotes from the CBI charge sheet, “The detailed examination revealed that Sephy’s hymen was subjected to surgical interference, hymenoplasty and due to which it was not possible to determine her virginity.” And then goes on to add, “There was no necessity for a nun, who is a virgin, to undergo hymenoplasty surgical interference. The only reason for such corrective surgery is for concealing the evidence of rupture of her hymen due to frequent vaginal sexual intercourse” (as cited in Philip, S. 2009).

This charge sheet once published led to controversy regarding the language it had used. Virginity tests oscillate between the ‘most modern’ and ‘most essential’ investigative method to the ‘most primitive’ and an ‘insult to dignity of woman’ in these accounts. All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) secretary and CPI(M) Politburo member Brinda Karat had written to the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressing “shock and outrage.” The letter was reproduced with importance in the media and the letter critiqued the “obscene and unscientific” language used in the charge sheet “that questioned the dignity of a woman” (“Sr Sephy to move SC Against Virginity Test”, 2009). The National Federation of Indian Women also joined the issue, demanding that the government intervene and take appropriate action against those who prepared the charge sheet. The Syro Malabar Church expressed its protest over the virginity test in UCA News citing it as a “violation of fundamental rights” (“Church People Criticize Virginity test for Nun-suspect in Murder Case”, 2008). But at the same time, some of the members of the Church considered it a ‘necessary step.’ Such statements did not challenge the ability of virginity tests in producing evidence. The same report quotes senior nuns justifying CBI’ virginity test as necessary move. Sister Sephy questioned the charge sheet in Delhi High Court for its “vulgar remarks.” The New Indian Express
reported that she argued that the examination was without her consent and tortured her physically and mentally (“PMO looking into CBI’s Remarks against Nun, 2009). The counter affidavit filed by the CBI generated a further graphic description of the test in the media. It stated that the CBI was merely recording the statements given by the two doctors that “location of hymen orifice suggested surgical intervention possibly by hymenoplasty” (“Abhaya: Accused Nun Questions Virginity Test”, 2010). It also defended the decision to conduct the virginity test which reveals the moral underpinnings of the scientific investigation. The CBI stated in its counter affidavit:

Previous forensic tests of the petitioner (Sephy) had indicated she, a nun, used to meet males in the night in ladies’ hostel, and her complicity with accused 1 and accused 2 (priests Father Thomas M. Kottor and Father Jose Puthrukkayil). Since the suspected motive for the murder of another inmate, Abhaya was linked with this sexual past of the petitioner, it was necessary to conduct the medical examination. It cannot be termed as torture. (ibid)

The media reproduction of the CBI narratives have put into circulation the word virginity test and hymenoplasty. Often Malayalam newspapers had to translate the technical words used in the charge sheet to increase their intelligibility. For instance, instead of using hymenoplasty they have consistently used ‘kanyaacharmam mattivekkal shasthrakriya’ (surgery replacing hymen).’ Hymenoplasty and virginity tests are presented alongside Narco Analysis and brain mapping as the most modern crime investigation methods. Virginity test was presented in these narratives as the ‘last resort’ and the ‘most effective’ intervention by the CBI. The popular discourse around this event reproduced the CBI
narrative and amplified the moral concerns expressed by these narratives. Both the CBI and the popular discourse around the event reaffirm the same logic that the presence of hymen stands for virginity. In these stories hymen comes as a proof of virginity and virginity comes as a proof of innocence. Here the symbolic innocence of virginity gets accentuated through projecting the lack of it as the evidence of the presence of murderous motives. It is interesting to note how the techno-scientific discourse around female body reinstates the status of hymen as ‘evidence’ of chastity/virginity innocence, making the script patriarchal.

These accounts other than presenting virginity as an ideal attribute of femininity also presented the hymenoplasty as a Western idea and suggested it was something foreign. Sister Sephy in her affidavit says that she had not undergone hymenoplasty and as a proof she argues that this particular surgery does not exist in India. Only “Western” countries offer this service and since she has no passport it is evident that she had not gone out of the country (“Virginity Test: With Consent CBI, Not with Consent: Sephy”, 2010). In this whole account loss of virginity and medical examinations that verify the same and the surgical methods adopted to re-establish virginity becomes ‘most primitive’ and at the same time “most modern and Western”. This should be read in conjunction with the emergence of the “Purity Revolution,” a teenage social movement in USA that gives

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4 The popular Malayalam comedy sitcom ‘Cinemala,’ which caricatures contemporary events, devoted an entire episode to the CBI’s virginity test and arrived at the conclusion that Sister Sephy was a ‘lose woman’ who did commit murder (USMalayali, 2008).
immense value to virginity and chastity. The group works through the “Vows of Virginity” where adolescents are invited to Church rallies or Church rock concerts to make vows of sexual abstinence till marriage. This movement is one of the most popular teenage movements America has witnessed recently. 10% of the boys and 16% of the girls are believed to be taken virginity pledges (Baumgardner, 2007 as cited in Scott & Angela 2008, p.1). It also involves a Purity Ball which usually involves a written or verbal contract between a girl and her father where the girl makes a vow to abstain from sexual activity till marriage. This discussion gestures towards the ambivalent status of virginity.

It becomes both an idea that modern societies have already done away with and at the same time becomes the corporeal and lived reality of femininity which should be secured and protected with a chaste lifestyle and should be ‘concealed’ through hymenoplasty in case it is lost.

The preoccupation associated with First Night has connection with the ambivalent cultural perception of virginity where the virgin becomes the highly valued and virtuous figure but at the same time virginity becomes the ‘not so modern’ notion that should be done away with or the very mention of it can make a discourse ‘primitive.’ Virginity here is inscribed on the body as something that could suggest an originary position and becomes the inscription which works through invisibilizing the very act of inscription. Virginity in these accounts become a “productive body and a subjected body” (Foucault, 1977, p. 26) produced by the trope of the virginal. It is possible to argue that the ‘first’ of

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5 Whether to call this a social movement or not is a contested question and it has been argued that this movement being deeply implicated in the state, the Christian right and in the media puts into crisis the usual liberatory notions associated with new social movements. (Murray & Aguayo 2008).
First Night is drawn from the body of the virgin and suggests the sexual act that will make and unmake the virgin body at once. Rather than ‘proving’ virginity the very discourse of virginity is capable of creating the threshold of ‘first’. So whether a couple actually ‘did it’ or ‘not did it’ becomes immaterial in the constitution of the event.

1.2. The Night

This discussion engages with two events to which this project on First Night owes its initial thoughts. What is common to both of them is the night. The attempt is to explore the framing features of night that helps to locate the meaning-making around First Night in culture. The assumption here is that the night offers a time-space that could frame our experiences and informs the production of subjectivities. The first event discussed here is an anecdotal account of a feminist struggle while the second one is a mediated event with multiple meanings.

1.2.1. Claiming the Night

This is a piece of autoethnography\(^6\) where I am writing of a struggle I was part of. This event happened in relation to the ‘claiming the night’ struggle organized by a group of feminists in the state capital, Thiruvananthapuram, in 2002. As part of the campaign the feminist group pasted posters in crowded public places such as bus stands, railway stations and markets. One of the major slogans in the posters was, “This night belongs to us/ All the coming nights belong to us”. (Ee raathri njangalkku swantham/ini ellaa

\(^6\) Ellis C. defines autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (2011, p.1).
While sticking this poster at the Thampanoor bus stand, a group of curious male onlookers gathered around and started reading the poster aloud, stressing each word as if suggesting that they are reading something totally strange and unintelligible. They made a number of comments, most of which were sexually suggestive. As the number of male onlookers increased and those who joined later on could not access the poster, one of them asked loudly, “What’s going on?” One of the guys standing next to us replied quickly, “Nothing brother. These women are saying it is their First Night. Poor things. They have come this far to tell us that it’s their First Night.” Obviously this remark caused the male onlookers to roar with laughter. Bracketing this laughter and defamiliarizing the ways in which this joke produced laughter can reveal the layers of binary thinking that weaves the cultural fabric of contemporary Keralam. The feminist activists were making a public and political statement by pasting posters on the need to claim the night. It was a conventional political act that used the familiar tropes of political activism such as raising slogans and pasting posters. The activists were actually making a claim to become “disembodied subjects”, which they believed would make them eligible to make a political claim over their bodies and nights. By converting night to First Night the male onlooker subverted the political project of claiming the public and this comment swiftly transported the activist subjects to the private as sexualized bodies. This joke clearly stems from the anxieties generated by the presence of women in the public space as political agents as opposed to domesticated and docile bodies. The joke re-establishes the status quo by reminding women where they are supposed to be at night – inside the house – in the bedroom. The joke works as a counter slogan by invoking precisely the opposite of what the women
were saying. It reaffirms the classical binary assumption that the public is imbued with politics, and the private in contrast is devoid of any elements of the social and the political and is saturated with the sexual. The trope of the virginal invoked by the use of ‘First Night’ places women at the ‘uninitiated’ position with respect to politics and makes a violent reading of a political text where the position of the male onlookers are legitimized as deflowerers.

1.2.2. The Night Vigil

On March 7, 2007 a group of ‘concerned citizens’ organized a Night Vigil in front of the Legislative Assembly Building – Secretariat – to express solidarity with the Chengara Land Struggle. The Night Vigil was inaugurated by a prominent media person and it was followed by a round of speech by Dalit activists and thinkers. Poets and other literary figures recited poems at the venue to express their solidarity with the land struggle. After this, a small group comprising of less than fifty people chatted with each other sitting at the protest venue. Some of them laughed and hugged each other and one of them smoked cigarettes. The Kairali-People, a television channel owned by the then ruling party CPI (M), created a video footage of this event and its newspaper, Deshabhimani reproduced the visuals from the footage of the Night Vigil. Both reports resorted to derisive commentary which accused the event supporters/organisers of propagating ‘immorality’.

7 The Chengara land struggle was a massive land struggle that started in 2005 and which slowly gathered momentum by 2007. It dissolved by 2009. Led by landless people, especially the Dalits, for the ownership of cultivable land from Harrison Malayalam Estate - a state-driven private plantation - around 5000 families ‘encroached’ on the estate and started dwelling there. The land struggle raised strong critique of land distributions made by the CPI (M) in 1960.
Kairali-People channel carried the news the whole day connecting it with the special discussions on gender they had planned earlier for March 8th - the International Women’s day. The news anchor raised questions about the appropriateness of such a struggle to the special guests who had come to the studio to respond to issues related to International Women’s day. The next day Deshabhimani newspaper printed a front page story titled “Masala Filled Night Strike” (Rathrisamaram Masalamayam) which described the event as, “the night protest staged scenes which are hotter than those in “Masala films” (inverted comma in the original) (2008, p.1). The report also said, “The protestors chose the site of protest itself as the venue for their passionate games.” As proof it referred to the scenes telecasted by Kairali-People Channel the day before, where it said, “men and women co-mingled and kissed.” The news reproduced a frame grab from the channel footage with the caption, ‘Thrill of Strike’ (Samaralahari).

The same day the paper carried multiple reports where in the first report The Progressive Art and Literary Collective – a cultural wing of CPI(M) – condemned the Night Vigil for being “insane and immoral” and made a plea to “boycott people who propagated vulgarity in the name of cultural activism (2008, p. 5). ” The next report reproduced the press release from AIDWA which asked to “punish those indulging in immoral activity under the disguise of protest” (2008, p.5). The AIDWA statement said “open immoral activity” (parasyamaaya anaashaasya pravarthanam) at the venue of struggle bring disgrace to “Kerala culture” (Kerala Samskaaram) (ibid, p.5).

The Secretariat being the administrative centre of the state, the pavements in front of the Secretariat is one of the most coveted venues for political protests. The visual
representation of these political protests is usually in the form of candid camera where the shots are well lit and the camera angles are frontal and direct. But in the case of the Night Vigil, the protest was shot as a sting operation, where the shots were ill lit and shaky, and the camera angles suggested a covert positioning of the camera. They were long shots which occasionally zoomed in on the bodies of the protestors. This visual representation was effective in creating a ‘peeping’ effect despite the fact that the protest was staged on these same pavements and the only difference was in the timing of the struggle. This media representation of the protest became the primary text upon which the contestations and negotiations happened. What prompted such readings of the political protest was the ‘pornographic gaze’ deployed around the event in media representations.

Analyzing the editorial commentary in the same paper with the title ‘Avarude Raavukal’ (Their Nights) further reveals the nature and mechanisms employed to produce the pornographic gaze(2008, p.6). It has been argued that pornography is a visual genre: it operates by titillation through the visual. It is always a story of the eye: a spectatorship of the consumption of the body (Iqani, 2012, p. 134). The editorial commentary creates a visual text out of the struggle for an imagined spectator and this text passes through many nodes of cultural production. These then become associated with pornography in the popular memory. The title is a word play on the famous Malayalam soft porn movie

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8 There are multiple and contending ways of approaching and defining the pornographic gaze. One major approach starts with the theorizations of the ‘male gaze’ by Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975). I use the term to suggest a gaze that creates pornography out of an object. It is not any particular quality embedded in the object that presupposes the gaze and makes the object pornographic. But the object emerges as pornographic through the act of the gaze.
‘Avalude Raavukal’ (Her nights) (1978)\(^9\). It tells the story of a teenage girl who slips into sex work. Through this word play the pornographic is successfully invoked even before the actual beginning of the commentary. The same report carries another reference to pornography while describing the protests. It said that the protest with its ‘intensity’ satiated even the ‘Noon Show’\(^{10}\) (Ucha Padam) goers. The comparison with the soft porn genre reaffirms the pornographic gaze. Both the protestors and the media took up the issue of public space to defend their own positions. In the press meet conducted at Thiruvananthapuram the next day the protestors deplored the pornographic gaze saying it was not a clandestine activity but a political protest staged in a public place. But it is precisely this ‘publicness’ of the space that is invoked in media representations to validate the inappropriateness of the protest and to legitimize the gaze. In the above report, to accentuate the publicness of the space, the commentary brings in auto drivers as witnesses of the protest. This reference to the male spectators presumes the pornographic. The concluding remark in the commentary brings in censorship and concludes in a satirical tone, “Necessary steps should be taken to grant ‘A’ certificate to these protests as they are not watchable along with all members in the family.” Censorship laws focus on the curtailing of the obscene – that which should not be seen – in the public sphere. By invoking censorship the commentary produces two claims:

\(^9\)Avalude Raavukal has endured multiple lives in Keralam where it began as a social realist film and was re-inscribed as the first soft porn movie in Malayalam. See Maruthur (2010) for a detailed discussion on this recuperation of Avalude Raavukal.

\(^{10}\)Ucha padam or noon show refers to the soft porn films that were screened regularly in cinema theatres at the 11 am slot for an all-male crowd. Even respectable theatres played such films in this slot while the other slots were reserved for popular Malayalam films whose audience was families. Noon shows came into practice by the 1970s and it slowly faded away in the early 2000s.
1) It signals the status of the protest as a mediated reality or as a televised spectacle. It is argued that the consumption of televised visuals as active spectators construct domestic pleasure and domestic time and in the process re-constitutes the family (Morley, 1986). The anxieties expressed in the report shows both the status of the protest as mediated reality and its ability to interfere with the codes of domesticity.

2) It reproduces the familiar anxiety related to pornography that it disrupts the orderly boundaries of public and private. Pornography is inherently public in that it always exists for display, but it displays what is normally shared in private.

Night Vigil was not intelligible as a political struggle to many mainstream political actors as it disrupted the conventional spatio-temporal axis of a political struggle. The semantic rupture the event brought in is reflected in the statement of the CPI (M) MLA, and the secretary of AIDWA, K. K. Shailaja:

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

What accentuated the crisis was the media representation of the struggle. It tried to re-plot the entire event to the conventional spatio-temporal schemes. These representations tried to repair the fractured cultural schema by re-presenting the event through the vectors of the normative imagination related to day and night. Shailaja’s comment also gives
voice to the anxiety that display of such improper actions in such a pristine place of protest might “give license” to those who are involved in the ‘flesh trade’ to access the space. This comment foregrounds another binary regarding womanhood – public woman and domestic woman – and who should be seen where and at what time. In that sense this comment is not different from the comments of the male onlooker at the bus stand. Here day/night binary set into motion several other binaries which are in operation when we think about politics and culture. Day is associated with the public and the political, where disembodied subjects make rational claims. Night represents the private mediated by the sexualized bodies and their passions.

First Night as an event converges two powerful tropes – the trope of the virginal and the trope of the nocturnal. The virginal body anchors the dominant imaginations around body sexuality and pleasure. The virginal body as a trope perpetually anticipates the act which transforms the body into non-virgin. ‘First’ in the First Night suggests this act and the act cannot be named without the virgin body. Thus ‘First’ in First Night invokes both the virgin body and the act that institutes the division between virgin and non-virgin. The trope of the nocturnal invokes a very foundational binary. It hints towards a fantasy laden liminal space that always escapes rational scrutiny. Once the virginal body and the anxieties emanating from this body are placed in the domain of the nocturnal it creates an event which revels in the excess; an excess not just inscribed on the body of the virgin but also bleeds on to the recesses of culture.

11 When I say it is a foundational binary, I do not wish to suggest that day and night constitute an immutable binary. But I would like to argue that this is a binary which undercuts many other binaries at work and it has not attracted much theoretical attention. Instead theory reproduces this binary where theory is an enterprise primarily concerned with light and visibility (Irigaray, 1985).
Among the many elements that contribute to the visibility of First Night, why the thesis is pre–occupied with virginity needs a bit more elaboration. It is concerned with the ways in which First Night is embedded in the performance of everyday sexuality in Keralam. One needs to know the layers of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Butler, 1990) and policing of the boundaries which defines sexually appropriate and inappropriate conduct to understand the meaning making that happens around First Night attaching a distinct cultural premium to it. Policing is not just used in a metaphorical sense here. Keralam is increasingly witnessing instances of moral policing (sadaachaara police) where any expression of sexuality or desire that does not reinforce the institution of heterosexuality or disapproves conjugal hegemony are labelled as deviant and the people involved in such expressions are targeted and stigmatized. It is usually the vigilante groups that engage in these acts, but it is not unusual that police personnel themselves take on the mantle of moral police. In addition it is not just right wing religious groups who are engaged in such acts of surveillance, but the mainstream political parties are also often engaged in these practices. This eventually strengthens the community’s surveillance around sexuality. The mob lynching of people engaged in extramarital relationship is not

12 The expression ‘sadaacharapolice’ started circulating among the progressive women’s groups and other human rights group in the beginning of the 21st century and slowly the expression gained popularity. The media has also picked up the phrase to suggest the quasi-religious quasi-political outfits engaged in community vigilantism in issues related to sexuality and sexual romance. The 2014 ‘Kiss of Love’ protest was a highly popular struggle against moral policing where a group of young people tried to engage in public kissing at the Cochin Marine Drive and they were physically attacked by the Hindu right wing.
uncommon in Keralam now (Philip. S, 2014). Other instances of moral policing range from spatial segregation of boys and girls in schools, ban of T-shirts and tight pants in colleges, and surveillance around intermingling and time spent on conversations with an opposite sex class mate (K.K.Shahina, 2014).

The constant surveillance and subjection to a heterosexual logic should be read in conjunction with the status of the state as having the highest rate of crimes against women, even beating Delhi which is often labelled informally as the ‘rape capital of India’ (“Crime Against Women”, 2012). The surveys carried out in two cities (Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode) support this finding. It says, “both witnesses and women respondents agreed that women face maximum harassment while using public transport, at bus stops and on the road. Sexual harassment has been pointed out as a problem by 98% women. Verbal and visual abuse is the most common form of sexual harassment, as reported by 80% women respondents. This is followed by physical harassment (60%). Parks have also been identified as unsafe by women. It is clear from these findings that women face harassment in the course of normal everyday life and not only at night or in specific places” (as cited in Viswanathan.K, 2013, para. 11).

The highly gendered production of public spaces in Keralam is well documented (Lukose, 2009). Though women have access to public spaces through education and employment, they are supposed to wear a “demure femininity” (ibid, p. 77-80) to enable them to navigate these public spaces. Lukose also notes the kind of constant self monitoring women has to engage in while they are travelling via public transport or walking through the street as if “a young woman’s participation in public spaces of
modernity requires her to mediate her sexuality” (Ibid, p. 85). She adds that the young men are not subjected to this constant self monitoring, instead a carefree and casual outlook defined their entry to public space. Even the skin colour becomes a crucial signifier in producing the ‘demure femininity’ with brown skin correlating more with sexually lose conduct than fair skin (Philips, 2004).

Lukose (Lukose, 2009, p. 84) also reflects upon the violent Malayalam expression ‘comment adikkuka’ which literally means to ‘hit with comment’ and it connotes the practice of making sexually suggestive comments to women in public places. This finding goes well with the survey findings that 80% women face verbal abuse in the streets of Keralam. The everyday communication between opposite sexes is thoroughly monitored. It has been observed that flirting and other forms of verbal and non-verbal communication hold the possibility of sexual and romantic playfulness. The practice of flirting in Keralam usually lacks this feature (Osella, 1998). It is usually a one-sided communication where men try to prove their sexual virility and aggression, and women could resort to retaliation with equal aggression only to prove their good conduct. The ethnography of Osella (Osella, 1998) suggests how pre-marital romance is constructed as a site of erotic danger and transgression and pre-marital sex is taboo.

The following discussion presents nodes of two contradicting discourses which shape everyday heterosexuality in contemporary Keralam. One is a regulative discourse of sexuality and the second one is a proliferative discourse around consumption. I would like to argue that the performance of everyday sexuality is structured by the push and pull
of these two contradictory discourses and First Night emerges out of this discursive production of cultural meaning as a recognizable event.

2.1. Good Girls and Bad Girls: Regulative Discourses around Sexuality

This discussion presents two instances from my ethnographic field work. Both of them reveal the contours of the regulative discourses around sexuality which creates sites of erotic danger out of the female body and desire. They also touch upon the discourse around the body which divides it as virginal and non-virginal, and privileges virginity in the process, thus making virginity an ideal attribute of womanhood.

I

The discussions triggered by the elopement of a young woman from one of the houses which I was visiting as part of my fieldwork reveals many strands of the discourse around the female body and virginity that contributes to the making of First Night. The girl was a college student in her early twenties. Her parents were local politicians and her mother was a member of the local governing body at the time of the girl’s elopement. She eloped with a lower caste boy and the family got her back using their political clout and connections. The local police and cyber crime cell were involved in the investigation and the girl was located tracking signals from her mobile phone. She was brought back the next day morning after a full night of search. The police found a ticket on the boy for both of them to board the next day’s train to Mumbai. The police took it as evidence to discredit their love story. The police’s version was that the boy was trying to sell her at the Mumbai red street. The girl was not brought to a magistrate as the law recommends.
Instead she was forcefully sent along with her parents. The boy was badly beaten by the police and sent back to his house.

I visited the girl’s extended family two weeks after the event and the situation was still very volatile. There were heated debates going on between family members on the inappropriateness of the girl’s action. I was part of an all-female discussion on this event. The seventy-year-old grandmother of the girl developed a serious chest pain shortly after the event and was hospitalized for two days. She told me that her “heart felt heavy” thinking of the gravity of the foolishness (*mandatharam*) her granddaughter had committed. She said the parents will have to struggle to “give her a life” (*oru jeevitham kodukkaan*) as the girl had lost everything (*ellaam kalanju kulichu*) after the elopement.

Me: What do you mean by ‘giving life’?

Valsamma: To find an alliance for the girl. What else?

Me: o.k o.k

Me: Anyway she is back. She is safe. Then why do you worry about loss?

Valsamma: (looking at me sharply) You could say that. Can’t you see? She messed up (*vendaatheenam kaanichu*) her life and spoiled it (*kalanju kulichu*)\(^\text{13}\).

The twenty-one-year-old cousin of the girl also voiced the same anxiety while describing the event to me. According to her, the girl’s act was a foolish one (*mandatharam*). “I never thought she is this foolish. I mean, we all use mobiles. But do you trust someone who calls you every day and tells ‘I love you’ or whatever. Is she crazy or what?” Both of them voiced the same anxiety when they described her action as foolish: of the eloped

\(^{13}\text{All the conversations reproduced in the chapter are taken from my field notes.}\)
girl having lost some attributes of ideal femininity endorsed in the culture. On further talk it turned out to be the possibility of her having had a sexual relation on that night with the boy. The maternal aunt of the girl, who is a school teacher, supported the other two and expressed the concern more explicitly:

If the police guys are really smart, what they should have done is they should have located the girl as soon as she went missing. Not after she spends a whole night with a boy in a room. Now everyone knows that. Don’t ask me how I went to school next day. I felt as if my skin was peeling off from my body. And my colleagues, who had collected every bit of information on it, were asking “Lathika have you taken the girl to a doctor? Lathika is there any chance of marrying off the girl to the same boy?” She’s given people a story to hum about. I have nothing more to say.

I met the girl some months after the elopement and return, when she had re-started attending college. The mother said she refused to go to the old college where she had been studying prior to the elopement. She was adamant that she would not go to the same college even if she had to discontinue her studies. Finally the parents yielded to her wish and using or abusing all their political power found admission for her in another college in the middle of the academic year. Her mother said the girl was convinced of the police version that the boy was trying to cheat her and was trying to sell her at Mumbai. My talk with the girl lasted for less than 40 minutes and I have not recorded the interview though I had introduced myself as a researcher working on questions related to marriage. I have made the conscious decision to not ask anything related to her elopement and started off with a general talk on the new college. She asked me about the higher education possibilities in Bangalore. Most of our talk revolved around education and career. I felt
she was re-assessing her status in the community and was trying to act as faithful as possible to the cultural scripts for ‘good’ middle class girls - modest, disciplined, focused in studies, hardworking and upwardly mobile. The entire talk was devoid of any reference to the elopement and she said she was determined to study well and get into a proper job. But she gave me some interesting answers when pushed further about her ambitions.

R: Why do you think a job is important?
Nisha: I don’t want a job here. I wish to go to America.

R: America? Why?
Nisha: I don’t want to live here.

R: Why?
Nisha: I wish to go to America.

R: O.K. Why do you think America is an interesting place?
Nisha: I don’t want to get into the buses here. It’s very crowded. And men make unwanted comments and will try to touch you. Going to college is hell. Also the streets are dirty.

R: What comments do men make to you?
Nisha: Not to me. Am saying in general that is the situation.

This contingent detail – desire to go to America – somehow stood out in her speech without exceeding the bounds of the subject matter we were discussing. Though there was not any reference to the elopement, that episode was clearly informing the conversation. The wish to go to America came not just from her desire for upward mobility, though America generally stands as a symbol for upward mobility. It is possible
or necessary to read the comment in connection with the intense wish she had expressed to come out of the past which fixes her as a ‘bad girl. She had expressed this wish by refusing to go to the old college. She wanted a new beginning, a new self and a ‘clean slate’. Her reference to the men’s comments in the crowded bus too might not be accidental. Her seemingly innocuous comment about the ‘dirty streets’ tells how she feels about the scrutinizing public gaze on her.

The responses of the people around her also suggest the ways in which an instance of pre-marital sexual activity is received in the culture. She becomes someone who has ‘lost everything’ through the possibility of having had a sexual relationship out of wedlock. The concern about “spending a night with a boy in a room” in a way addresses all the concerns the thesis wishes to explore. It clearly shows the possibility of having had a sexual relationship and thus making the girl a non-virgin and her ensuing non-suitability for the marriage market. The illegitimacy of the act is amplified in the accounts of people around her who label it as foolishness. The introduction of the Mumbai red streets invokes the trope of erotic danger and reaffirms the position of conjugality as the only legitimate and safe avenue to express one’s sexual desire.

II

In another interesting conversation I had with two young and vibrant girls and their mother on wedding culture exposes another layer of the regulative discourse. It also corresponds to the ‘dystopic discontents’ discussed in the beginning where fear of unbound sexuality is projected onto the female body making them subjects of state protectionism. The mother of the girls was my acquaintance. She had invited me once to
her house and while having coffee she showed me the wedding album of her niece. Naturally the conversation slipped on to weddings and related concerns. Her two daughters also actively participated in the discussion. Since the conversation was really interesting I requested their permission to record it. They agreed without second thoughts. I asked them to describe their notion of a ‘good girl’. The mother gave a description which combined the modern and the traditional, “in the correct proportion” as she herself put it. She thought a good girl should be smart and “should be able to stand on her own legs” referring to financial independence. But at the same time she wanted the girl to have atakkam (discipline), othukkam (modesty), anusarana (obedience) so that people would not say that she is “over smart.” When asked about the kind of girl they would prefer to bring into their family as a bride, the mother said she would look for the above said qualities. The elder girl then cut in and said her sister-in-law should be “well behaved” (nalla swabahaavamulla) and an attempt to unpack the expression lead to an interesting expression wherein she said the bride should be “devoid of history” (history undaakaruthu). When probed further regarding the meaning of the expression ‘history’ she said the bride should be a “decent girl.” The English words ‘decent’ and ‘neat’ are common adjectives used in Malayalam conversations to describe people. These words are used both for men and women and when it is used to describe a man, it generally means he is a non-smoker and refrains from alcohol consumption. When used to describe a woman it means she is humble and subservient and has had no romantic affairs in her life. The English word ‘history’ suggests a romantic or sexual relationship in the past, as in ‘she has history’ (avalkku history undu) means she had a boyfriend in the past. But the girl did not touch upon that, instead focused on the ‘good qualities.’ There are many
phrases in local discourse to indicate the premarital sexual activity of the girl. One earlier expression was ‘peru dosham kelppikkuka’ which means ‘earning a bad name’. This expression is more connected to ‘adukkala dosham,’ a practice of Brahmins wherein the woman who has conceived out of wedlock is expelled symbolically from the caste and literally from the house. While the elder sister was trying to move away from ‘history’ with ‘decency’, the younger sister added playfully: “Not just history, geography too”. This led to another round of questions and answers:

R: What do you mean by geography?
Sruti looks at her sister with a shy smile.
R: Do you mean body?
Sruti: If you ask me so…yea…
R: Why do you say geography?
Sruti: I was thinking of a neighbour. She is married now. She married the same guy with whom she had an affair. She had a secret abortion before marriage. And she put on weight after that. We used to say this at that time... That her geography changed a lot.

The mother of the two girls interrupted us at this point and asked me what my research project was actually on. Though she looked very curious while asking this, I could feel her suspect my intentions. I answered this with a counter question as to why she is suddenly worried about that. This question was helpful as she sensed that I in turn had sensed her worry. She then openly expressed her worries. Her primary anxiety was with the presence of the digital recorder placed prominently on the table. She asked me whether I will upload her children’s interview on the internet (internettil idumo). I tried to reassure her that I will not put it up on the internet. The younger one who was very
talkative and appeared so eager to talk to me interrupted her mother saying, “Sister (Chechi), she is so worried after watching Drisym (movie). Could you please tell her that it’s just a movie?”

The reference to the movie Drisym makes the picture complex and helps to see why good girls in Keralam ‘don’t have history and geography.’ Drisym is a popular movie which had crossed the collection records for Malayalam cinema released till 2013. Packaged and labelled by the makers themselves as a “100% family entertainer,” Drisym revolves around the life of a family with two girls. The problems begin when the elder girl goes away for a one-week camp. At the camp a boy records her bathing on his mobile phone. Later he tries to blackmail her with the video and trespasses on her house one night. The mother intervenes and as a last resort she offers herself to him to ‘save her girl’s life.’ But she finally kills him to protect herself and the girl from sexual violence. The rest of the movie is structured as a crime thriller where the family successfully erases all the evidences of the murder and justifies the act by invoking the sexual honour of the women. Just before the girl leaves for the camp, the mobile phone is introduced in the movie as an innocent toy where the mother exhibits an unusual fear towards the gadget saying that it was the equipment used to shoot naked pictures of women and then later to put those pictures up on the internet. Everyone laughs at her naiveté and ignores her comments as those of a homemaker with no exposure to modern life. But later, through the incident of the blackmail the film tells us that the mother’s understanding of the gadget in particular and technology in general was right.

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14 This tagline appeared in the poster made for theatrical release of the movie Drisym (2013).
We can read the mother’s openly expressed mistrust and the girl’s reference to a fictional narrative in conjunction with regular media reports of finding hidden cameras in toilets of restaurants, trial rooms of textile shops and so many other public places.\textsuperscript{15} This voyeuristic male gaze is one of the structuring principles of Keralam’s public sphere. The cultural fabric of Keralam is woven with the media texts that reproduce and legitimize the voyeuristic gaze. Women’s everyday negotiations are punctuated by this transgressive male gaze that creates a female body that inhabits a constant state of fear, insecurity and suspicion. It is through the violent pedagogy of sexual attacks and serial rapes that ‘becoming woman’ takes place in present day Keralam. Combining the earlier discussion on Sharmila Sreekumar’s (Sreekumar, 2009) reading of the serial rape cases as part of the ‘dystopic discontents of modern Keralam’ and Ratheesh Radhakrishnan’s (Radhakrishnan, 2005) analysis of the formation of a ‘narrative public sphere’ in relation to the reproduction of the sexual harassment case of P.E. Usha in 1999 helps to see how the social and cultural fabric of Keralam is being spun by a female body that reels under the fear of sexual violence or violation. It is not accidental that in present day Keralam, the demands of both statist empowerment discourse and the feminist emancipation discourse are the same: it is nothing other than physical safety and security for women in public and private spaces. For instance, the Kerala state recently launched the ‘She Taxi’ project where the drivers are women and passengers are “women, kids and family.” This

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15} The Sagar Hotel case in Kozhikode is a famous example of hidden camera cases. The case had received serious media attention and the State Women’s Commission and the State Human Rights Commission took up \textit{suo moto} cases following the reports. (“Torture of complainant”, 2010). So many reports of hidden cameras operations followed after this and discovering a spy camera in the most unexpected of places is not news in Keralam these days.}
project uses technology enabled services to track the routes of travel and constantly monitor the movement of the vehicle to ensure the safety of the driver and passengers. Launched to increase women’s mobility and thus to empower them, the project presents ‘safe travel for women’ as adventurous as live war reporting. The feminists’ response to the rape and murder of the girl Soumya in the train echoed the same kind of anxiety regarding safety\textsuperscript{16}. The Soumya death case presents the pinnacle of the safety concerns where all the different feminist voices expressed the same concern.

[Fig: 1The banner of the official website of\textit{ She Taxi} which showcases six new technology enabled safety features. Retrieved from\url{http://www.shetaxi.in}]

This analysis of the negotiations around heterosexuality helps to see how women are placed in a precarious position: between the anxiety of keeping their sexual honour and

\textsuperscript{16} Soumya was a sales girl who was raped and murdered while coming back from work by train. She was thrown out of the deserted ladies compartment and was raped by the accused Govindachamy. This was on February 1, 2011. She succumbed to her injuries on February 6, 2011 at the hospital. The murder case brought to light questions related to women’s safety in public spaces and their right to travel. See “At a Glance: Soumya Rape and Murder Case” (2011) for a discussion on the case.
protecting themselves from sexual attacks. Both the narratives discussed above present conjugalcy as the ideal and probably the only available location for the expression of sexual desire. The woman becomes the keeper of the patriarchal order by disciplining her sexuality which in turn is expressed in the legitimised avenues of conjugalcy. At the same time, being a sexualized body, she carries the potential for disorder and is thus subjected to more surveillance and disciplining from patriarchal authorities. The ‘panic logic of sexuality’ (Singer, 1993) defines the production of this figure of ordinary woman or good girls. Reflecting on Singer’s analysis of the logic, Butler (Butler, 1993, p.9) contends that “women are the non-systematized position of being inside and outside of disciplinary structures; they are both a subject of discipline and who is in need of further discipline; hence, they are that which exceeds every effort at discipline, discipline’s limit, the site where it produces its own cultural psychosis.”

2.2 “Celebrate the Beauty of Life:” Proliferative Discourse around Wedding Consumption

“Celebrate the beauty of life” is the tagline of Malabar Gold and Diamonds, one of the most popular Kerala-based jewellery brands which has now become an Indian brand. The image publicized along with this imperative to celebrate is that of a wedding, clearly suggesting the position wedding holds in contemporary consumer culture and making it a hyper visible site. The preoccupation with weddings is a global cultural phenomenon. It has connection with the global flow of cultural texts and goods. Weddings respond to commodity capitalism by projecting itself as an avenue of self improvement and
aesthetization. Conventional ethnographic frameworks which treat wedding as a rite of passage are not sufficient to understand this new wedding culture. Wedding culture follows the global trend and has become the most important cultural ritual of our times. Feminist ethnographers (Boden, 2003; Ingraham, 2008) who have tried to understand the wedding culture has acknowledged its ability to converge many discourses related to consumption, life style, tastes, choice and self fashioning.

Sharon Boden’s analysis of contemporary wedding culture in U.K (Boden, 2001, 2003) is relevant in its attempt to address the connection between consumption and subjectivity. Boden (Boden, 2003) has argued that instead of analyzing consumption in the wedding or for the wedding or at the wedding, analysis should focus upon “wedding itself as a commodity” – the wedding as something which is produced and consumed as a whole. She treated wedding as a “spectacular, within reach consumer fantasy” (Boden, 2001, p.1) where romantic ethic becomes a consumer ideal. Boden argues that the romantic imaginary and the consumption practices play a key role in transforming wedding from a standard life course event to a cultural site. This is a site made by the interactions of subjectivity, consumption and representation and from where these complex interactions can be studied. This section makes such an attempt to see how a combination of old and new representational systems and the ethos of commodity capitalism create a spectacular site out of wedding and how the figure of the bride occupies a central role anchoring the cultural production of signification.

2.2.1. Discursive Formations around Wedding
Abstinence from wedding related consumption was a major plea which social and community reform in Keralam made in the past. The congress led nationalist movement had also projected ascetic modes of political activism where women who gave up gold had earned enormous social respect. It was the time when the figure of ‘Daridra narayanan’ was invoked nationally in the political and developmental discourse (Lukose, 2009). The ‘Communist Party’ also encouraged simple and austere life style and the leaders married in unceremonial ways. The pioneering leaders of Communist Party in Keralam such as P. Krishna Pillai, and A. K. Gopalan had simple weddings where they exchanged red garlands with their brides. The venue of such weddings was most often the party office. Later this became an informal rule and leaders of the Communist party and staunch party followers married in simple and austere ceremonies. Changes in the consumption pattern started in the 1970s and are broadly connected to the migration to the Gulf countries, Europe and U.S.A. It was observed that a new material culture was introduced in Keralam as part of the phenomenon of migration (Abdullah, 2014). The state driven development discourse also encouraged consumption-oriented small families.

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17 A detailed analysis of the reformist plea to abstain from luxurious wedding is made in the next chapter. Even the Royal family was not exempted from this code of conduct.

18 See the biography of P. Krishna Pillai for a detailed account of his marriage where the description focuses on the austere nature of the event (Kunjiraman, 2013, p. 70-83). A.K Gopalan’s autobiography “Ente Jeevitha Katha” (My life story) also devotes a chapter to marriage titled “Vivaaham” (Marriage) (1980, p. 195-197) where he recounts a simple marriage “at the Alapuzha party office without any rituals” (Ibid, p. 197).

19 As per a survey by the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, there are around 2.27-3 million non-resident workers from Keralam. According to this study, international migrants sent around Rs 24,000 crores as remittances to Keralam in 2006-07. That same year, remittances accounted for around 20% of the state’s NSDP (Rajan & Zacharia, 2007).
(Devika, 2002). Changes in the wedding-related consumption have connection with these broader changes in the consumption pattern.

Wedding culture is blooming in Keralam with more and more event management agencies and designer bridal boutiques stepping in. The exceptional and the celebrity weddings which gains media attention expends ten times double of the average wedding budget. Therefore there is a palpable cultural preoccupation with weddings. Now wedding has become the most significant public/personal/community event in a Malayali’s life. Leaders of political parties engage in lavish weddings unlike in the past.\(^{20}\)

Weddings are carefully planned and meticulously executed and this task which earlier rested with a close kin group is now outsourced to wedding planners and event management agencies. Nowadays, except among the lowest strata of the socioeconomic ladder, the decision to have a lavish wedding is seldom questioned. This “democratization of lavish wedding” (Otnes & Plank, 2003, p. 45) makes it a legitimate avenue for consumption. The wedding consumption is a readily observable phenomenon in Keralam that the State Government had made attempts to introduce an extra levy on the expenditure for wedding (“Tax on happy marriages”, 2013). The Kerala State Women’s Commission made attempts to bring in legislation that would reduce the consumption of gold in weddings as it creates huge debts (Mayenkar, 2014). Lavish weddings have become the norm and now the decision not to have a lavish wedding creates news. For instance, actress Rima Kallingal and film director Ashique Abu had

\(^{20}\)The weddings of the sons of senior CPI (M) leaders Pinarayi Vijayan and Kodiyeri Balakrishnan prove this point. These were spectacular weddings with respect to the arrangements; number of guests, venue and other regalia employed, and presented a complete break from the earlier practice of ‘simple wedding.’
created news for their decision to not have a lavish wedding (Prakash, 2013). The debates around this wedding also reveal the complex relation wedding has with social status and how class and caste intercept the idea of wedding. While generally the Rima and Ashique wedding was treated in the new media as ‘bold’ and as ‘setting example for girls,’ there were some voices of dissent which suggested that lavish wedding signals upward mobility and social status for Dalits. Sreebitha (2013) has argued that in Keralam the conspicuous consumption on the wedding day enhances the socio-economic status of Dalit communities by giving a legitimate avenue for the performance of wealth. This debate shows wedding is a powerful medium in present-day Keralam where mixed messages related to class, caste, and gender are getting circulated and wedding-related consumption provides a new elevated platform for the contestations and renegotiations of the different elements of the social.

The mass media productions around the event or moment of wedding are also proliferating. At least 35 movies were made in the last five years where wedding was the leading event or the narrative resolution. In a single television season, at least 6 serials were telecasted in different television channels with the wedding theme. Wedding reality shows were launched in television channels and leading women’s magazines produce ‘wedding issues.’ Every step of celebrity weddings, from engagement to honeymoon, feature prominently in newspapers and contributes to the development of a popular wedding consumer culture, in part through identifying and celebrating the ‘successful’ elements of the wedding. Bangalore Days (Dir. Anjali Menon, 2014) is a recent Malayalam movie which was a huge commercial success and was very popular among the youth. The film comes with the tag of ‘celebration of youth’ and starts with a
spectacular wedding scene which begins a day and night before the wedding and stages the wedding day, and the wedding night. The opening song of the film which is labelled as ‘wedding song’ by the makers and the media shows the “Bollywoodisation” (Rajadhyaksha, 2003) of the Kerala Hindu wedding where Bollywood as a culture industry provides the region with a national fantasy. The explosion of wedding images in the visual field of Keralam makes it worthy of examining. Wedding image is used to sell even products that are unrelated to wedding. Advertisements of wedding jewellery and bridal accessories bring in major ad revenue for television channels and newspapers.

As the tagline “celebrate the beauty of life” reveals many discourses around self fashioning and the aesthetization converge to create the wedding culture. The notion of discourse formation (Foucault, 1972) is helpful to understand the complex discursive constellations that are at work here. Discourse formations can be understood as systematic, socio-historically contingent signification practices. It involves “analyzing inter-textually, configurations of meaning constitutive of a particular discourse in the set of texts of a given period and their inter-semiotic multimodal expressions through language, visual images, gaze and posture, colour and graphics” (Lazar, 2009, p. 375). Celebration is one of the macro discourses that emerge from the advertisements with its subject effects and this discourse contains several other discourses. Here I reproduce the taglines of the advertisement of wedding merchandise from a single issue of Vanitha women’s magazine (Vanitha, August 15-31, 2014) which is the most popular women’s magazine in India. While the number of advertisements itself substantiate the claim of discursive proliferation around wedding, an analysis that is attentive to the micro
discourses can reveal the wedding culture and the production of a bridal subject who becomes the locus of the imperative “to celebrate”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taglines of Wedding Merchandise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. They came to wish the bride. But instead they met a princess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fairy Tale Diamond Bridal Collection, Sunny Diamonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Be a Princess. Let others admire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Wedding Collection from Bobby Chemmannur International Jewellers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The Day you need to Glow, SPARKLE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalyan Jewellers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Brides of the world, here is the biggest sensation in silk. Saugandhika perfect 10. A bridal saree which is a picture of perfection in 10 different ways. Saugandhika perfect 10. Ten times better. 10 times purer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saugandhika Perfect 10, Kalyan Silks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Her Pleasure. Your Celebration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bollywood Bride! The naughty one who stepped out to see the sky while it’s raining. The adamant one who insisted that her father should beat the drum for her to dance. Today</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
she is getting married. When she sparkles like a star with gold and diamonds, the father who turns her pleasures to celebration is the one who can be proud of.

Brides of India, Malabar Gold and Diamonds

6. Masterpieces

Invaluable Creations of Silk in hues of Celebration

There are some rare beauties that make each celebration dreamlike. There are some masterpieces that exemplify the pleasure of togetherness. Only Lulu Celebrate has those masterpiece creations in silk and in party wear.

Lulu Celebrate, The Bridal World

7. Divine Wedding

The amazing bridal collection with beauty that unfolds in novelty. From Bheema which steps into a century of completeness with the sanctity of one million weddings.

Pavithra Vivaha, Bridal Collection

8. Don’t stare at the Bridal Beauty

Wedland Silk & Sarees

9. Royal are the wedding fantasies now

Sankalp Bridal Collection, Kalyan Jewellers
10. To add glow to the concept of jewellery, with a rare collection of gold and diamond

Parinay, Franchisee of Geetanjali Jewels

11. To give weddings the purity of tradition, the ‘Palakka’ Design collection in one gram gold from Parakkat Jewellery Wear the beauty of ‘Palakka’

Parakkat Jewels

12. Behind every beautiful bride, there’s always a classy blend of traditions

Seematti, The Queen of Silks

The advertisements of wedding merchandise focus on the performative elements of the ritual where the bride creates an event around her. The wedding day is projected more as ‘The Big Day’ or as ‘My Perfect Day’ or a ‘Dream come true’. The micro discourses that culminate here are: Celebration (5, 6 ), Beauty (6,7,8,11,12), Fantasy/ Dream (6,9), Becoming Royal/Being Princess (1, 2, 9), Tradition (12,11), Purity/divinity( 4,7,11), Glow/ Sparkle(3, 5,10), and Pleasure (5,6). This discursive constellation show how the media reconstructs wedding as a fantasy laden cultural event that is dependent upon consumption. Consumption for wedding and the consumption of wedding together create the pleasure. The media production around the wedding presents it as the promise of a relationship, and that also as the only one offered by the culture. Wedding is always featured in a dreamscape or in a fantasy land and a discourse of abundance follows it. All of these texts carry the figure of a bride who is placed alongside these lines. These are
confident brides who look straight at the onlookers. The visual and language games together compose the text that produces the figure of the bride who attains iconic dimensions in the process. This is the figure that would answer the hail “brides of the world” and creates the condition for celebration and pleasure.

The wedding advertisements present the figure of a bride who is on the threshold of a romantic encounter. The ‘dream bride’ projected by the media is always a dreaming bride who makes an ‘about to fly’ effect through the layering of the landscape and the physical body of the bride in space. There are two dominant ways of representing the bridal body in the advertisements. In the first representation, the bride’s body is positioned in the visual text against beautiful and picturesque landscape and places that could invoke a raw or earthy feeling. This representation suggests the sexual and reproductive powers carried by the virgin bride as unbound and untapped and which flows harmoniously with the other elements in nature. In the second scheme, the bridal body is presented inside the inner chamber of the house suggesting the need to tap the unbound sexual and reproductive powers the virgin bride represents. The virginity of the bride is accentuated through these visual techniques and is projected on to an encounter that comes as a gift after long years of waiting. The emotional anticipation presents a pleasurable culmination to long waiting. Placed in the circuits of media and cultural production, the disciplined and docile body of the bride attains iconicity and becomes a cultural figure that acts as the locus of the imperative “to celebrate.”

There is a proliferate discourse around beauty diet regime, gesture and posture and I would like to acknowledge that it is necessary to document these discourses around the bridal subject to understand the
2.2.2. The Production of the Bridal Subject

A person watching the prime time shows (between 7 pm and 10 pm) on any of the popular television channels such as Asianet or Surya TV in Kerala will encounter the figure of a fully adorned bride beaming through the flood of images at least once in seventeen minutes; probably giving this image some synecdochal functions in the representational games\textsuperscript{22}. Anyone taking a casual walk through the streets of Kerala will realize the proliferation of the bridal image. The pavement hoardings carry gigantic figures of brides in full wedding regalia. With the penetration of major jewellery and clothing brands in rural Kerala these images are making their presence felt in the rural spaces too. The changes in the wall posters and hoardings that create the public visual field show the preoccupation with the figure of the bride. Earlier the walls and hoardings were adorned by the faces of political leaders and slogans of political parties, the most popular among them being Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels, Lenin, Gandhi and local leaders of Communist parties and Indian National Congress. In the post 1990’s the walls and hoardings have completely transformed into advertising panels where the ubiquitous production of the same. However, this discussion does not touch upon that ‘work of consuming femininity’. This discussion engages only with the spectacular visual field that contributes to the making of the figure.

\textsuperscript{22}This was a paper & pencil test I conducted in 2010, May as part of the pilot study where I watched the prime time shows (7pm-9pm) of 2 most popular Malayalam television channels Asianet and Surya TV for a week. I have noted down the programme, telecast time and the frequency of the appearance of a bridal image in the programme or as part of the advertisement. I have also kept a column for other images that appear as frequent as bridal image. The results showed that a bridal image is telecasted once in 17 minutes on an average. And no other image came close to this frequency in prime time Malayalam television. It is not easy to produce an analysis of this empirical data. However, if televised images are capable of creating an individuated space of the new bourgeois viewer as Rajadhyaksha (1990) has argued, the emergence of the bridal image as the ubiquitous image this viewer is provided with demands an analysis.
figure that can be found in any street corner is a fully adorned bride. The bodily excess that the figure of the bride carries is augmented with material markers such as gold and silk in this visual representation. To understand the production of meaning in advertising it needs better awareness of the conventions that define the visual culture and it should be placed in a productive dialogue with the visual culture and the consumer culture. In the next section I have made an attempt to read the advertising campaign of one of the major jewellery brand to understand the production of the bridal subject.

Fig: 2. The bridal figure defining the public visual field, a small hoarding of AIYF (the student’s wing of Communist Party of India) can also be seen. Retrieved from http://olsonfarlow.photoshelter.com/image/I0000nG1GkNyLwXw

2.2.3. “Sankalp Bridal Collections:” Bridal Fantasies and Fantasy Brides

This sections attempts to produce an analysis of the advertisements of ‘Sankalp Bridal Collections’ a signature collection from the one of the biggest jewellery in India, Kalyan Jewellery.\(^{23}\) This analysis tries to understand the interplay of representation, identification

\(^{23}\) Kalyan Jewellery, a family -owned business, started as a single shop in Thrissur, a small town in Keralam, in 1993. Since the beginning of this decade it has expanded with outlets in all the major cities of
and consumption that is crucial in the production of the bridal subject in contemporary Keralam.

The name of the bridal collection is very evocative. Sankalp is a word which has its root in Sanskrit and as a concept its genealogy goes back to Vedanta traditions. Etymologically this word means idea, wish, volition, conception or notion formed in the mind or in the heart, desire and intention.24 Sankalp hints towards a mental construction. However it is different from bhavana or imagination, which is again a kind of mental construction. Sankalp addresses the mental constructions originating from desire. Sankalp aligns closely with fantasy than imagination. With its stress on volition and intention Sankalp foregrounds a desiring individual who creates a world out of desire and conversely a world which a desiring individual could inhabit. The Sankalp collection was introduced in the media campaign precisely at the moment Kalyan was creating its first national campaign in 2011. The word can be found in almost all Indian languages and it means almost the same in all of these languages; a fact owing to its Sanskrit roots. The word Sankalp here fuels the pan Indian imagination the brand was nurturing while creating the media campaign. It also induces a fantasy space which the Indian bride could inhabit to become the bride of fantasy. The media campaign around Sankalp creates an ideal case where the regional imagination is translated into pan Indian language and made to resonate with the global flow of texts and images and commodity capitalism. It

India and has become an Indian brand with a highly successful national advertising campaign. In 2014, the American Private Equity (PE) Warburg and Pincus acquired 10% share in the company suggesting the transformation of Kalyan as a global brand from India. The brand ensures that its presence is felt in the regional media with a monthly budget of Rs. 90 Crore for media publicity (Babu, 2015).

24Retrieved from www.spokensanskrit.de
circumvents the usual imagination that the regional is either subsumed under national or it has a disruptive relation with the national. Here the regional imagination is employed to amplify the Indianness and this Indianness is not in a disruptive relation with the global.

I wish to produce an analysis of two television commercials that promoted the Sankalp collection: the 2011 advertisement with Sushmita Sen as the model and the 2014 advertisement with Aiswarya Rai Bachan as the model. The selection of the models reveals the global beauty discourse which informs the image making process. Both Sushmita and Aiswarya were winners of global beauty titles, Miss Universe and Miss World respectively, in 1994. How these two ‘super models’ and the discourse around beauty pageant ushered in a new language of aestheticization which went well with the Neoliberal regime are well documented (Kishwar, 1995; Shresthova, 2008, p. 128-131). The image games were predicated upon their status as being the global face of beautiful Indian womanhood. The thinner and fairer bodies of these super models also displaced the regional film stars who had comparatively limited access to global beauty regimes.

Both the 2011 advertisement and the 2014 advertisement kept to similar plots. Both involved the transformation of the bride to princess. They started with an already beautiful and princess-like bride waking up to the wedding day. The day is portrayed as an extension of the dream or the fantasy. The interior of the house through which the brides floats along suggests it to be a space of wealth and opulence. The next shot is of the bridesmaids or friends of the bride helping the woman to adorn herself as the bride – the centre of the event – the wedding. The 2011 advertisement shows a beautiful and confident Sushmita, together with her friends, looking at a mirror and then she moves
alone to the platform where the wedding is about to happen. There she stands alone for a moment and the next is a close shot of the groom’s hand placing the floral garland around her neck; the face of the groom is conspicuously absent. The advertisement ends with a classic act of unveiling where the model Sushmita removes her bridal veil partially to reveal her face and makes seductive gaze. The frame freezes there with the words Sankalp Bridal Collection and Kalyan Jewellers imprinted on the frame. In the 2014 advertisement, as the bride progresses with wearing each piece in the bridal collection the place transforms into a traditional Indian palace. She witnesses the transformation happening to her on the mirror. The white walls change into red and golden hues with heavy carpets rolling out as she walks and the car transforms into a chariot. The end shot is almost similar to the earlier advertisement where it involves a mid range shot of the bride’s unveiling and seductive gaze. The sound tracks of the advertisements are a humming music inspired by classical Indian music and the only words that both the advertisements carry in visual and audio tracks are “Sankalp Bridal Collections from Kalyan Jewellers”.

It is possible to find all the major concepts around a wedding playing out in these ads such as celebration, beauty, excess and abundance. This advertisement campaign carefully employs techniques that suggest the co-production of two subject positions being in bridal fantasy and being the fantasy bride. The advertisements present a space that evokes the ‘bygone era’ or ‘ancient traditions’. The furniture, the carpets and all the other objects found in the space evoke a palace. The spaces presented are in stark contrast with the contemporary Indian living spaces that appear in the advertisements of a detergent or of tea. The physical space depicted amplifies the trope of fantasy the
advertisements carefully employ. The image management of the advertisements suggest that these are brides who are coming from elsewhere. They definitely do not belong to the everyday and the ordinary. They are presented as two fairytale brides who would normally inhabit the space of fantasy. The seemingly uninterrupted flow of images from sleeping to waking confounds the distinction between the two stages as in an ideal situation of fantasy. The brides inhabit the fantasy and the fantasy is that of being a bride. The advertisements suggest the complex process of being in fantasy and becoming fantasy, fading the distinction between the two.

An analysis of a shot that has been faithfully reproduced in both advertisements further reveals this play of fantasy. It is the scene of the bride looking into the mirror and looking upon her own reflection in the mirror. This is a fleeting moment, placed in the middle of both the advertisements without adding any additional narrative weight on it. However I would like to argue that this image is crucial in understanding the production of the figure of the bride who is at the centre of the wedding and gives an opportunity to understand the interplay of representational games and the production of subjectivities. In the 2014 advertisement while the bride looks, she and the mirror metamorphose simultaneously. The mirror is not static and it does not claim to be a true reflection. But it helps one to see the way one wants to see oneself and in the process transforms itself into an object in one’s fantasy. The transformation of the mirror along with the images makes it an ideal metaphor to understand the making and managing of images and subjectivities and their interconnection. Schroeder (2004) has argued that mirror is the root metaphor to understand consumer society.
The mirror remains a root metaphor of the consumer society, reflecting surface appearance, beckoning us to look, to compare, and to dream, and exposing us as exhibited objects for visual consumption. Like a fetish, mirrors express social and psychological tensions, of appearance versus truth, for example, yet catch the viewer within a circuit of representation, vanity, and consumption. Moreover, these ads use of advertising billboards—images within images—implies them within a kind of funhouse mirror, endlessly reflecting consumer visions, perpetually displacing resolution, and continuously referring back on themselves in a parable of the consumption spectacle. In this way, the act of looking—looking at products, others, oneself, ads, and images—reconfigures the subject of consumption. (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004, p. 46)

In the 2011 advertisement it is not just the bride who is looking at the mirror, her friends too looks at her reflection eagerly. While she looks at the mirror with confidence, her friends express excitement in the consumption of the mirror image. The eagerness her friends show in consuming the image on the mirror disrupts the gaze doubly and confounds the notion that the gaze always presupposes an opposite sex desire to fuel it. The friends who look at the bridal image in the mirror install a gaze that has homoerotic undertones. It is possible to argue that the ‘work of consuming femininity,’ not just creates sites of collective identification but is capable of dethroning the male onlooker. It is not a permanent dethroning as the next moment suggests the confident bride leaving her friends there, stepping on to the wedding stage alone and receiving the garland from the groom’s hands. But there is a conspicuous absence of grooms in both the ads. The first advertisement presents the hand of the groom and in the second advertisement the groom is an absent referent.
The Sankalp bridal collection also presents an equally popular print advertisement series which appeared prominently in newspapers and magazines. As in the case of the television commercial, the advertisements also had a 2011 version and a 2014 version where Sushmita and Aiswarya respectively appear as models. The 2014 print ad has the fully adorned Aiswarya sitting on the door steps of a palanquin and the palanquin is placed inside a dimly lit chamber. She looks like a princess/bride who has either reached the groom’s palace or is about to start the journey from the inner chamber of her palace. The Malayalam tagline that accompanies this visual is “Royal are the wedding fantasies now” (*Rajakeeyam ini Vivaaha Sankal pangal*). The English tagline is “Jewellery so
Royal. Every bride looks a Princess”. The Malayalam ad has the bride looking straight at the camera and the English ad has the bride who averts her gaze. The 2011 ad has no tagline, but it presents three gazes of the bride – the one who looks away and the one who looks at the camera or at the onlooker and the one who looks down with an expression of mirth or fun. These advertising images combine the traditional and conventional representation schemes with new modes of representation.

The bride who looks away or looks down represents the conventional representational scheme where women are generally represented as the objects of male gaze or who are demure about looking straight into the eyes of the onlooker. This position of “averted gaze” has invited much theoretical discussion on interplay of gaze, power and desire (Dyer, 1982). It is argued that the averted gaze acknowledges the gaze of the viewer and becomes the passive object in the process. The Sankalp bride not only acknowledges, but she also allows or even anticipates the objectification that accompanies the gaze. In her attempt to avert the gaze of the camera and the onlooker she does not look at any other object. In both the cases the bride appears with half closed eyes and with a mild and glowing smile suggesting the pleasure she has in becoming the object of the other’s gaze. This representation goes well with all the assumptions Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975) puts forward regarding the objectifying gaze where women could only identify with self as an object.
But who is the bride who looks straight into the camera and into the onlooker’s eyes? She is the new bride who represents the new subject position the bride has come to inhabit in the new order. She, by looking straight into the camera, takes up the subject position reserved for the man in the representational schemes. The nonchalant and confident gaze directed by the bride represents nothing but authority, if not power. She is the one who knows what she wants and she is in total control of the situation. This confidence and control is totally dependent upon the consumption of her own fantasy. This is a pleasurable state where there is no difference between her thoughts and her experiences, her body and her mind, fantasy and reality. The bride being a quintessentially feminine figure, the performance of autonomy and control doubles the message. Unlike Laura

25 Laura Mulvey in her essay “After thoughts on Visual Pleasure in narrative Cinema” ponders over the question of the female spectator and contends that the female spectator oscillates between masculine and feminine positions and is “echoed by the woman spectators masculine point of view” (Mulvey, 1981, p. 30).
 Mulvey’s female spectator who has to undergo transvestitism to enjoy the gaze, here she becomes the bearer of the gaze in her bridal dress. This bride will be more at ease with Doane’s (Doane, 1982) “feminine” spectator who can ‘play at being a woman’. The images not just represent the new woman who embraces femininity in an assertive way, but also connotes the amplification of the feminine attributes by the market that give her the status of spectator. There have been attempts to understand this new subject position offered to women by commodity capitalism. This subject comes close to the formulation of the post feminist subject (Tasker and Negra, 2007) who has surpassed the phase of feminist critique and who is already empowered through her entitlement to consumption. By deploying the two gaze together the Sankalp campaign hints at the dynamics of power and desire that govern the production of the new bride. It is the aesthetic and stylistic blending of these two positions that create the new bride who creates and consumes her own bridal fantasies. The next section tries to place this bridal figure in the event of the First Night to see the contestations over signification that the figure anchors around it.

3. **First Night: The Event**

   **“A Japanese Couple’s First Night**

   Husband.."Sutaki"
   Wife.."Kowanini?"
   Husband..."Toka anji rodi romi hoa yako"
   Wife..."Mimi yoa nakodinda tinkuji"
   Husband..."Na miaou kina tim kouji"
   Wife..."su ki kina mato?"
   Husband..."Sako teetee yoomi che"
Wife. . . "Mmmmmmmmm"

... 

Oh! You are incredible! Even if you don’t understand a single word you keep on reading listening to the word First Night.”

This is a popular Malayalam joke which is still doing the rounds in new media, while I am writing these lines. It came with the title ‘A First Night Joke’ and thus it can be treated as a meta joke on the sub genre ‘First Night joke’ and reveals the kind of curiosity accumulated around First Night in the culture and the need to narrativize the event in the form of stories and jokes. Through invoking curiosity and addressing the very curiosity frontally, this joke reverses the gaze in a playful way to the scopophilia that structures the gaze. Such an addressal is made possible by the presence of a foreign language which forms an obstacle to the flow of meaning, disrupting the narrative climax. The joke operates by suspending the sexual and the textual elements structuring a typical First Night narrative. This joke offers an entry point to make sense of the games at work in relation to First Night. It draws attention to the cultural labour involved in meaning making and foregrounds how culture informs the cognitive and affective networks that operate in the making of an event.

26 There are many versions of the joke. The current version can be found at http://whatsappfunnyjoke.blogspot.com

27 The joke also made me reflect upon my own competence and training in reading or understanding the intimate. I am reminded again of the salience of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s stand that writing on the postcolonial Indian intimate is like attempting “to write ‘French’ social history with Indian material.”(Chakrabarty, 2000, p.35)
The anticipation that there will be a story lurking beneath this foreign language is a culturally produced one. It is possible to say that the First Night is an event produced in talk. The cultural meaning of the event is produced discursively through the First Night talk that proliferates in the culture along with the stabilization of conjugality.\textsuperscript{28} In contemporary Keralam, one can find copious representations of First Night in a variety of texts, ranging from women's magazines, material for psychological counseling, premarital courses, fictional constructions, autobiographies, popular cinematic representations to advertisements. These representations place First Night as a dominant or visible practice within contemporary Keralam. In most of them, First Night appears as a micro-event which bears within it the promise of a relationship. The representations treat it as the threshold between being single and being in a relationship. The idea here is that First Night will be the first sexual encounter for both man and woman, though that might not be the case; it is still assumed to be the context for the first sexual relation. In that sense, First Night represents the anxieties involved in imagining monogamous heterosexual couples. It is possible to find a strong disciplining strand in the discourse which shapes First Night; as a reward for the internally disciplined life. For instance, in many of the representations, the bride’s virginity attains significant visibility and it is assumed that only a virgin bride becomes a ‘chaste’ wife, who later clinches the pleasures to be had from monogamous conjugality. At the same time there is a discourse around

\textsuperscript{28} The absence of reference to First Night in classic or ancient Malayalam texts and the explosion of ‘First Night talk’ in modern Malayalam literature and cinema push me to argue that First Night must be a relatively new site formed along with the formation of the modern conjugal unit. A detailed examination of the emergence of First Night is attempted in the next chapter.
consumption which works with the notion of romantic love. Both of these contradictory discourses, which are mapped in detail in the previous sections, are inscribed on this micro-site creating the spectacle of the First Night.

See the description of First Night by a famous theatre person and writer N. N. Pilla and I quote it for its representational value since many discourses that produce First Night in the culture converge here in a condensed way.

‘First Night’! This is the night, where in a modern society; a man and woman are initiated to life actualization. This is the night where the gunpowder castles of vital forces are set to fire for the first time. This is the night where the rocket of suppressed emotions explodes and reaches out to the outer sky of life. This is the night where the seal of future is broken. There is no night like this before. The nights before and after are mere nights. …This is the night where anticipation, anxiety, apprehensions and assumptions pressure up the nervous system to an exploding level.

(Pillai, N.N, 1970, p. 92)

The first thing one might notice about this description is the creation of an affect laden space with sexually charged metaphors. The description draws energy from the impending sexual encounter. The metaphor of explosion is central to this description and this metaphor aligns closely with the popular understanding of male sexuality and virility. Through its reference to ‘seal breaking’ it reproduces the popular idea of the virginal body too. The man becomes the seal breaker and the woman becomes the envelop that carries the seal and what is inside the envelop is the ‘future’. This representation of
sexual relation is crucial for the performance and maintenance of heterosexuality as an institution. This description foregrounds the body in a major way. The body in First Night is no normal body – it is a body which is on the verge of explosion. The explosion comes from sexual pressure and also from the cultural pressures of “anticipation, anxiety, apprehensions and assumptions”. The description identifies and captures the encounter between sex and culture as an important encounter that creates First Night and it presents the body as the locus of this encounter. By presenting First Night as a significant night that divides all nights to before and after it, this representation touches upon another popular idea around First Night. It positions the status of First Night as an event subsumed under the registers of everyday and yet has the ability to structure the everyday. First night is a self proclaimed event of love, intimacy and erotic pleasure in popular representation. The affective weight of the event must be explanatory of the narrative proliferation around this moment. Placed at the doorsteps of a relation this threshold event makes narrativization essential. This is the ‘happening night’ which presupposes the question ‘what happened on that night.’ The answers generated are either ‘it happened’ or ‘nothing happened’ ruling out the possibility for other imaginations. The narratives of First Night are anchored around penetrative sex. Whether a couple has engaged in penetrative sex defines the nature of the night. In some representations ‘doing it’ defines a successful First Night and in some other instances ‘not doing it’ defines the success. First night being a dynamic event, all the norms defining the event are constantly renegotiated. However the centrality of penetrative sex in defining the event is

29 A detailed analysis of ‘doing’ and ‘not doing’ is attempted in the fourth chapter.
not disputed. This again foregrounds the figure of the virgin as the body upon which the act is sanctioned.

### 3.1. Wedding Ragging

The practice of wedding ragging is important to understanding what First Night really stands for in the culture. It is a recent phenomenon in which the bridegroom’s friends play pranks on the bride and groom on the wedding day and night. The practice of playing pranks is not a recent one and the wedding songs and rituals documented among different religious and caste groups in Keralam in the nineteenth century show that friends and family members used to play pranks on the bride and bridegroom on the night before the wedding and on the wedding night. These practices were treated as a part of the ritual and usually involved sexually suggestive songs and performances. The practice which is discussed here is a recent one and is referred to as wedding ragging by media and in popular culture as they do not fall into the repertoire of wedding rituals followed by different social and religious groups. The pranks involved in wedding ragging can be innocent ones to serious ones hurting the bride and groom physically, mentally, and emotionally. This practice of wedding ragging had started in the northern parts of Keralam and is now widespread throughout the state; but is more prevalent in northern Keralam. A cursory look at the newspapers reveals many instances of wedding ragging. Those that receive media attention are the ones which had grown out of proportion to the extent of destroying the wedding it anticipates. One famous instance of wedding ragging is where the groom’s friend appeared instead of the groom to tie the knot. The bride’s side, seeing another guy in place of the groom backed out of the wedding instantly,
accusing the groom to be “spineless”; one who does not know how to control his friends (K K Shahina, 2011). Another instance includes blowing crackers outside the nuptial chamber on the wedding night, leading to the bride suffering permanent loss of hearing. The practice of wedding ragging has even inspired a movie named *Malabar Wedding* (2008) which revolves around a series of wedding ragging episodes. What makes this practice worth examining is the performative element in it. Through parodying a culturally valued moment, this practice disrupts the naturalness associated with the wedding schema. For instance, one of the major and oft-repeated pranks is stopping the wedding procession in the middle of the road and forcing the bride and groom to step out of the car that is adorned with flowers and ribbons, and to make them board a JCB earth remover, bullock cart or garbage vehicle. This disrupts the spectacle of the wedding and reveals the culturally made up edifice of the ritual and by upsetting the cultural script the onlookers are also forced to move out of the fantasy. It is this disillusionment which fuelled the intervention of the community and political parties in Northern Kerala. Their attempts to curtail the practice are justified by the validity of wedding as a sanctified moment of relation and the acts of the bridegroom’s friends are branded as ‘hooliganism’. 

Elizabeth Freeman observes about the theatrical and symbolic aspects of the wedding ritual, “Wedding actually vacillates between restrictive and expansive visions of the social, between elevating the couple and displaying alongside them the very things that compete with couplehood - ties with extended kin, social and religious

30 For instance the CPI(M) leader who took the initiative in bringing together different political parties and community leaders in opposing the practice of wedding ragging attributes this practice to alcoholism. He says, “In all incidents, the youngsters indulging in hooliganism were heavily drunk. They feel no remorse in spoiling such a precious moment of someone’s life.” (K.K Shahina, 2011).
movements, friends” (Freeman, 2002, p. 11). So what the community leaders might think of as irresponsible alcoholism can also be treated as a point of resistance to the primacy of wedding and couplehood.

Another and possibly the favourite site of wedding ragging is the bedroom. Bedroom is imagined as the space where the wedding rite unofficially ends. The bedroom here becomes the site where the romantic teleology reaches its culmination point through consummation. Most often the ragging involves sprinkling itching powder on the nuptial bed, removing the hooks of the windowpane of the couple’s bedroom, cracking explosives outside the bedroom and making the groom drink alcohol before he enters the nuptial chamber for ‘First Night’. All of these practices in one way or another try to disrupt the ‘natural’ resolution of the wedding narrative which is consummation. If the nuptial chamber is created through the closure of the doors and windows, it is precisely this facility which is disrupted through the acts of wedding ragging. All these practices suggest the community’s imagination of a ‘happening night’ and provide a glimpse of the kind of anxieties that govern this night.

3.2. The Nuptial Chamber

Wedding ragging foregrounds the physical space of First Night –the bedroom/the nuptial chamber. The nuptial chamber is not an ordinary bedroom. This is a space that is created through closure. A closure of the bedroom door marks the making of the space. The wedding ragging works precisely at this point and tries to bring crisis to this space through removing the lock of the door or the hooks of the window pane. It might not (only) be the voyeuristic male gaze which is getting projected here but a community’s
anxieties around an exchange that is constitutive of it. Without the closure the bedroom cannot become the nuptial chamber. The emphasis is on viewing and it is reaffirmed through references to the spatial organization of the bedroom. This also positions the bride and groom as spectacles upon whom public gaze can be directed. Following is a discussion that tries to understand the dynamic production of the nuptial chamber and the subjects who inhabit the nuptial chamber.

One of my informants who is in her forties and a divorcee showed me the video of her marriage which happened twenty five years ago. The end shot of the video showed her as a reluctant and shy bride who is being pushed into the bedroom by her friends. The faces of her friends are not visible, but one could sense the push from behind, which lands her inside the room. The video ends with the image of the closed door where many heart shaped bubbles appears. This was one of the common end shots of marriage videos in the eighties. This was also the time when the very idea of marriage video was getting popularized in Keralam. Janaky Abraham in her study on the marriage videos in Northern Keralam (Abraham, 2001) talks about the “Dream Sequences” that appear as an indispensable part of the marriage videos of the nineties. The sequence she says varies as per the imagination of the videographer but generally involves a careful documentation of the bedroom, and the groom is represented as sitting or lying on the cot ‘dreaming’ (of) the bride. Even now, the bedroom is an essential part of the documentation in most of the marriage videos\textsuperscript{31}. Similar to what Abraham has pointed out, the picturisation of the

\textsuperscript{31}Marriage Videos respond to the broader sociological shifts and consumption patterns and vary greatly over time and space. Marriage videos commissioned by the upwardly mobile upper caste people are
bedroom is often found in the videos commissioned by the groom. In most videos the scene ends with the figure of the groom who is enacting the ‘waiting’ sitting at the edge of the cot. The bride appears in the dream in full bridal regalia and the dream is interspersed with scenes of rivers, flowers, meadows and birds. It is observed that the aesthetics of popular films is reproduced in these narratives to invoke ‘romance’ (Dyer as cited in Abraham, 2001).

*Maniyara* is the Malayalam word for nuptial chamber which is a qualified version of *ara* – roughly translated as room. *Ara* generally stands for a room with fixed door and the word is also used to refer to the storage space for grain. This room is usually dark and a non-aerated space. *Mani* is an adjective which means special or beautiful. The existence of a separate word in the language itself suggests the presence of a space as distinctly identifiable from everyday space. How does one understand the production of the space of *maniyara*? This section tries to address the production of the space “*maniyara*”- the nuptial chamber – in relation to the exchange that happens *through* that space. This reading does not consider space as a fixed entity which provides a backdrop to map the exchange. Taking cue from the recent debates in the area of cultural geography which presupposes a connection between the production of spaces and production of subjectivity, this inquiry looks at the production of subjectivity not *in* or *on* a space, but rather *through* space (Massey, 1994; Rendell, 2002). The perceptual difference cultural geography and feminist geography together try to instil, foregrounds the need to re-think both the terms space and subjectivity where both are imagined to be emerging coming out of the ‘documentation’ mode and experiment freely with more exotic locations. However, the basic tone and mood of the videos remain the same.
simultaneously. They have tried to ‘rip open’ the static notions of space and subjectivity with their commitment to flowing spaces and fluid subjectivities. In this conception, subjectivity does not correspond to the interiority of space. These notions are important in this discussion of the making of a space and an exchange that is characterized by closure, constraints and entrapment. Feminist geography has argued for an understanding where the constraints of the physical spaces pose constraints of experience and constraints of subjectivity. This analysis tries to understand how the time–space of nuptial chamber affects the subjects, their movements and their actions. My attempt is to ask how this space corresponds to the nature of the exchange which First Night embodies.

Udaya Kumar (Kumar, 1997) in his compelling analysis of an episode from C. Keshavan’s mother-in-law’s life has shown how the desiring subject and notions of interiority are produced through the discourse of modernity. He analyses the story of C. Keshavan’s mother-in-law wearing the blouse for the first time against the then existing social conventions and then removing it instantly fearing punishment from her mother. She decides to wear it secretly at nights in the privacy of her bedchamber for her husband to see. The act of wearing the blouse becomes a transgressive act when she crosses the boundary of the private space – the bedroom. Engaging carefully with this reading helps to see it was also about the production of a space which the desiring subject could inhabit. I would like to argue that this is the space which has later become the bedroom in the box houses of the seventies.

This is a project where modernity, architectural shifts and production of spaces and subjectivities converge. The making of the Malayali house should be understood in
relation to the emergence of modernity and the modern individuals in Keralam (Anonymous, 2012, p. 150). Malayali Modernity as a project tried to emerge above caste and religious differences. Those who had acquired the cultural resources of modernity tried to become individuals and their individuated selves and privacy needed a space to dwell. The emergence of the ‘small box houses’ (*petti veedukal*) in Keralam is understood in relation to that. The arrangement of bodies in a *Nalukettu* – the traditional dwelling space of the upper caste groups – does not acknowledge individuals (ibid, p. 148). It has dark corners where desire and carnal pleasures are kept hidden and helps to produce and retain a public space that is free from desire and where tradition controls the movement of bodies. It was this dark corner of the *Naalukettu* which was expanded in the box houses to provide a dwelling space to the modern individual and ‘his’ privacy. It is observed that in the making of the Malayali house “it was actually the darkness of tradition which was illuminated as the light of modernity” (Ibid, p. 150). The box houses can be analyzed for the arrangement of bodies it allows. It has a common area and a back end. This common area falls in the front of the house and it is the space marked by the movement of the head of the household and the back end is the feminine space of labour.

The bedroom in this scheme belongs to the front end and thus falls under the patriarchal surveillance. Even the smallest scale replica of box houses such as houses built under government schemes faithfully re-produces this logic of space.

The nuptial chamber is not an empty space; objects are also arranged in this space along with bodies. A conventional nuptial chamber has objects carefully and aesthetically arranged in the chamber inviting gazes. These are usually not everyday objects. Most often they are ornamental objects or everyday objects used in an ornamental way. In the
past amongst most communities making/creating the *maniyara* involved highly ritualistic elements. Now the cinematic representation creates a blueprint of the *maniyara* for the modern individual. The major elements in them are the floral garlands used to decorate the cot and a glass of milk and tray of fruits. The making of the nuptial chamber these days involves conspicuous consumption. This involves utilization and presence of expensive electronic gadgets, mats, cushions, bedspreads and comforters.

The nuptial chamber is a transient space which emerges from the registers of the above discussed modern Malayali ‘home’ and goes back to the everyday spatiality of the home. It is coded in the conventional housing designs and finance schemes and it is by converting the nuptial chamber to the ‘master’ bedroom that heterosexuality is naturalized within the home. But nuptial chamber is no ordinary bedroom. It is a time-space that becomes the locus of exchange. Or in other words it corresponds to the spatiality of time and temporality of space and corresponds to the latency of meaning and exchange. Being a space that inhabits the edge of time, the nuptial chamber could easily transmute into the facade of the Master bedroom and ensures the servitude of the woman for the preservation of the act of male possession. The closure of the door as it is represented in the marriage videos suggests the creation of both a material space and a

32 The description of *maniyara* circulating as an internet joke falls under a compilation of the clichés in Malayalam Cinema. It describes the *maniyara* as follows: “Whether it is upper class, middle class or lower class the First Night set up is the same in Malayalam cinema. The most important thing in it is the nuptial cot decorated with jasmine garlands. The groom wearing a sandal coloured shirt and white Mundu will be waiting on the cot as if he is a butcher waiting for his prey. Then we see a small movement at the door. The bride wearing set mundu and all her jewellery enters with a glass of milk.” (“First Night in Malayalam Cinema: The usual Formulas”, 2011).
mental space for the exchange where the exchange can be t(r)apped for the benefit of the patriarchal institution of marriage.

The use of mental space has its connection with the notion of psychic space and oeniric space employed by Bachelard (Bachelard[1958], 1994) in *Poetics of Space*. These concepts are useful as beginning points to think about the interaction between physical space and psychic spaces. Bachelard’s thinking offers rich conceptual registers to address the question of the production of spaces and subjectivities in their mutual imbrications. However the current project wishes to hold onto the feminist critique of production spaces as a masculine exercise. When Bachelard talks about a space that is at the “edges of the imagination, recesses of the psyche, the hallways of the mind” (Bachelard [1958], 1994, p. vii) it resonates well with the nuptial chamber as space. But this project still hasn’t found a way to address those “phenomenological resonances” without losing the voice of the women who shared their experience of First Night, and where escape from the nuptial chamber came up as a recurring theme. In most of my interviews with women on the experience of First Night, they at least fleetingly made a reference to an attempt by someone (known to or totally unknown to them) to ‘escape’ the nuptial chamber and how almost all of them failed in their attempt to escape. It is necessary to think what makes such ideas of transgression a recurring theme in these narratives. The feminist musings on house and home considers both as possessions of man. The woman preserves them with her labour but she is homeless and derelict.\(^\text{33}\) A dialogue between Bachelard’s ‘poetics of

\[\text{33}\] See (Young, 2005, p. 256-257) for detailed discussion on the physical homelessness of women and the homelessness in language. Drawing from Irigaray she argues that woman functions for man as his ground
space’ where home is read as ‘protection’ and ‘shelter’ and the feminists contention of home as “prison house” (Young, 2005) will be fruitful when asking questions about the production of bounded space, and fixed identities. This inquiry will also be helpful in seeing how sexual difference is implicated in the production of bounded spaces or a more foundational question would be what brings in bounded-ness to space.

Rendell (Rendell, 2002) while trying to create a dynamic analysis of gendered space uses Irigaray’s notion of exchange where gendered space is understood as the “space where men are represented as exchanging and moving and women are represented as moved or exchanged between men” (ibid, p. 15). She argues that the spatial patterns composed between man and woman describes “a choreography of desire: of mobility – freedom and constraint/connection and separation and of visuality – looking and being looked at/display and secrecy” (ibid, p. 15). Though she does not call the space produced in Patriarchy as “prison house” as Young (Young, 2005) does, Rendell too considers the production of bounded spaces as a crucial site that needs further examination. She extends her analysis on flowing spaces and fluid subjectivities with two notions: Irigaray’s concept of Angel and Rosi Braidotti’s concept of ‘Nomadic Subject.’ Refusal to fixity is a primary concern defining both these feminine figures and the spaces they inhabit. Rendell’s analysis show how there is a “disavowal to the refusal to fixity in the production of bounded spaces”. This analysis holds true for the production of the nuptial chamber and the production of the bridal subjects where bounded-ness corresponds to the creation of a fixed identity out of flowing subjectivity.

for subjectivity and using her as his envelope he makes ‘his own room’. This leaves the woman with nothing to deal with her own groundlessness and she is left homeless and derelict.
4. **An Event In Excess**

The above discussion has attempted to demonstrate the semantic and erotic excess associated with the practice of First Night which makes it a readily observable cultural location within the given culture. But this discussion is incomplete without an engagement with the kind of cultural production that leads to the creation of excess value. The discussion so far was an attempt to show there is cultural preoccupation around this moment. But that can be said about any moment in a culture. May be one of the problems with a culturalist explanation is this inability to account for the cultural specificity of a practice or its inability to say what is cultural of a moment that needs explanation. When confronted with such a moment, cultural studies turns to ‘cultural production’ and tries to explain the ‘cultural’ through invoking “circuits of cultural production” and “circuits of consumption”. But of late this idea of ‘cultural production’ itself has been critiqued for its lack of theory of Capital.\(^{34}\) Taking cue from this critique this project makes an attempt to move away from a culturalist explanation of a cultural phenomenon, instead tries to think through the existing theorizations of the political economy of marriage in India.

This analysis tries to engage with the notion of exchange that has framed the discussions so far. The discussion extends the notion of the political economy of marriage to an erotic

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\(^{34}\) One of the major critiques in this direction was made by none other than Stuart Hall. In his later works he has predicted that cultural studies will “have to return to the fundamental category of Capital” (Hall, 1996 c.f Hennessy, 2000, p. 84)
economy of the intimate where the sexual exchange that constitutes First Night will come up for a close examination. Most of the Indian attempts to engage with the political economy of marriage has treated dowry as the point of contestation. The conventional feminist scholarship employs a Marxist understanding of commerce, commodity and exchange to understand dowry and treats the material wealth exchanged with a bride as the reason for commodification of women. As per this scheme “marrying off” a woman without any material gifts would take away the problem. The problem with this critique is that it cannot address the commodification of women which is constitutive of marriage. I do not wish to discount the efforts of early feminism in India to empower women to fight against the inequalities of the institution of marriage through its campaign against dowry. For instance, it was through the feminist intervention that the name “dowry death” was put into circulation to describe the ‘accidental deaths of newlywed bride at the grooms place’.

In contemporary times also feminist activists and scholars insist on using “groom’s price” instead of dowry to denaturalize it and to remove the respectability it enjoys in a culture. While agreeing completely with this politics of naming, this project wishes to invoke Irigaray’s conceptualization of the virgin as commodity to explain the trails of excess First Night carries with it.

The introductory discussion of the thesis presented Irigaray’s conceptualization of commerce where she takes up the Marxian idea of commerce and commodity and uses it

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35 Dowry death was strategically deployed by Indian feminism of the 70s and 80s. The political mobilizations against dowry death were instrumental in the formation of one of the earliest feminist organization, Manushi and its magazine with the same name. Madhu Kishwar (Madhu Kishwar, 1986a, 1986 b, 1988, 1989, 1993) documents both the struggle and relevance of the dowry question in understanding Indian patriarchy.
against itself. This discussion helps to see why a political economy of marriage is not sufficient to understand the production and re-production of patriarchy. The theoretical stance of virgin as pure exchange value reverses the dowry argument and shows it is not gold and diamond which is giving bride the value. But bride being the foundational social currency gives value to gold and diamond. However, the script becomes patriarchal when we are unable to recognize and account for the exchange in women or commerce in virgin as the foundational exchange that produce not just value, but also “the society we know, and our own culture” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 172).

Conclusion

This thesis, while problematizing the hypervisibility of first night in culture and the invisibility of it in scholarship has argued in the Introduction that First Night becomes the cultural blind spot of patriarchy. The current chapter engaged with the question of cultural locations has made an attempt to document the incitement to discourse that makes First Night the cultural blind spot. What made First Night a site of inquiry was its status as an event produced in the registers of marriage and its resistance to be subsumed completely under the institutional registers of marriage. This inquiry documented a regulative discourse around sexuality that deploys virginity and chastity as markers of culturally valued female body and femininity. There is an equally strong strand of discourse where the idea of pleasure and consumption converge to the effect of projecting wedding as a site of pleasure. These two discourses together produce the figure of the virgin bride and the event of First Night and they converge towards a cultural location marked with pleasure and ecstasy. The discussion employed Linda Singer’s formulation
“panic logic of sexuality” (1993, p.28) which considers discipline as that which outstrips its regulatory means, proliferating the very site it seeks to control. This understanding of discipline is important to understand the making of First Night as a recognizable cultural event. Taking cue from Singer, the chapter argued that the panic logic and the proliferative economy accompanying it create First Night as a site of excess (value), which in turn creates sites of cultural position for modern erotic speech. The chapter also attempted for a more complex reading of the ‘regional’ than one placing it as a local “male-dom” against a global culture of sexual permissiveness. The meaning-making around First Night combines both global and regional strands of pleasure and control where a language of coercion and a language of desire give way to a self-regulated politics of ecstasy that provides a new location for erotic speech.

The thesis tries to listen to this erotic speech in chapters 4 and 5; in Chapter 4 it appears as the effect of a psychologising discourse, while in Chapter 5 this speech is placed at the fissures of the psychologising discourses. In order to listen to this speech, as a beginning exercise, the thesis tries to produce a genealogy of the virgin bride who is at the centre of the event of First Night. This exercise is crucial not to lose sight of the dynamic nature of contemporaneity where it operates with notions of latency in time and meaning [a point discussed in the introduction of the thesis while delineating the expression ‘contemporary Keralam’]. The next chapter is a turn to the archival – a turn that helps the thesis work with ‘knotted time’, and displace linear narratives of transformation of matriliny, and create space for a speech which carries elements of the past in displaced and condensed forms. The next chapter historicizes the idea of virginity, and documents the nineteenth
century contestations in Keralam over the body of the virgin where a virgin bride is produced from culturally circulating ideas of virgin and bride