Conclusion

Understanding the Erotic Economy of the Intimate

1. First Night as Site, Research Problem and a Relational Method

This thesis is forged by the questions thrown up by the practice of First Night. The first three chapters of the thesis treated First Night as a discursive event and tried to document 1) how First Night emerges as an ‘event’ which carries traces of both semantic and erotic excess, 2) how the event emerges through re-negotiations over lineage and inheritance practices, and 3) how it later becomes the ‘surface of emergence’ to observe the psychologizing discourses crucial to ‘subject formation’ in contemporary Keralam. The last chapter tried to attend to the experience of First Night through a turn to narratives – a psychoanalytically informed turn that focussed on the active reconstructions at work while retrieving experience. The attempt there was to get to the lived and memorialized aspects of the experience of First Night.¹

The hope or the promise of the thesis was the possibility of a dialogue between the discursive and the lived, lived in the sense of being experienced. And it has expressed its apprehensions in bringing these two to a face-to-face encounter. This methodological move – and the move can be questioned – invokes the ‘scene’ of First Night. As we have seen in the case of First Night, the relationship imagined between the two is a difficult one. The inquiry too imagined a difficult relationship when it suggested that the method

¹A recent attempt to bring ‘lived experience’ back to debate was done by Guru and Sarukkai (2012) in their work The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory. This work invokes ‘lived experience’ in the phenomenological mode as theory’s other and its source.
“far from seeking immediately to integrate one into another, will hold them separate until
the reciprocal involvement comes to pass of itself”. ‘Reciprocal involvement’ suggests
that the success of the method is similar to that of the success of the night. Success is not
when either of the strands ‘do it’ and ‘do away’ the other in the process; success is rather
in the reciprocity, the two-ness, the two-ness of the sexed couple, as also in the sexuated-
ness of the two/couple, as this work has tried to highlight. Given the patriarchal histories
of South Asia and Keralam in particular, does the man of the sexuated couple represent
the side of discourse, while woman represents the side of experience? But then that
would be too simple, immobile and essentialised a position. The ‘methodological two-
ness’ thus does not represent the secure two of the sexed couple; it represents the
ambivalence of the relationship, more akin to the Lacanian maxim there is no such thing
as a sexual relationship. This then is what could be called a “relational method”
(Gilligan, 2003) where one register perpetually invokes the other, unsettles the other,
anticipates the other and displaces the other. It shows that First Night is not just an
empirical site ‘secreted out’ in the production of knowledge; rather ‘it’ itself, in itself,
becomes a research question and a method. In an inquiry that adopts a relational method,
the ‘success’ or efficacy of the inquiry is in the promise of the relation; it is in looking for
the possibility of reciprocity. The question is whether they have started talking to each
other. I believe there were some attempts towards such a dialogue; difficult albeit. I will
try to give an account of the dialogue through an examination of how this dialogue
affected the concept the thesis began with and the concept it wanted to arrive at. These
concepts are the ‘intimate’ and ‘erotic economy’, respectively.

2. ‘Intimate’ as a New Location
The thesis deployed the notion of intimate when it was confronted with the dichotomous thinking generated by the public/private binary. This kind of binary thinking was not found to be enabling and was rendering the inquiry either as the ‘inaccessible private’ or as ‘always already public’, thus, in turn, producing and perpetuating another binary. The thesis deployed intimate as a conceptual handle to foreground the site of First Night out of the dominant registers of social scientific inquiry around marriage, family and kinship. As a preliminary exercise, the deployment of this notion demanded two conceptual beyonds in thinking: beyond the public and the private; and beyond sociologism that lacks ‘psychic significance’ and psychologism that lacks social significance. Though ‘intimate’ was used for the want of a better term to describe the threshold imagination or the in-between space, the inquiry around First Night helps thicken the notion of the intimate. The discursive strand brings in what could be called the *exteriority of the psyche* (the Lacanian understanding *the unconscious is outside, and not inside* would be a perspective that informs me) to the understanding of intimate and the narrative strand brings in, in turn, the interiority of the social, thus bringing to crisis the simple psyche-social, inner-outer, inside-outside imaginations that are usually spatial.

2.1 The Discursive Strand: Intimate as Estimate

Chapters Two, Three and Four were an exercise at documenting and analysing the discursive constellations that make, unmake and manage the event of First Night and the domain of the (sexuated) intimate. This discussion was informed by some critical discourse analysis traditions that incorporate Foucauldian ideas of discourse, and sometimes attempts a feminist re-inscription of the object domain. The basic idea that was
shaping this strand of inquiry is that the subject is always already discursive (and not just psychoanalytic; though it would be important to remind myself that Lacan turns the psychoanalytic somewhat discursive in *Seminar XVII* through the invocation of the Four Discourses). The above mentioned chapters, while documenting the discourses that grant and revoke the rights over the virgin’s body, shows a gradual movement of the ‘norm’ from God or the divine and the Priests to the Husband and thereafter to Psychologists. Chapter 3 shows how the pre-colonial initiation rituals involving actual or ceremonial defloration of virgins hold the right of first copulation exclusively with Gods and priests. The same chapter shows how the colonial discourse and the reformist discourse together transfer the authority to the husband. It shows the creation of the ritual-free first copulation where virginal defloration was reconstituted as a prerogative of the husband. Along with it comes the joint deployment of conjugality and psychology. The psychological discourses renegotiated the norm, making romantic love and sensual competence a pre-requisite of sexual relations. This movement shows the working of the Law or a ‘contingent social norm’ in a site conventionally imagined to be free from the influence of social or external factors. This is imagined to be the private space of ‘subjectivity/interiority’. How to understand the presence of law in a domain hitherto believed to be one that of ‘pure’ interiority—a space untrammelled by external influences—a space free from the social and the political? Lacanian discourse analysis with its attention to the social gives a unique tilt to the intimate where intimate becomes *extimate*. Pavon-Cuellar explains *extimate* as follows:

The term “extimacy”, an English translation of the French neologism (extimité) coined by the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1959-1960), may be used in critical
psychology for the purpose of problematizing, questioning, challenging, and even rejecting and going beyond the traditional psychological distinction between exteriority and psychic interiority or intimacy. Instead of this fundamental distinction and the resultant fixed conceptual dualities that cross and constitute psychology, extimacy indicates the non-distinction and essential identity between the dual terms of the outside and the deepest inside, the exterior and the most interior of the psyche, the outer world and the inner world of the subject, culture and the core of personality, the social and the mental, surface and depth, behaviour and thoughts or feelings (Pavon –Cuellar, 2014, p. 661).

This is an exercise in recasting the spatial taxonomy and the taxonomic clusters in which subjectivities come into being. Miller (2008) considers the expression extimacy as “necessary in order to escape the common ravings about a psychism supposedly located in a bipartition between interior and exterior”. Miller says the extimacy of the subject is the Other and it is the Other whom the subject finds in a space which is “more interior than the inner most being”. Miller thinks Lacan suggests this possibility “when Lacan speaks of ‘this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my identity to myself, it is he who stirs me’ (translation modified) – where the extimacy of the Other is tied to the vacillation of the subject’s identity to himself”. The possibility is in placing the subjective unconscious in the register of the Other (I have in mind the Lacanian maxims: the unconscious is the Other’s discourse or desire is the Other’s desire). The ramification of this move is far reaching and could radically change the way the domain of the social sciences and psychology is imagined conventionally.
2.2. The Narratives Strand: Cracks in the Speech and Speech from the Cracks

The narrative inquiry adopted by the thesis wanted to capture the lived experience of First Night. The concrete attempt was to look at the regime of the social which has interestingly taken the form of the psychic with psychologization discourses. The assumption behind such an attempt was that even the psychologologized speech carries cracks in the speech. The narrative inquiry attempted in chapter 5 tried to listen to the speech or to be more specific, the cracks in the speech. This exercise revealed the cracks in the consent rhetoric and opened up a number of questions and the most important among them is regarding how to listen to the speech that is placed at the cracks. In that sense, the narrative inquiry was an attempt to capture not just the cracks in the psychologized speech, but also to understand the speech emanating from the cracks.

In this inquiry, the phase of narrative generation tried to use some re-thought formulations of psychoanalysis where the inquiry was at least aware how anxieties around castration are colouring the very project of psychoanalysis. The analysis of the narratives produced was done according to Gilligan’s “Listening Guide Method”. The connection Gilligan’s method has with woman’s experience is a contested one and Drucilla Cornell observes that what Gilligan is critiqued is “for collapsing the “is” and “ought” of women’s experience (1999, p.137). Cornell in her attempt to redeem the feminist potential of Gilligan’s project takes it away from the “actuality” of experience that is differentiated between genders (Ibid, p.137) and captures the other assumption that is there in the method. Cornell says “what is implicit in Gilligan’s work is at least a moderate ethical assumption that female experience is valuable” (Cornell 1999, p.137
emphasis mine). Given the history of the double problem of empirical exclusion of female experience and the theoretical repression of femininity in Western thought (Le Doueuff, c.f. Moi 2001, p. 356), the implication of this assumption is not moderate. Also this helps see why extending this ethical assumption to the methodological impulse of a research project will always be a double task where attending to the empirical exclusion of female experience and theoretical repression of femininity does not happen one after the other; it rather happens in a single turn. In the case of the present project, this task was as follows: to listen to the female voice one must suspend the castration anxiety (and by default phallicism) at least temporarily. And to suspend castration anxiety and reveal the cracks in the speech, one must listen to the voice of the female. So any project that attempts even a moderate re-cognition of the value of female experience must acknowledge that the female experience is placed at the crack which was hitherto represented as lack (Freud and Lacan both foreground lack).

But what is the connection between ‘female experience’ and the ‘theoretical feminine’? I think, Gilligan’s method makes an attempt to address this question through promoting a relational ontology and attention to listening. Even Cornell’s reading is missing out on the promise of the relational aspect of the method. In her attempt to actualize the feminist potential of Gilligan’s method, Cornell reads Gilligan as a “cognitive psychologist studying the actuality of moral development” (Ibid: 137) and not as a psychologist who is concerned with voice, and psyche – the loss and recovery of the voice of the psyche in patriarchy. Cornell’s reading misses out the potential of relational ontology Gilligan’s method is adopting, as something that goes against the rational pursuit of cognitive psychology. There is an attempt in Gilligan’s method to relate to that which is put outside
the rational discourse of cognitive psychology while thinking about moral development. The way in which the relation is established is equally important. The relation to the actuality of experience is established through the attention towards listening. Perhaps Gilligan was ‘able to see’ the cracks in the adolescent girl’s speech in *In a Different Voice* because she was not ‘looking for’ cracks. In her Listening Guide Method Gilligan was doing something fundamentally different - she displaced the entire scopic regime – which sees lack / absence /projection and erection through her attention to voices. She, in a way, brought back the attention to listening – something psychoanalysis was born with but lost in its preoccupation with primal scene and the question stemming from there – what is there to be seen.

The *crack* as a metaphor intuitively draws its lineage to Irigaray’s “isomorphism” and the “two lips”. And the analysis attempted by the thesis shows that it is not just an intuitive lineage, but one that ‘naturally’ occurs when we refuse to ‘see’ castration anxiety and the oedipal tensions in the voice of women. In that sense it is the least natural inference that could be drawn from a speech. Or what appears natural is the most cultural or the most social or to quote Butler “a contingent social norm at work” in the psychoanalytic attempts to listen to speech. But the relationship between cracks in the speech and speech from the cracks needs to be probed further to understand what distinct mark the cracks are making on the speech. This is not an exercise attempting to ‘give content to the feminine’. It, on the other hand, is an exercise generated precisely from the awareness of the impossibility of such a task. Listening to the cracks in the speech and speech from the cracks is not an attempt to *capture* the feminine; it is a way of understanding the feminine as the *beyond* of the discourse. And this imagination of beyond is something unique
psychoanalysis offers to sexual difference theory. As feminist scholars concerned with “the future of sexual difference”, Cornell and others repeatedly re-visit this problem when they say – “The whole project is predicated upon not on the ‘woman’s’ experience but it is placed at the interlacing of or slippage between the three terms “women” “woman” and “the feminine” (Grosz 1998).

But Toril Moi (2004) asks, what ensures that what comes along with the critique of castration anxiety is feminine. She asks why psychoanalytic theories that connect castration with femininity are even considered theoretically sophisticated when they are actually sexist theories of femininity (2004, p.870). It is again a psychoanalytic master plot that connects castration anxiety with femininity. But even she acknowledges that to begin the exercise of listening to the voice of women, we must produce a critique of castration anxiety. According to Moi “We need more historically specific, more situated, and far more clearly defined accounts of women’s lived experience and women’s subjectivity than femininity theories can produce” (Moi, 2004, p. 845) to come out of this deadlock.

As for this project, this critique was located in its attempt to listen to the embodied voice of women who were alerting to the possibility of a relationship that could be violating the integrity of their body and psyche. And it further tried to show that it is precisely this experience of pain and anticipation of violation that vanishes from psychoanalytic accounts, which privilege abstract male anxiety. The narrative inquiry adopted by the thesis was able to show the need to listen to the speech from the cracks. There is a need to listen psychoanalytically to the embodied voice of women or the accounts of lived
experience of the pain without getting anxious about reproducing any sexist connection between castration anxiety and femininity. But at the same time this inquiry could remain open to the possibility that accounts of lived experience of women could bring back the feminine to the inquiry in new and unexpected ways.

2.3. Intimate as a Location of Knowledge

There is a revamped interest in the spatial metaphors in feminist inquiries around knowledge production. Knowledge production is more and more being referred to as locating, mapping, positioning and situating. Jane Rendell (2010) observes that the investigation around the subject is taking an active interest in the space where new ways of knowing and being are discussed in spatial terms. She says “[E]mployed as critical tools spatial metaphors constitute powerful political devices for examining the relationship between identity and place. Where I am makes a difference to who I can be and what I can know. For example, Donna Haraway’s ‘situated knowledges’, Jane Flax’s ‘Stand Point Theory’ and Elspeth Probyn’s notion of ‘locality’, all use ‘position’ to negotiate such ongoing theoretical disputes” (Rendel, 2010, p.16). In the light of the discussion the thesis has presented ‘intimate’ can be presented as a location from which knowledge can be produced. This is a threshold space—a space placed between the social and psychic; between interiority and exteriority. Dhar and Chakrabarty (2014) explain the possibility of the in–between space as follows:

If the condition of the psychic is traceable to the “factory of [unconscious] thoughts” (Freud, 1965, p. 317), and if unconscious thoughts are an inalienable thread of the overdetermined social, affecting the social and, in turn, being affected by it, how can
this dialogue be avoided? How is the “psychic”, which is usually understood as a kind of interiority, always already “social”? How is the social, which is usually understood as a kind of exteriority, paradoxically “psychic”? What is the connection then between the psychic and the social? How are they interlinked? Where is the overdetermination and contradiction between interiority and exteriority? (Dhar& Chakrabarti 2014, p.221)

This is also a location which entails a particular relationship with the knower and the knowing. Intimate as a location privileges the relational ontology. The relation, the attachment, the immanence is no longer a problem here; it, rather, is the preferred way to knowledge as it allows the material, the contingent and the mutable of experiences. For a project that wishes to listen to the embodied voice of women, or tries to theorize the feminine of experience, intimate is an indispensable location to ask questions from. This relational ontology guards this location from reproducing normative intimacy and normative responses to intimacy alike.

3. Erotic Economy of Intimate

The perspectival difference the thesis tries to instil can be phrased as ‘from political economy of marriage to erotic economy of the intimate’. The location intimate helps to imagine a non-institutional relationship with the institution of heterosexuality. A feminist critique that privileges the institutional understanding could produce a political economy of marriage. But the thesis calls for a shift from political economy of marriage (which has dominated much of the Kerala social science and gender related scholarship) to erotic economy of the intimate. If heterosexuality is an institution, intimate opens up a non-
institutional understanding of the institution. What is hitherto put outside the rational understanding of the institution can be acknowledged through making intimate the location of inquiry. Erotic economy could show how the woman, the sexual and reproductive labour of the woman, and the feminine of the experience are put outside the institution of heterosexuality. An erotic economy is needed to account for the desire, body, carnal pleasures and embodied pain.