APPENDIX

I reproduce below (my translation of the salient parts of) NS Madhavan’s response to my reading of his story and my rejoinder to his response:

Question: “Mr Ansari has accused that there is a Hindu interest behind the naming of the villain of ‘Higuita’ as Jabbar. What do you say about this?”

Answer: “Name will always be a problem for Ansari. It’s psychological. Like the Oedipus fixation of fatherless children. Because Ansari does not have a name. Who will be named Nair, Suryani, Christian or Ezhava? Ansari is a name like that. It’s the caste name of the Momin (weaver) Muslims in North India. I will not further destroy (deconstruct) an individual who has been denied even a name.”

“Let’s take another caste name: Marandi. Lucy Marandi, the female character in ‘Higuita.’ Marandis, who imagine tortoise as their totem, are a sub-group of the Munda adivasis. They generally live in Ghooti and Moori in Ranchi district and Bandhgaf in Simhdoom district. The exploiters in these areas are roughly of two types. The first type is the Hindu Baniya who exploits them in the area itself. The second type comprises a handful of Pathans. They, apart from lending money at high interests, are involved in sending adivasi girls to Sonagachi in Calcutta. Hence, for the sake of expressing the right politics (political correctness) it is rather difficult to make Jabbar a brahmin youth in a Kalpathi Agraharam.”

“Like Sara Joseph, who despite being a woman was not able to rescue her stories from a patrilineal descent, Ansari is not bailed out because he is a Muslim.”

“There was an organization of Jews who helped Hitler to kill Jews. They betrayed other Jews. And created doubts in other people about those Jews who were involved in anti-Nazi activities. . . .”

“Without me saying so, you should know that religious fundamentalists in our country are also using such strategy. A MIM (MP Owaisi’s party) worker had told me that Hyderabad, where Ansari resides, is an important centre of such people.” (Excerpt from the interview with NS Madhavan [by Sudhakaran] in Madhyamam 33 [9 October 1998]: 14-16)

A rough translation of my rejoinder (Madhyamam 51 [12 February 1999]: 36-37):

“The translated version of my paper reproduced in Madhyamam 50 (5 February 1999): 20-24, first presented at a seminar organized by ISS, New Delhi, in December 1996, is an attempt to address the politics of ‘representation’ and its imbrication with our conceptualization of ‘Indianness.’ The latter is a perennial problem, with a cutting contemporary edge, besetting us (‘Indians,’ if Madhavan permits) from within and without.”
“At the outset, let me clarify: my paper does not say that Hindu (Hindutva would have been the right word here) interests belie the name Jabbar. Maybe Madhavan has the excuse of a wrong answer to a wrong question! However, it is true that in the discussion that followed, and responding to the query whether the paper will lose its point if the villain bore another name, I remarked that what I was trying to say/show was that it could not but be so. Especially since writers, occupying, as Pierre Bourdieu notes, a ‘structurally contradictory position’ in society, are conditioned and constrained by cultural politics. Given the setting of the story, aesthetically as well as historically, the villain would therefore have inevitably borne a Muslim name. On the contrary, we may even maintain that the Christian-Hindu conflation in the naming/actions of the hero would be Madhavan’s contribution!”

“I cannot possibly do justice to the complexity of these issues in such a short space. The notion of representation, I would argue, presents us with a primary problem that forces (some of) us to try to reverse its institutionalized relation with the real. The effects of such a perception are manifold. I will not elaborate on these lines here, especially since I am sure Madhavan has read and thought about the new questions raised about the truth of representation and of the notion of author(ity). Or, if we go by the manner in which he seems to understand history, as a neutral medium, has he? If he had ‘understood’ that history itself has also been plagued by these questions of representation, maybe he would not nonchalantly proclaim authorial innocence and veracity. Representation involves a ‘presentation,’ an ordering, of the ‘real.’ Foucault’s conception of a reality-effect and of an author-effect is worth remembering here. Such a selection, an inclusion/exclusion of various aspects of the real, is not a random or haphazard act—inspiration no longer explains/expiates (lack of) authorial involvement—but involves conscious decisions, as in the case of an intellectually aware writer/author who is, nonetheless, pre-determined by prevailing cultural politics. In a simple example, a good portrait or a good photograph is determined by conditions other than how ‘beautiful’ a person appears to be. Hence, EMS or Madhavan or an Ansari exists in a different discursive field with different rules than that occupied by literary characters. A Geeverghese, a Jabbar or a Lucy is an object coming to life in a literary discourse, even if they do actually exist elsewhere and actually do what they are represented as doing. Madhavan’s attempt to aestheticize EMS (Madhyamam, issue 39) spring from such a confusion of the literary with the socio-cultural, historico-political dimensions.”

“Nonetheless, the involvement of an author in ‘ordering’ reality, in enmeshing the real with his/her own personal/political preferences, unwittingly or otherwise, cannot be denied. If we keep aside the question of sincerity, we have to grant that a conscious writer would have been acutely aware of these cultural politics; as Foucault has it, of what what one does does. Instead of pretending to be presenting a ‘true’ picture of life as it is, s/he would have been more than a mere portrait-painter and the representation would have a critical charge. What I try to show is that Madhavan too, contrary to our popular perception, has not been able to shake off the shackles of an aesthetic
that is largely underwritten by a particular characterization of Islam; whatever problems Said's thesis may have, its basic sense cannot be denied. The circulation of such re-pre-sentations in our contemporary culture presents us with a grave problem. Scholars have already written extensively about the problems underlying such an easy conception of a secular India, about how the secular is underwritten by an ethos, which is widely regarded as natural. Writers who have drawn attention to these aspects have always had to face the charge of communalization, interestingly from disparate quarters. I am aware of the inevitability of such an accusation when I venture to expose the ingredients of our common-sensical notions, of what is perceived as normally real. The fissures forcing their way into our national consciousness will not disappear as a result of a more forceful patriotic incantation of sameness. Maybe it's time for us, as I have argued elsewhere, to take stock, even to think in terms of the merits of reiterating our differences, especially if there are peoples who have been marginalized in this sublimation, who have always been at the receiving end of our national imaginary.”

“In a political context where we are grappling with the fascist energy behind the Hindutva surge and where minorities (recently Christians) are being periodically targeted, to say that a Jewish organization worked against the interests of Jews is an age-old ploy to draw attention away from the plight of minorities. To take a small digression here, Madhavan is actually labeling Jewish anti-Nazism as minority fundamentalism, for the Jews who betrayed their own people could not, by any extension of logic, be called religious fundamentalists. The phrase ‘minoritarian religious fundamentalism’ (which earlier on in the interview Madhavan lauds as ‘resistance’) is (mis)used rather glibly here, as is the case most often; the “naming” immediately establishes a hierarchy—this is fundamentalism. The ease with which we rush to labels is a cause for unease. We can understand minoritarian religious fundamentalism only to the extent that we can grasp or grant "naming," immediately establishes a hierarchy—this is fundamentalism. The ease with which we rush to labels is a cause for unease. We can understand minoritarian religious fundamentalism only to the extent that we can grasp or grant it!”

“Hence, Madhavan has either to acknowledge the double-edgedness of the aesthetic or dismiss constructive criticisms by desperately trying to divert attention from the issue, trivializing it by engaging with “naming,” in a trivial manner at that. It is sad that Madhavan takes himself and his name so seriously. Instead of focussing on ideological structures/strictures that determine our lives and our literature, he attempts an impossible task: to defend a position/posture riddled with contradictions, least of which is the result of the confusion between the literary and the socio-historical and the political. Being in this unenviable position, it is only understandable that snide comments have to tide over the resultant confusion. Significantly, it is Madhavan (in his own person) who says that names do matter. Sad, in that he seems to be echoing Pramila Gokhale (in his “Mumbai”) who tells Aziz: ‘I will just tell them my name. That’s all. My name is both my history and geography.’ In 'Mumbai,' he had starkly depicted the problematic of naming, of whose name matters or what kind of name is a “proper” name. But in his person he talks about ‘fatherless children with Oedipus fixation’ (sic). Was it because he knew that my father had passed away recently (in March '98)? Or was it (allow me to deconstruct Madhavan’s statement, not his self) because
of the unacknowledged, if not unconscious, trace of an earlier era’s attempt to explain the etymology of ‘Mappila’ as *ma-pilla*, meaning mother’s child, connoting that the father is unknown? How does Madhavan want the Mappilas of Kerala to react individually or as a community to such sick(ening) statements? Maybe it is worth our while to remember that the norms of a person who has internalized the values of a patriarchal western culture need not be necessarily shared by those belonging to a matrilineal society! And, is ‘fatherless children having Oedipus fixation’ a strong misreading of Freud? And, forgetting its Persian and Arabic roots, in fact forgetting its history and the different cultural geography it embodies, how can Madhavan conclude that Ansari is ‘originally’ a caste-name? Is this not a blatant exhibition of a North Indian, read ‘Hindu,’ bias? Ansari is a common enough name among Muslims, if not more common than Jabbar among Pathans!

“The issue of political correctness is irrelevant here; Jabbar could have worn a mask and be named Madhavan, but the structural logic of the narrative demands that the villain be named Jabbar. My interest in the story was only in that it represented in a compact form most of the problems underlying our conception of the aesthetic. Madhavan’s later stories that seem to have addressed the issue do not change the scenario; such later stories will also determine how we read Madhavan’s oeuvre. As I make clear in the paper, and I reiterate this here, it is entirely due to Madhavan’s commendably fine-tuned sense of the form of the cultural imaginary that the villain is named Jabbar. Hence, isn’t Madhavan protesting too much when he states that he cannot change the villain’s name/ethnicity for the sake of ‘political correctness’? Especially since in the said interview he himself acknowledges that the adivasis are exploited primarily by Hindu Baniyas and also by ‘a handful of Pathans.”

“Let me conclude this brief note by expressing my happiness: Madhavan’s attack at my person rather than my paper is an unwitting compliment. It acknowledges that my arguments have an undeniable sense and logic.”