Chapter 1

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1. On Proper Objects and Legitimate Inquiries

This project owes its initial thoughts to questions thrown up by the practice of *aadya raathri* or ‘First Night’ as it is observed in contemporary Keralam. First night is the night following the publicly conducted wedding rite where the relation is expected to be consummated. This night is a culturally acknowledged moment of the heterosexual relation. At present, almost all the castes, communities and religions in Keralam share the practice of First Night. Also as a practice, it has significant visibility in the cultural sphere of Keralam; discourses abound on or around First Night. It is possible to find many representations of this practice in popular culture which treats this night as a celebrated moment of the heterosexual union. Generally First Night is either represented as the moment of an emergent man-woman relationship or as the pinnacle of sexual or

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1 *Aadya raathri* is an expression which combines two Malayalam words *aadya* which means first and *raathri* which means night. The English expression First Night thus becomes the literal translation of the expression *aadya raathri*. The English expression is used as frequently as the Malayalam expression and perhaps is more popular as in the case of the word ‘sex’. Throughout the thesis the English expression First Night is used as there is no change in meaning in the usage of both the expressions and both are equally popular.

2 Similar usages and practices are found in other Indian languages. In Tamil, First Night is referred to as ‘*muthal iravu*’ and in Kannada it is ‘*mothala raathri*’. These two expressions again can be literally translated as First Night. In Telugu, it is ‘*shobhana raathri*’ or *Shobhanam* which means the ‘luminous night’. And in Hindi it is ‘*suhag raat*’. Though the practice is pan Indian, this study focuses exclusively on Keralam. This decision is partly based on feasibility concerns. Simultaneously, it reflects the impulse of the thesis to track the regional without losing the empirical specificity with the hope of generating a question to engage with the pan Indian cultural formations around wedding.
affective intimacy. As a practice that unfolds within the domestic/conjugal space, there is a certain air of obviousness associated with it. The practice is portrayed as a simple and self-evident moment of marital relationship where a male and a female become husband and wife. The present project draws attention to this “obviousness” when confronted with questions related to the significance of the inquiry.

During the course of the research I have encountered the obviousness argument several times while thinking about the significance of the research. One way to render intelligibility to the project is to treat it as an ethnographic or a psycho-biographical project on sexuality. But this project eschews this self definition and though it incorporates ethnographic methods of engaging with the filed, the gaze of the work is non-ethnographic. This project wishes to move away from easy intelligibility, as the angle/axis of easy intelligibility does not address the question of obviousness; rather it tries to cover it up with a disciplinary discourse. Rather than dismissing this problem, I would like to draw attention to this obviousness as a useful entry point to lay out the argument. So an introduction to this research project will not be complete without a discussion of the not so obvious reasons behind the obviousness argument. This exercise is undertaken not as a researcher’s personal dilemma in formulating a research problem out of a cultural practice rather as a self-reflexive analysis of the struggle involved in rendering a cultural practice as ‘proper object’ that could forge a ‘legitimate’ inquiry around it. This discussion helps to reveal both the concrete context of the inquiry and the

\[3\] Deployed by ColonialAnthropology, the ethnographic gaze exoticized native populations and the gaze operated through regimes of visual representation (Mohanty, 1984; Min-ha, 2000). Ethnography in its rethought formulations draws energy from feminist and post-colonial critique and tries to remain sensitive to the power differentials embedded in the ethnographic relation and the questions of representation.
conceptual contours of the research project at hand. This discussion identifies two major registers that contribute to the obviousness of the project:

1) The sexual politics of the cultural location (the next section is a reflection on sexual politics)

2) The dichotomous thinking that informs social science as a disciplinary location.

2. ‘Ordinary Woman’ and Her ‘Shadowy Others’: Sexual Politics in Contemporary Keralam

This discussion revolves around production of the “ordinary woman” (Sreekumar, 2009, p. 21) and her “shadowy others” (Maruthur, 2010, p. 32) or between the production of the housewife and sex worker (Devika, 2006). This discussion will focus first on the production of the ordinary woman and then move on to the concrete political interventions that have urged the scholarship to think about the ‘others’ of ordinary woman. It shows how the current thinking has ended up in the production of two binary figures where one figure is placed within the family and the other is outside the family. The present chapter tries to find a way out of the deadlock of dichotomous thinking which reproduces the simple topology of inside and outside the family.

The ordinary Malayali woman invoked in everyday discussion to developmental discourse is connected to the figure of the “Kerala woman”. Deployed primarily by the developmental discourse the “Kerala woman” is educated, empowered and has a
matrilineal past (Jeffrey, 2003; Parayil, 2000). The discourse of ‘Kerala exceptionalism’ also encourages the deployment of the figure of the ‘Kerala woman’. But it has also been observed that this figure of “Emancipated Kerala Woman” produced by the developmental discourse and the feminist interventions does not correspond to the everyday lives of women in Keralam (Radhakrishnan, 2005). Sharmila Sreekumar (Sreekumar, 2009) in her compelling analysis of the making of the ordinary woman notices the slippage between ‘Kerala woman’ and ‘ordinary woman’ in contemporary Keralam and documents how “Kerala woman effortlessly walks into the constructions of ordinary woman” (ibid, p. 21). Her analysis is directed at the dynamics of the post 1990’s. It shows how the making of this ordinary as a dominant category is capable of reproducing all the hierarchies related to caste, class and gender. As a cultural figure the ordinary woman vigorously engages in othering all who falls out of the “cultural paradigm of normative ordinariness” (ibid, p.22). Sreekumar’s analysis looked at the figure of the ordinary woman and how they actively invoke the “normative ordinariness” to exclude and inferiorize the other. Ordinary woman of Kerala is invariably the domestic

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4 From infant mortality a rate to literacy rates Keralam has better scores in all of the development indices compared to most other Indian states. The scores of gender development indices (GDI) are also better for Kerala compared to rest of India. This has been invoked in Social Science scholarship to suggest that Keralam is different from the rest of India, aligning it with developed Western countries. See (Sreekumar and Sanjeev, 2003) for a critical take on this discourse on ‘Kerala exceptionalism’ where the authors argue that Kerala constructs itself through “print blocks” raising envy among the neighbouring Tamils and a spot which demands the surveillance of CIA.

5 The post 1990’s in contemporary feminist scholarship denotes a set of socio-political changes and technological changes that together suggest an unsettling of the gender equations produced and maintained by reformist and nationalist politics. (John and Nair, 1998; Uberoi, 1996). It sometimes suggests the arrival of a sexually permissive globalized culture and engages with the interaction this culture has with regional forms of patriarchy (Nigam and Menon, 2007).
woman. This should be read in conjunction with the findings that there is a social commitment to domesticity in making the ideal feminine figures (Kodoth and Eapen, 2005) and marriage and the entry to conjugality are projected as the natural life course events in Keralam (Kodoth, 2008).

Sreekumar argues that an attempt to make a non-linear narrative of this woman takes us to two contradicting strands of discourses around development and destruction, where one discourse presents it as utopia and another as dystopia (Sreekumar, 2009, p.143-193). She presents a detailed analysis of the mediations around ‘serial rape’ cases and shows how it straddles between ‘innocent victim’ and ‘assumed guilty.’ Sreekumar demonstrates that the public discourse is characterized by fears of unbound sexuality and addresses the woman with a protectionist stance. Her analysis of the discourse around HIV/AIDS shows how dystopic visions are employed to present fear of sexuality. She tracks the state sponsored HIV/AIDS discourse where the fear of sexuality is projected onto the body of the sex worker and the sex worker becomes “not just the carrier of an irreversible destruction but the destruction itself” (Sreekumar, 2009, p.169).

Devika in her book *En-gendering Individual: The Language of Social and Community reform in Kerala* provides a persuasive analysis of the production of the “aesthetic woman” where she tracks a wide array of discursive formations around modern gender in nineteenth and early twentieth century India (Devika, 2007). She argues that the discourse around modern family, marriage and respectability brought the ‘aesthetic
woman\textsuperscript{6} to a confrontation with the domestic ideal. The sexual and reproductive labour of the aesthetic woman was subjected to the newly emerging domesticity and her ability to generate pleasure was tapped to cement conjugality by ensuring pleasure. Devika addresses this new womanhood as the “new elite woman” but does not call this figure dominant or normative. This domestic woman carries all the markers of ‘womanliness’ (Devika, 2007).

The post 1990’s was also the time where the sex worker and the lesbian subject were making political interventions in the public sphere of Keralam. There are a number of small yet significant interventions that have to be captured in this thesis. The most visible among them is the publication of the autobiography of the sex worker, Nalini Jameela. Nalini Jameela published two autobiographies and both of them created serious discussions around the figures of the ‘housewife’ and the ‘prostitute’. The work of the Non Governmental Organization (NGO) \textit{Sahayathrika} and their documentation of lesbian suicides\textsuperscript{7} was another major event in the post 90’s Keralam which opened up discussions on a number of sexual identities which were absent or invisible in the public

\textsuperscript{6} Devika (2005) traces the genealogy of aesthetic woman in the matrilineal woman who was in productive relations with the family where her ability and skills in generating pleasure was valued. Devika places this womanhood against the respectable woman of patrilineral traditions. She argues that the reformist discourse subjected the aesthetic woman to the emerging notions of conjugal family and her ability to produce pleasure was used to cement modern conjugality.

\textsuperscript{7} The documentation on lesbian suicides was done by the \textit{Sahayathrika} team - the first activist group working for LGBT rights in Keralam. The anthology \textit{Mithyakalkkappuram - Swavarga Laingikatha Keralathil (Beyond myths: Homosexuality in Kerala)}, (ed. Bharadwaj, 2004) carried oral narratives of lesbian suicides and articles contextualizing homosexuality in Keralam.
sphere and the intellectual scene. These two incidents have captured the popular imagination and the critical feminist imagination alike.

Devika attempts an analysis of the production of the figures of the housewife and the sex worker by connecting them to the history of modern gender in Keralam (Devika, 2006). She also examines the political stakes of life writing by juxtaposing the locations of the writers of the autobiography and the literary public in Keralam. Navaneetha Maruthur addresses the sexual politics of the region after the sex worker and lesbian actors problematized the field by political mobilizations and by creating alternate circuits of cultural production (Maruthur, 2010). Maruthur’s research declares a self conscious distance from the figures of ‘ordinary woman’ or the ‘domestic woman’ and tries to approach the shadowy others “[N]ot tangentially but as central subjects of analysis” (ibid, p. 12). Her analysis engages exactly with those claims of the other which Sreekumar described as the “claim to dignity equality and often enough humanity” (Sreekumar, 2009, p. 23). Her analysis of the custodial death of the sex worker Kunjibi and the analysis of the Sahayathrika documentation of lesbian suicides in Keralam shows the delicate line of life and death that these subjects occupy. Her work shows how certain lives are ‘rendered illegible’ and their ‘proximity to death’. She observes, “[W]hen the social self is devalued, life itself becomes a questionable zone, literally and metaphorically (Maruthur, 2010, p. 52). This should be read in conjunction with the analysis of the fear of sexuality in developmental discourses (Devika, 2009). Devika argues that a developmental discourse built on the desexualized labouring and maternal bodies cannot address the figure of the sex worker and sexual minorities too (ibid, p. 29)
She contends that sex worker becomes the abject figure in mainstream developmental discourse (ibid, p.29-31).

The above discussion helps to lay out the contours of the field of sexuality and provides a useful entry point to understand sexuality as a key structuring principle in the production of spaces and bodies in contemporary Keralam. It is on this force field of sexuality that the thesis wishes to anchor the discussions around First Night. The map presented by charting out the trajectories of the historically specific cultural discourse in this region naturally tends to place any inquiry into the domain of conjugality and domesticity as a normative one. It has been observed that in the post 90’s discourse, the dominant emblem who is central to the self narrative of Keralam is the domestic woman (Maruthur, 2010, p. 12). This project would like to pause here and ask whether engaging with a dominant or normative cultural site will naturally result in the reproduction of the dominant or the normative? And conversely, will engaging with a non-normative figure or a cultural site of social stigmatization make the project subversive? This project does not presuppose an answer. Rather it tries to re-visit the force field of heterosexuality after the sex worker and the queer subject have problematized the field. And it is imagined as a self conscious exploration of the field of heterosexuality – a field that has been termed dominant or normative in scholarship. I would like to reflect more on the conceptual and methodological impasse involved in addressing heterosexuality or the heterosexual scene.

2.1. The ‘Deep Difficulty’ of Heterosexuality
In an attempt to move away from the dominant, Social Science has tried to directly address the production of the figures of the prostitute and the lesbian – the figures that are usually pitted against the figure of the domestic woman. But does this move guarantee a non-normative positionality? Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger’s in their introduction to the *Feminism and Psychology Reader* on heterosexuality alert towards the possibility that asking non-normative subjects to narrativize their experience may result in colonizing the experience and instead Social Science should ask heterosexual couples to narrativize their experience, just to remind ourselves that heterosexuality too is a contingent and unstable category. They begin by asserting that heterosexuality has been largely un-theorized within (both psychology and) feminism and that feminist theory too often assumes heterosexuality as a given, producing analyses in which it occupies “taken for granted, but never explicitly addressed, substrate” (Wilkinson& Kitzinger, 1993, p.1). Several strands of feminism have argued the need to re-visit the field off heterosexuality. For instance, Andrienne Rich has suggested an “unexamined heterocentricity” (Rich, 1986, p. 24) at the heart of theory.

This project argues that instead of pitting heterosexuality and homosexuality against each other and treating the former as the normative location and the later as the non-normative location, a more useful exercise will be to think of the working of the norm. Rather than focusing on the ‘oppositional purity’ of normative and non-normative positions it is

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8 In India a similar concern was expressed by Gopal Guru (2002) in his essay “How egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India”. Guru argues that Social Science theory building in India reproduces the empirical East-theoretical West binary in a new form as empirical Sudras and theoretical Brahmins where the privilege of theorizing rests with the upper caste urban academia and Dalits are relegated to the domain of raw empiricism.
possible to attend to the “scandalously impure boundaries” as Butler has suggested (Butler, 2002, p. 5). Butler has argued that often one register presuppose the idioms of the other “confounding the distinction between the two at a rhetorical level and thus bringing into crisis the stability of the conceptual distinction between them” (ibid, p. 12).

But turning attention to the scandalously impure boundaries does not mean the project wishes to equate the heterosexual and the lesbian or to place them in a continuum. Such a move will again place heterosexuality in a safe place beyond interrogation. This project wishes to acknowledge the “safe and uncontested” (Kanneh, 1993, p. 46) nature of heterosexuality and would like to turn its attention to precisely this problem where heterosexuality escapes theoretical scrutiny and political re-inscription. It also reveals the obviousness of the project as emerging from a popular perception of heterosexuality in the culture but also as being generated by assumptions regarding heterosexuality which prevails in scholarship. Heteronormativity has become a conceptual handle in sexuality scholarship and in feminist scholarship to implicitly suggest that the question of heterosexuality is solved. As a cautionary step towards not reproducing this problem, the thesis does not privilege the concept heteronormativity while thinking about heterosexuality. In other words, the thesis does not collapse heterosexuality into heteronormativity. It argues, heterosexuality is a condition; heteronormativity is a hegemonic perspective; and such a perspective could colour both heterosexuality and homosexuality. Heterosexuality in that sense is open to the deconstructive; and the cloud of heteronormativity need not obscure the work of the deconstructive. The assumption behind this move of the thesis is that in the current scholarship on sexuality, the concept of heteronormativity obscures more than it reveals. The thesis contends that given the
acceptability of heteronormativity as a concept, the quick and rather unthinking deployment of the same forecloses the inquiry into heterosexuality rather than opening up the field for inquiry.\textsuperscript{9} Suspending heteronormativity from the explanatory grid at least temporarily helps to see other ways of engaging with heterosexuality. This project finds two among them important:

1) To re-inscribe heterosexuality as a contingent, decentered and unstable category; open to heterogeneity

This project assumes American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler as its interlocutor. This first option tries to ask whether it is possible or necessary to rethink the field of heterosexuality and tries to foreground First Night as a moment that reveals the fragility of marriage as an institution and exposes the cultural labour involved in imagining monogamous conjugal units, dethroning them from the naturalness they enjoy in the culture. This exercise is analogous to the effect of drag\textsuperscript{10} (Butler 1990; 1993) in disputing the naturalness associated with heterosexual institutions. It is not that drag is

\textsuperscript{9} I hope the methodological or conceptual stand the thesis is taking, not to privilege heteronormativity as an explanatory category, will be helpful to re-open the domain of heterosexuality to a number of questions such as what gives heterosexuality normative status? What is the norm at work? How does the norm work in a particular cultural location and at a particular historical juncture? However the present project wishes to acknowledge that writing the history of the norm is a larger project and the present project only aspires to offer a window to understand working through the norm.

\textsuperscript{10} Butler (1993) explains the concept of drag in Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex while discussing the relation between gender identity and performance. Her analysis of the figure drag queen foregrounds the performative nature of masculine and feminine identity where gender identities are produced through repetitive performance of behaviours, physical stylistic expressions. Drag does not imitate a pre-supposed original or natural gender. Instead drag foregrounds that “hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations.” (1993, p. 125).
working without the idea of heteronormativity. But there is attention to the norms at work and Butler herself in her rethought formulation of drag places it on an ambivalent place and asks whether drag re-idealizes heterosexual norms without interrogating them (Butler, 1993, p. 240). Drag is not presented as an ipso facto subversive act, but at the same time we must not lose sight of the “opening up of the possibilities of the resignification of sex” (ibid, p.131) which drag provides. The thesis while approaching First Night - the celebrated moment of heterosexuality in the culture concerned - would like to invoke the exercise of drag in an attempt to re-open heterosexuality for interrogation and resignification.\textsuperscript{11}

2) To treat heterosexuality as an unachieved and unachievable ideal under patriarchy; in the sense, that in patriarchy, there are no two sexes.

This second one assumes Belgian born French feminist philosopher, psychoanalyst, linguist and cultural theorist, Luce Irigaray as the interlocutor.\textsuperscript{12} To think about the

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\textsuperscript{11} The anxiety whether such a move will end up in “reidealizing heterosexual norms” is a valid one and the methodological and conceptual moves the thesis makes will be informed by this anxiety.

\textsuperscript{12} This selection of interlocutors could raise questions about locations of knowledge production. Why does doing feminism in post colonies always privilege Western theorists and implicitly reproduce the stereotype that West is theory and non West is experience? This is a question that has received serious attention in postcolonial feminist thinking (Mohanty, 1985; Kishwar, 1991; John, 1996). The attempt of the thesis is not to treat the Western feminist theoreticians as the \textit{interpreter} and the post-colonial Indian woman and their experience as the \textit{interpreted}. Berger has argued that rather than treating such a methodological move as reproducing theoretical imperialism, it can be construed as an attempt “to provide a forum for dialogue between two ‘speakers’” (Berger, 1998, p. 24). She imagines this to be a “transformative dialogue” (ibid, p. 24) where both western theory and non-western discourse undergo changes. This move could remain alert to the power differential embedded in such a project. But whether this could actually do away with the power differential is another question. This thesis attempts a grounded discussion on theoretical imperialism in Chapter 5 while describing the contestations over psychoanalytic ideas in India.
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second option one needs to re-visit the very idea of heterosexuality through the question of sexual difference. The question of sexual difference as it is delineated by Luce Irigaray, suggests that in patriarchy true sexual difference does not exist. In patriarchy only men are subjects and women became the “the other” of these subjects. For Irigaray the positioning of woman in Western thought completely neglects the sexed difference of woman. Going with this reading of sexual difference reveals that there is a more fundamental problem inherent in the contemporary use of the expression heterosexual. Heterosexual by definition has two opposite sex partners involved in it. But Irigaray argues that institutionalized heterosexuality erases the difference of the Other, or reduces the Other to the “other of the same”, and reproduces the sameness and in the process becomes Hom(m)osexual (Irigaray hence felt the need to inaugurate the perspective of the Other sex: i.e. woman, or the Second Sex: i.e. woman, in the Western tradition; her critique of patriarchy hence takes the form: *This Sex which is not One; it is two; and one needs to acknowledge the existence of the second or the Other*). This is a theoretically different move and does not assume heterosexuality to be normative rather presents it as an unachieved and unachievable ideal under/in Patriarchy.

The entire scholarship of Irigaray deals with the question of sexual difference and it is easy to get lost in the intricacies of articulation for someone who is not trained in philosophy. To avoid that and to present the research problem of the thesis in a better way, this discussion engages with a grounded articulation of the sexual difference question, in Irigaray’s essay ([1977]1985) “Women on the Market” from *This Sex Which Is Not One*. This reading of the essay tries to address three concerns
1) How it helps to show that the question of heterosexuality is not done away with

2) With the analysis of commodities the essay presents, is it possible to formulate the research problem without reproducing the housewife/sex worker binary.

3) Does it explain the obviousness associated with First Night?

In the essay “Women on the Market”, Irigaray takes up Marx’s critique of commodity capitalism and employs it to analyse patriarchy. She starts the project by saying “Marx's analysis of commodities as the elementary form of capitalist wealth can thus be understood as an interpretation of the status of women in so-called patriarchal societies” (ibid, p. 172). This strategy in relating woman-as-commodity to Marx’s notion of commodity has generated many different readings in feminist thinking. Rendell observes that “Given the importance of style or rhetoric of her work –the way an argument is made –this seems critical” (Rendell, 2010, p. 15). Abigail Solomon Godeau considers it as homology and Irigaray herself says it is analogy and Toril Moi considers it as mimicry.13 Whether homology, analogy, or mimicry what is important for this discussion is that Irigaray, through the notion of exchange and woman-as-commodity shows how foundational and undercutting is the question of heterosexuality.

In this essay Irigaray has argued that in patriarchy men does not do commerce with women rather they do commerce of women. Irigaray writes:

In this new matrix of History, in which man begets man as his own likeness, wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men. The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality, even while they maintain that hom(m)o-sexuality in speculations, mirror games, identifications, and more or less rivalrous appropriations, which defer its real practice. Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign, and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man's relations with himself, of relations, among men(ibid, p.171-2).

Irigaray says, “If exchange (as social relation) in the masculine economy requires a currency then woman as that object of exchange is that currency.” She re-works Marx’s notion of commerce and exchange to arrive at her conception of ‘woman-as-commodity’. In ‘Women on the Market,’ Irigaray presents three female figures as commodity: Mother, Virgin and the Prostitute. Mother is pure use value; Virgin is pure exchange value; and prostitute is both use value and exchange value. Mother is excluded from exchange- she is taken off from the market – and she is the private property. Prostitute is the one who exchanges her use value and thus remains in the market. What is the role of virgin in this scheme? Irigaray thinks:

The virginal woman, on the other hand, is pure exchange value. She is nothing but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men. In and of herself, she does not exist: she is a simple envelope veiling what is really at stake in social exchange. In this sense, her natural body disappears into its representative function. Red blood remains on the mother's side, but it has no price, as such, in the social order; woman,
for her part, as medium of exchange, is no longer anything but semblance. The ritualized passage from woman to mother is accomplished by the violation of an envelope: the hymen, which has taken on the value of taboo, the taboo of virginity. Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among men. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 186)

It is the virgin who is on the market as ‘pure exchange value’. It is by violating her that she is made a non-virgin and removed from exchange among men and she becomes the mother, the private property. Or the pure exchange value of the virgin is converted to the use value of the mother. Or “she is the use value for man and exchange value among men” (ibid, p.31). For Irigaray, the exchange of virgin undercuts all the exchanges around sexuality in patriarchy as this is the foundational exchange that constitutes patriarchy. This is the exchange that reproduces the norm.

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14 This concept of virgin as commodity is slightly different from the concept of virginity which Irigaray employs later. Irigaray while talking about sexual rights consider women’s virginity as “psychic virginity” and defines it as an aptitude to “conserve and cultivate one’s own identity (2002, p.68 c.f Deutscher, 2002, p. 51). See Deutscher (2002) A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray for a detailed discussion of the later notion of virginity in Irigaray.

15 This reading of sexual difference has been critiqued for being ‘normatively heterosexual’ in its attempt to produce a critique of the heteronormative. The most influential critique in this vein was made by Butler (Butler, 1998) and Murphy (Murphy, 2007). Murphy argues that Irigarays’ critique of heterosexuality is dismissive of transsexual and transgender people and in that sense reproduces the norm of heterosexuality. Poe (2011) revisits this question in her essay “Can Luce Irigaray’s Notion of Sexual Difference be Applied to Transsexual and Transgender Narratives” in Thinking with Irigaray. This essay tries to answer it through the difference in the notions ‘nature’ and ‘cultivated natural’ as they are used in Irigaray. She thinks Irigaray’s articulation of sexual difference allows the woman to come out of the idea of ‘nature’ as it is imposed by society or biology and Irigaray urges the woman to cultivate natural where she “creates her nature in keeping with the many parts that cause her to call herself woman” (ibid, p. 112). She tries to show how Irigaray’s method does not try “merely to preserve sexual difference but moves from systems of
This reading helps to further complicate the dichotomous division of domestic woman and sex worker where the first becomes the normative figure and the second non-normative.\(^{16}\) For Irigaray all three social roles suggest the commodification of woman. The three figures we have discussed corresponds to three social roles analysed by Irigaray: domestic woman corresponds to Mother, sex worker corresponds to prostitute and the figure of the bride who is the central figure in the event of First Night interestingly holds the in-between position, that of the virgin. We have started the de tour with questions of engaging with the norm and the question remains unresolved.\(^{17}\) But it

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\(^{16}\) This discussion helps to see the tacit feelings of transgression and subversion that usually accompanies the figure of the sex worker and which is translated as non-normative positionality in scholarship. Among the three, sex worker is the only commodity who exchanges her own use value in the market. Irigaray says that in the case of the prostitute the usage and exchange are not clear cut or she is the “usage that is exchanged” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 186). Though she is a commodity exchanged between men, she is not owned by a man who could exchange her use value. This lack of ownership a man has over her use value makes her look like a transgressive figure. For Irigaray, sex worker stands for a usage “that has been already been realized” (Ibid, p. 186). Irigaray does not create a liberatory narrative around the prostitute and considers, “Neither as mother, nor as virgin, nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure” (ibid, p. 187).

\(^{17}\) The discussion so far has shown that drag holds the risk of ‘reidealizing the norm’ and sexual difference holds the risk of reproducing the strict binary of man and woman. But this discussion reveals that the field of heterosexuality is neither obvious nor completely done away with. We have not understood the working of the norm yet so that we can say with conviction whether touching the norm will or will not reproduce the norm. Rather, any attempt to touch the norm needs to be carried out with the realization that such a project holds the risk of reproducing the norm.
offers some valuable insights to rise out of the deadlock of dichotomous thinking which positions the figures of housewife and sex worker as oppositional entities. Drawing energy from this discussion, especially from Iriagaray’s notion of ‘woman-as-commodity’ and ‘exchange of woman’, the next section tries to foreground First Night as a research problem.

2.2. First Night: Threshold of an (Impossible Sexual) Exchange

The theoretical attention to exchange helps the thesis to turn to First Night as a site of an exchange which is placed somewhat prior to the production of domestic woman and sex worker. The idea of threshold is important in understanding First Night. With the exchange she either becomes mother and falls inside the family or becomes the prostitute and falls outside the family. First Night becomes that moment which is placed neither outside nor inside of the family. It is the in-between moment of exchange which is tapped into the creation and maintenance of patriarchy. First Night stands up for a primordial exchange that creates the patriarchal social order within which the usage in mother and prostitute is realized. But what makes her a primordial commodity? Irigaray begins to answer this question by dismissing the anthropological arguments such as women are scarce, men are polygamous and desirable women are a minority. Her answer on the other hand focuses on the sexualized nature of the exchange – the power differential embedded in the heterosexual scene. Irigaray says:

Why men are not objects of exchange among women? It is because women’s bodies –through their use, consumption and circulation –provide for the condition making social life and culture possible, although they remain an unknown “infrastructure” of
the elaboration of that social life and culture. The exploitation of the matter that has
been sexualized female is so integral a part of our socio cultural horizon that there is
no way to interpret it except within this horizon. (Ibid, p. 171)

Irigaray tends to say the exchange in virgin is *foundational* when she says virgin
becomes the “unknown infrastructure”. But Irigaray does not say there is something
natural/esoteric/mystic in the virgin which makes her the commodity. Presuming such a
virginal body to begin with, will make the whole project patriarchal. On the contrary
Irigaray plays with the very notion to show how once placed in the masculine relations
she becomes the body to be violated /the hymen to be broken. She says that “Just as a
commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as
image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value-invested form
amounts to what man inscribes in and on her matter: that is, her body”(ibid, p. 187).She
addresses the power differentials embedded in the heterosexual situation as integral in
understanding the production of the “sexualized female”. It is also important not to lose
sight of the conception of virgin as a place holder of relations. When Irigaray calls the
virgin ‘a place holder of relations’ she hints at both the creation of a potent relation and
the already realized relations. Irigaray does not say there is something in the virgin that
facilitates or leads to such an exchange.

With the notion of exchange and attention to the creation of value and meaning in
patriarchy, Irigaray’s analysis of woman–as-commodity brings in another layer to the
obviousness concern. Despite being a hyper visible cultural practice, despite incitement
to discourse, First Night here becomes the *cultural blind spot* of patriarchy. The
exchange of woman which First Night represents becomes so integral to the production
of the socio-cultural horizon. And there is “no way to interpret it except within this horizon” (ibid, p. 171). This is the deeper difficulty involved in producing an analysis of heterosexuality. This is the difficulty involved in foregrounding the proper object of analysis from the practice of First Night. This is the difficulty which thwarts the easy intelligibility of the project at hand. The cultural practice of First Night does not cover the exchange underneath it, rather projects the exchange and yet the cultural analysis which does not address the familiar and the obvious is bound to miss it. It is in this sense that this project treats First Night as the cultural blind spot of patriarchal culture. An inquiry that equates the hypervisibility of a cultural practice to easy intelligibility is bound to miss the question. Such an inquiry does not suffer from ignorance of the culture, but rather abandons the knowledge of a culture in its knowingness.\textsuperscript{18}

First night, as a site and context for sexual exchange (and not just an exchange of women between families and communities) – sexual exchange between specifically and in particular the two – the ‘two of sexual difference’ locked in the ‘bridal chamber’ – is also the site of an impasse or the impossible – an impasse captured aptly in the Lacanian (psychoanalytic) maxim: “there is no such thing as a sexual relationship” (see Seminar XIX, May 17, 1972) between the two; so the two do not form a harmonious One on the first night (narratives of first night [as explicated in Chapter 5] are not just gendered but

\textsuperscript{18} In his essay “Knowingness and Abandonment: An Oedipus for our Time” Jonathan Lear (1998) presents knowingness as our problem rather than lack of knowledge. In his reading of Oedipus Tyrannus, (Sophocle’s tragedy) Lear presents Oedipus as suffering from knowingness – and abandoning the inquiry in the belief that he knows or in other words refusing to see what in other sense one knows. The thesis invokes this idea of knowingness at several places and is one of the formative ideas that define the kind of cultural analysis the thesis wishes to undertake.
are narratives of such non-harmony); Lacan thus inaugurates not just the question of *sexual difference* in the context of first night (as Irigaray does) but the “impossibility of establishing the relationship between “them-two” (*la relation d’eux*) (1998, p. 6). “The fantasy of harmony” between the two sexes, manifested in the form ‘we are but one.’ Everyone knows, of course, that two have never become but one, but nevertheless, ‘we are but one’” (Lacan, 1998, p. 47) drives the discourse around first night; not just the discourse around first night, but the incitement to discourse. The fantasy of harmony that the discourse around first night is paradigmatic of “has a long and distinguished lineage, insofar as we can trace it back to at least Plato’s *Symposium*, where we see Aristophanes put forward the view that once we were all *spherical beings lacking in nothing*, but Zeus split us in two, and now we are all in search of our other half. We divided beings yearn to be grafted back together” (Fink, 2004, p. 149). In this framework, first night is “what can make good the primordial [heterosexual] split, and [sexual] harmony can be achieved thereby. … Aristophanes’ image of humans as originally spherical beings also points to the sphere as the shape that was considered most perfect, most harmonious, lacking in nothing” (Fink, 2004, p. 150). Barthes (2002, p. 226-7) wonders in the fragment titled “Union”:

I spend an afternoon trying to draw what Aristophanes’ hermaphrodite would look like: globular, with four hands, four legs, four ears, just one head, one neck. Are the halves back to back or face to face? Belly to belly, no doubt, since Apollo was to sew them up again here, drawing the skin together and creating the navel: yet their faces are facing away from each other, since Apollo was to turn them toward the side where he had divided them; and the genital organs are behind. I persist, but get nowhere, being a poor draughtsman or an even poorer utopianist. The
hermaphrodite, or the androgyne, figure of that "ancient unity of which the desire and the pursuit constitute what we call love," is beyond my figuration; or at least all I could achieve is a monstrous, grotesque, improbable body. Out of dreams emerges a farce figure: thus, out of the mad couple is born the obscenity of the *household* (one cooks, for life, for the other).

Chapters 4 and 5 of the thesis are a demonstration of what Barthes (or Lacan) calls a difficult or an impossible union of the sexed two into a primordial harmony, as also of the tragi-comic impasse of imagining a hermaphrodite. In the face of such a mythological discourse of first night, or such a fantasy of union (“*En sa moytie, ma moytie je recolle* – to her half, I rejoin my own half”), Lacan designates ‘love’ as *l’amur* – which is a “combination of *mur* (‘wall’) and *amour* (‘love’) (see Lacan, 1998: 4). This thesis on first night is thus a grappling with the turn to thinking around sex, gender, sexual difference and *sexuation* inaugurated by Butler, Irigaray and Lacan.

3. **Initiating The Intimate: First Night as an Event**

The question with which we began the discussion on First Night whether there is anything in First Night which remains distinct or inaccessible to dominant studies on marriage remains unanswered. The discussions in the previous sections of the chapter foreground the difficulty in unearthing the question out of a familiar location. It also pushes the thesis to look for a new location to anchor the inquiry. The prevailing tradition of looking at marriage treats it as a social institution which is shaped by historical and economic practices. Here, marriage is the public event defined by state, legality and community. So in this scheme, First Night falls into the realm of the private and again the
dominant way of looking at private treats it either as a domain being regulated by the norms of the public, or as a domain which is not permissible/accessible to the public. So First Night here becomes either the ‘inaccessible private’ or it is ‘always already public’. In both situations an exploration into the experience of First Night is either impossible or unnecessary. In that sense, first is rendered un-researchable; and this is the challenge the thesis takes up, including the challenge of methodology.

The thesis also argues that these are two problematic positions which cannot account for the public/private divide which dichotomize human practices and theory building. It is not accidental that prostitute becomes the ‘public woman’ and the mother becomes ‘house wife’ or ‘domestic woman’. The public/private divide operates with the inside/outside topology. If we follow this topology where do we place the bride – the virgin? She is standing neither outside the family nor inside the family. First Night in that sense is neither a public event nor a private event.

This discussion tentatively deploys the notion of intimate event to get out of the stalemate of dichotomous thinking where both concepts vie for attention. There are many ways of approaching the notion of event, and the formulation of an event varies according to the theoretical language one deploys. The conventional way of defining an event is to look for larger historical incidents. For instance, for Lefebvre an event is nothing less than revolution when he defines it in the Critique of Everyday Life (Lefebvre, 1961). In this scheme the days of revolution are ‘equivalent to twenty ordinary years’ and “…shatter the boundaries of everyday life, bringing life as it is lived into the domain of history” (ibid, p. 3). He imagines a complete break between event and everyday here. In Indian
Social Sciences also, the major attempts to look at the event/everyday relationship were based on the idea of event being historical. For instance, in *Event Metaphor Memory* Shahid Amin takes the colonial state as frame of reference for defining an event (Amin, 1996) and in *Violence and Subjectivity* Veena Das considers post colonial Indian state as the frame of reference for defining an event (Das, 2000). Veena Das who has extensively worked on this considers it as story that “is part of the story of nation” (Das, 2007, p. 2). This thesis in its attempt to define the notion of event turns its attention to the domain of the intimate. The assumption here is that the domain of intimate gives a distinctive gradient to the notion of event and this notion of event is different from a historical understanding of event.

The concept of intimate as used in the thesis demands a careful delineation of its structure and logic. To start with, it can be mentioned that it is not used in the usual ways where it is either a synonym of private or an aspect of the private. In Social Science literature, intimate is subsumed within the register of the private. But there is an apparent discomfort in collapsing these two notions. The thesis would like to draw attention to this discomfort of the Social Sciences in dealing with the site of the intimate. Saying an event is intimate does not make it readily accessible or available for examination. But acknowledging the lack of easy accessibility also does not make it a private event. Jugen Habermas in *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* argues that bourgeois individual has a very special kind of private self which is in fact a deferred public self “which is always already oriented towards an audience” (Habermas, 1962, 1989, p. 49). Later Dipesh Chakravarty ponders over this idea in the article “The Difference – Deferral of a Colonial Modernity” and in *Provincializing Europe* to understand the contestations
over the received models of bourgeois public sphere in colonial India (Chakravarty, 1997; 2000). He documents an interesting situation where he is confronted with both plenitude of narratives on the new self and a lack of narratives of the private self at the same time. He makes an emphatic reading of this experience when he says “I shall now return to themes of ‘failure’ ‘lack’ and ‘inadequacy’ that so ubiquitously characterize the ‘speaking’ subject of Indian history” (Chakravarty, 2000, p.34). Though he acknowledges the subaltern studies project of finding speech in the “gesture of inversion” (Ibid, p.34) as in the case of peasant insurgents, he is not stopping there. He considers this as a serious point of contestation and argues that “Indian public life may mimic on paper the bourgeois legal fiction of citizenship –the fiction is usually performed as a farce in India –but what about the bourgeois private self and its history. Anyone who has tried to write “French” social history with Indian material would know how impossibly difficult the task is” (ibid, p. 35). With this compelling statement Chakravarty moves on to the analysis of Neerad C. Chowdhury’s autobiography. He observes that out of the 963 pages only a single paragraph describing his wedding night experience interrupts his public life and “make room for something approaching the intimate”(ibid, p.35). The analysis Chakravarty offers of the single paragraph is as follows:

The passage remains a telling exercise in the construction of memory, for it is about what Chaudhuri “remembers” and “forgets” of his “First Night experience”. He screens of intimacy with expressions like “I do not remember” or “I do not know how”(not to mention the very Freudian “making a clean breast of”), and this self constructed veil is no doubt a part of the self that speaks” (Ibid, p. 36).(emphasis mine)
This reveals the crisis in relation to the public-private debate and the problems in addressing the slippery terrain of the intimate. This exercise offers some insights in how to attend to the speaking subject and also how to address the question of ‘intimate’. This analysis also reveals the place First Night has in the modern individual’s life. Dipesh Chakravarty’s reading of Nirad C. Choudhury’s autobiography re-affirms the formulation the thesis adopts in relating the experience of First Night and intimate. It might not be accidental that the one experience that is capable of interrupting the narratives of public life and “make room for something approaching intimate” was the wedding night or the room that was made could only be the nuptial chamber. But what is more interesting is the way a historian acknowledges the difficulty in understanding the “speaking subject”. Here, we have a historian who is turning his attention to a “telling exercise in the construction of memory” and he sounds almost like a psychoanalyst in the process. It is possible to argue that he senses the difficulty in addressing the speaking subject who does not fall neatly into European ideas of public-private and also senses the resistance at work in relation to narrativization when he saw the “self constructed veil” which constitutes the “speaking subject”. One should not lose sight of the fact that it is a historian who is urging for an acknowledgment of resistance and repression at work while thinking about a speech placed in the domain of intimate, making intimate a force field, a (psycho) dynamic site, which demands perhaps different modes of engagement

19 The dynamic notion of intimate also throws light on the way the thesis employs the expression ‘contemporary’ while describing contemporary Keralam. Contemporary Keralam is not just the post 90’s Keralam. It also suggests a location that could only be understood with latency in meaning and time. It is the acknowledgement that the present moment carries within it past in condensed and displaced forms.
How else can one address the post colonial Indian subject’s speech which has been marked with lacks, absences and resistance towards telling? This is a project which oscillates between the concealed and the confessional. The double bind of the problem here is that, to understand the speech that comes with a self constructed veil one must come out of the public-private binary and must be attentive to the domain of intimate. Moreover, to know more about the nature of intimate one must attend to the speech that comes with a veil. This double bind reminds that the intimate cannot be treated as a pre-existing static backdrop upon which the cultural script is unfolding. This exercise can begin by paying attention to the speech that comes with a veil. What does the speech hides with its veil? Does every speech carry a secret and every utterance an attempt not to give away the secret?

Ashis Nandy in *The Savage Freud* suggests that colonial cultures have their secret selves (Nandy, 1995, p. 81-144). And in *Time Warps* he delineates the nature of this secrecy. “The presumption here is that the secrecy is imposed, by categories associated with dominance, but is also partly internalized. As a result the socialized self learns to keep double ledgers, one for official consumption and one for private moments or for transmission as unofficial memories or the creation of contraband histories” (Nandy, 2002, p.170-171) He pushes the understanding further to suggest that not just individuals but communities can also have secret selves in a way uncoupling the whole notion from individual conceptions of interiority(Nandy, 2002, p. 171). Nandy does not expand his cryptical statement on secrecy further and there are not many cues left in his speech on the nature of secrecy. This is the point where the thesis looks for other discussions on the notions of secrecy that would-be helpful to take the discussion forward. It is possible to
find an explanation on the nature of secrecy in Derrida. Derrida privileges “non-knowing” to secrecy and considers non-knowing “more ancient and more originary” than the experience of secret. He explains this non-knowing as follows:

It is not a non-knowing installed in the form of “I don’t want to know”. ...It is not the limit of a knowledge [or] limit in the progression of knowledge. It is in some way a structural non-knowing which is heterogeneous, foreign to knowledge. It is not just the unknown that could be known and I give up trying to know. It is something in relation to which knowledge is out of question. ...It is not a thing, some information that am hiding, or that one has to hide or to dissimulate, it is rather an experience that does not make itself available to information that resists information and knowledge, and that immediately, encrypts itself (Derrida, 1995, p.201).

This idea of secrecy as non-knowing has major implications to the way we attend to the question of ‘culture’. It has been observed that bringing attention to the “always already encrypted nature of discourse, giving us a way of thinking about secrecy beyond this surface and depth model” (Hall & Birchall, 2006, p. 303). This secrecy is not buried deep under the layers of culture rather it is on the surface; but the surface is not superficial. This notion of secrecy as a concealment that is oriented towards unconcealment helps to account for the resistant and recalcitrant nature of culture in rendering itself available for

20 Derrida’s remarks on the secret are varied and are observed to be “subtly different speculations on the notion of what is hidden, veiled or withdrawn” (Almond 2003, p. 462). The description of secret this discussion invokes is the one among the many where he is most eloquent on the transparency of the opaqueness or the non-secret of the secret.
The constitutive role this secret plays in the making of culture makes every inquiry around culture an inquiry into the opaqueness of culture. The access to the culture in this scheme is enabled by the fact that there is no easy access to culture. There is a ‘structural non-knowing’ or secrecy at work which hinders any project that assumes easy accessibility to culture.

Though this discussion initially employed the notion of intimate to suggest a location which is neither public nor private, with the current understanding of secrecy at work, intimate becomes a new location that allows a glimpse of the opaqueness a cultural practice carries with it. The next section tries to reflect upon the concrete methodological moves required to engage with the domain of intimate.

4. **Note(s) on Methodology**

The formulation ‘First Night as intimate event’ carries two possibilities of addressing the experience of it. One is to treat the intimate event as a discursive site/event. The second is to analyse the experience of the event as it is *lived*. Usually these two strands are posed as two mutually exclusive strands of approaching questions of experience. Joan Scott in “Evidence of Experience” argues that the discursive tradition treats experience as the object of explanation and unsettles the foundationalist theories that privilege experience as the origin of explanation (Scott, 1991). Sonia Kruks treats Scott’s reading as presenting a “false antithesis” (Kruks, 2001, p.138) and argues that “experience can serve *both* the point of origin and as the object of an explanation. Whether one chooses to
explore it as one or the other—or indeed as both—is a choice that should not be foreclosed \textit{a priori}” (ibid).

According to Kruks, these two strands can be treated as two dialectically related poles from which knowledge can be produced (Kruks, 2001, p. 141). She argues that the relationship between these poles can also be imagined as a gestalt drawing, in which the figure that we foreground functions to occlude the other figure even though through a ‘perceptual switching’ we come to see that both are present. The metaphor of perceptual switching helps the thesis to think about the possibility of a relation (or lack of it) between third and first person accounts, between discursive explanatory modes and those that foreground lived experience. It does not presuppose mutual constitutively or compatibility between these two strands. The method ‘far from seeking immediately to integrate one into another, will hold them separate until the reciprocal involvement comes to pass of itself” (Sartre, 1968, p.35 cf Kruk’s, 2001, p. 141).

The thesis draws energy from Kruk’s formulation of ‘two dialectically related poles’ and treats First Night as both a discursive event and as a lived event. The experience of First Night is treated both as a discursive effect and that which falls outside the discourse. The project remains open to ‘beyond of discourse’ as a possibility. Beyond of discourse is not pre-discursive or non-discursive articulation of the question. It does not mean abandoning discursively altogether. It is paying attention to that which falls outside the discourse. To avoid the discursive determinism where the “materiality of bodies ironically becomes immaterial” (Sullivan, 2001, p. 42) the thesis tries to remain attentive to the extra-discursive registers of body and desire. Here extra-discursive does not
suggest a pre-discursive core or essence at the centre of experience of First Night but rather it looks for experience that falls outside the discourse or a body which is culturally inscribed and fall outside inscription at the same time. Beyond of the discourse helps to trace the lived experience in the extra-discursive registers.

The concrete methodological move the thesis makes is influenced by this decision to remain open to both discursive and lived accounts of experience and to look for mutual constitutivity as a possibility of relationship that emerges between them. This project first tracks the discursive so that it may remain attentive to the ‘extra’ or the ‘outside’ of the discourse. The discursive strand treats the subject as the ‘discursive effect’ while the other strand employs narratives to ‘capture’ – however problematically – the lived experience and looks for the emergence of the subject in the process of narrativization. The lived experience is captured here through narrative reconstructions. Narrative reconstructions work with the psychoanalytic idea of active reconstruction and thus accounts for the repression of experience and thus the (im) possible retrieval of experience. Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion on the methodological implications of the narrative turn the thesis adopts. This narrative turn helps the thesis to attend to the conceptualization of the dynamic constitution of intimate and the opaqueness of experience.

5. **Overview of the Thesis**

The structure of the thesis in a way reflects the chasm produced by the conceptual methodological stance adopted by the thesis. The thesis presents First Night as placed between the promise of relation and the impossibility of achieving the same, akin to the
Lacanian maxim: *there is no such thing as a sexual relationship*. The second chapter tries to follow what Foucault in *History of Sexuality* calls the ‘incitement to discourse’ around the moment of First Night. The third chapter shows the presence of a norm informing the difficult negotiation between the (two) sexes. The fourth chapter shows the modern notions of individuation, interiority and romantic love are not sufficient to achieve the fantasy of harmony. The fifth chapter imbues the thesis with the embodied voice of women which provide concrete enunciation of this difficulty.

At the methodological front, there is a productive crisis in bringing the discursive and lived strands to a face to face encounter and the thesis tries to tap into that crisis. The proposed relation between these two strands is not an easy one and the thesis remains open to the (im)possibility of an emerging dialogue between the two. Chapters 2, 3, 4 works with the notion that subject is a discursive *effect* and Chapter 5 through its attention to narrative reconstructions tries to remain attentive to the lived and memorialized experience(s) of the discursive subject. The conclusion of the thesis tries to think through the possibility or impossibility of the dialogue between these two strands and tries to assess the success and limitations of the thesis in taking up this project of difficult dialogue.

The second chapter is titled as “An Event in Excess: The Discursive Production of First Night.” This chapter tries to understand the discursive production of First Night as a celebrated event of heterosexuality. It shows that there is certain cultural premium attached to First Night and analyzes the nature of this cultural premium. As a beginning exercise the chapter locates First Night in the circuits of culture and media production. It
analyses the popular discourse around the trope of virginal and nocturnal to show the making of First Night. It then connects First Night with the negotiations around everyday heterosexuality which falls into two major strands: 1) A regulative strand around the disciplining of body and sexuality and 2) A proliferative strand around consumption operating with the notions of abundance and excess. First night emerges out of these two contradictory discourses as an identifiable cultural site that could produce new erotic speaking. To understand this new erotic speaking the chapter analyses the practice of wedding ragging which is mainly anchored around the space-time of the nuptial chamber. The production of the space of nuptial chamber helps to understand the production of the subjects of First Night in their mutual imbrications. The closure of the space corresponds to the fixing of identities the event of First Night marks. The discussion presents First Night as an event in excess and foregrounds the exchange in virgin as the defining exchange contributing to the production of the excess or the surplus value.

The third chapter is titled as “Touching the Untouched: Historicizing the Rituals around Virginity”. This chapter tries to understand the figure of Virgin by analyzing the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century debates around talikettukalyanam – a ritual involving actual or ceremonial defloration of virgins. The chapter starts with the available accounts of rites that have connection with actual or ceremonial defloration. Here the sources vary from early travel writing, colonial administrative writing to folk songs and native accounts of the rites. The next section addresses ethnographic writing and briefly engages with the explanatory frameworks used in such writings to explain or grasp these rites. How the foundational assumptions and implicit biases of Structural Anthropology get translated as universal theories of kinship and family are analyzed
here. The next two sections of the chapter analyse the early twentieth century legal and reformist debates on these rites. It looks at the ideological positions these different discourses have taken while talking about the meaning and function or lack of it in the rites. The chapter then portrays how these discourses make and unmake a virginal body. The final section tries to understand the cultural economy of the virginal body through the shift in the relation (ships) communities imagine with the act of defloration.

The fourth chapter is titled as “The Loving Conqueror: Surveillance and Psychologization around First Night”. The chapter starts with a brief discussion of the idea of love in the discourse around Marriage of Inner instruments (Anthakkarana Vivaham) and ‘Arranged Marriage. First Night appears as a moment intercutting both ideas of marriage revealing the fragility of both in addressing man-woman relationship. The chapter tries to understand the shifts in the surveillance around First Night within this larger picture. This chapter argues that the modern surveillance deploys the diagnostic gaze around First Night. The deployment of diagnostic gaze could only be understood in conjunction with the psychological culture prevailing in Keralam. In contemporary Keralam, all avenues of life such as work, play, conjugality, sexuality and parenting are under psychological surveillance. The chapter shows how powerful is the ‘psy-complex’ and how the logic of psy proliferates. The diagnostic gaze deployed around First Night takes the form of psychologization when it makes prescriptions around ‘successful First Night’ and ‘successful man’. The chapter analyses the psychological parlance to see how the trope of romantic love and consent emerge as two major nodes of negotiation and documents the shift where romantic love becomes
This analysis of the rhetoric of psychology tries to understand the psychologization of the intimate as part of the production of the modern subject.

The fifth chapter is titled as “Daughters of Scheherazade: Working Through the Narrative Reconstructions of the Experience of First Night”. The chapter is an attempt to look for the cracks in the psychologised speech. Or the chapter is an attempt to present listening against looking while thinking about crack and lack. The chapter invokes the Persian mythical figure of Scheherazade while thinking about the specificities of the narrative turn where the scene of Scheherazade’s story telling becomes both the wedding night scene and the analytic scene. This re-reading of the myth provides clues to the kind of narrative analysis the thesis is attempting where there is commitment to the feminist project of re-telling stories to create “radical geography of love” (Gilligan, 2002, p. 22).

The chapter provides a detailed discussion on why it employs a psychoanalytically informed narrative analysis and which genre or school of psychoanalysis. The narrative generation is done with the unstructured interview technique and narrative analysis combines grounded theory analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and Listening Guide Method (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan, Spencer Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003). This chapter combines the codes generated through the grounded theory analysis with the “listening” produced through listening guide method in the narrative analysis. The axial codes that guide this analysis are Affect, Negotiation, Consent and Violation. This analysis takes the discussion from Taboo of Virginity (Freud, 1918) to the question of taboo and virginity. It shows how the taboo is instituted between the virgin and her body, the virgin and her experience, and her experience and knowledge.
The concluding section tries to pull the strands together and to produce a grounded discussion on the erotic economy of the intimate. The concluding discussion argues that the discursive inquiry and its attention to the social, tilts intimate towards what Lacan calls the ‘extimate’ and the narrative strand places intimate at the cracks of the speech act. These two strands together presents intimate as a new location for knowledge production where intimate presents a threshold space between social and psychic; and exterior and interior. The last section ‘from political economy of marriage to erotic economy of intimate’ shows the perspectival difference the thesis tries to instil.