CONCLUSION

Uses of historicizing a media practice

Having investigated the illustrated visual materials in Malayalam periodicals of twentieth century, this thesis comes to the following conclusions.

Drawings sketches or paintings published in periodicals have been getting recognized admired and placed on an artistic pedestal in terms of some definitive logic of the cultural public sphere in Keralam. Having acquired a coinage within the popular media-use practices of this active laboratory of literacy, ‘illustration’ is regarded as a visual act inherently based on literary texts. It is also regarded as an original skill of an artist in collaborating fruitfully with the creative intends of the writer interpreting his literary work, in a personal and hence creative terms.

This study alternately meets this genre of text-image concurrence from a perspective of textual frameworks rather than a supposed literary determinism that is generally taken for granted. This research observed the repetitiveness and redundancy in the practice of ‘illustration’ that predominately ‘figured’ fiction in academically amendable typologies of figure studies. It gives clues well against the myth of ‘creative interpretation of literary text’. Values of fresh individualistic qualities that go with any notion of ‘creativity’ can not be contained within the routines of a media act that basically functions through reader-oriented and graphic means for communication of messages by repetition.

An enquiry in the first two chapters of this work, into the visual texts of readership formation traced the evolution of a graphic language of communicating identities ideas and emotions. Need for the graphic medium was systematically and conceitfully created out of the habits of both real and imagined ‘reading class’ who
could be mobilized around ideas of cultural and linguistic homogeneity. While tracing this readership formation, this research inevitably had to problematise the comfortable assumptions of literature-oriented ness of ‘illustrations’ that functioned in a complex textual sphere of communication.

Intertextuality of the unimaginably huge proportions of ‘illustrated images’ found in libraries, archives and in personal collections of ‘reading bufffs’ unsettled this ‘reading of the illustrated images’ at the very outset. ‘Illustration’ was not a paradigmatic act with predetermined features and shared frameworks for functioning. There existed no theory of ‘illustration’ but of ‘art’. Artists writers and readers talked about art and the pleasures of art, not about ‘illustration’. Curiously ‘illustrators’ were not talked about artists till early 1990s but last one decade saw systematically conferred importance on this practice in terms of the artistic value of the major people involved in it. Recent efforts to produce anthologies on individual artists (though they are illustrators) published their sketches without the corresponding literary text but talked about the way their ‘illustrations’ remain in memories of many who had the pleasures of reading literature in periodicals. Nostalgia gives value to the canonical habits of ‘illustration’ and ‘illustrators’ in the media habits today. Mathrubhumi weekly is at present giving their last page for old periodical pages of illustration displayed at random. They give a yellowish tint to that page. But efforts to encounter ‘memory’ in its collected material context in front of this researcher in full proportion, consistently proved that redundancy, routine, anonymity and transience of illustrated images characterized them as popular media practice. Taking illustration out of context at any instance is simply to evade the politics of mediatic dominance over visuals when used in a literary textuality.
Politics of ‘simply seeing’:

Instilling the values of individual original nostalgic and creative functioning of Art onto a media sphere helps only to enhance the efficacy of mediatic politics of communication. Media employ pictures to communicate specific ideas. ‘Creativity’ of illustrator but fashioned as artist is also a mediatic mobilisation that is historically well developed through pedagogic essaying of ideas on art by culture-conscious readers and writers, journalistic instilling of information and reporting artistic events as spectacles for ‘simply seeing’. Meaning of journalistic communication lies in its textualising capabilities. Reading illustrated images thus traced an immanent need for identifying periodical magazine as a reproductive mechanism of identities and cultural meanings wherein ‘Art’ operated as a codified idea through ‘illustration’. It has only tempted readers to uncritically ‘understand’ and ‘consume’ it than critically intervene into it as a social practice. The media dominance in such literary understanding of the visual virtually resisted art from developing here as a functional reality that could innovate sensibility in a way very different from literature.

Meaning of ‘illustration’ is produced out of a particular way of seeing, from an imagined vantage point of a reader who is simply an ‘onlooker’. Reading / viewing a periodical becomes a virtual participation in ‘public’ where one reacts reasonably, gently, tastefully, cordially or even secretively regulated as if in a public space. It devised the glance of a dis-interested subject who is a charged participant in the whole drama of events but equally distanced from his subject of interest as the cover picture of ‘Sanjayan’ drafted (chapter-1). This dis-interested glancing on the page eventually gained meanings of ‘privacy’ ‘leisure’ and ‘entertainment’. Pictures could be habitually looked at from a distance while the meaning of it was always verbally next to it. A ‘curio-interest’ in exotic human figure type and in panoramic landscapes could
be easily established in this fold of well-entertained onlooker who reveled in ‘truthful reproduction’ the very own image of himself. It was a historical contingency in colonial India and it had to face the technique and content of both mechanical reproduction and ‘illusionist naturalism’ of European tradition at once.

**Circumscribing the ‘other’ orientations:**

As discussed in chapter -3, periodicals in Malayalam, especially the ‘cultural majors’ like Mathrubhumi weekly, Malayala Nadu, Malayala Manorama (of 1950s and 1960s), and Kalakaumudi (in late 1970s), in the post independent years, were competently publishing photo features and graphic renderings of current news affaires and stories. This historically laid the base for a truthful reproduction of identifiable figure type. ‘Illustrators’ took up this as a basic format for forging an artistic identity in the sphere of journalistic communication. Human figuration could be a totem for the illustrators. The illustrators trained in art from Madras carried with them some codes of linear perspective and modeling that yielded an actualizing potential similar to the photographic and fictitious featuring. Unlike photo features that explained a picture, illustrators were easily assumed as interpreting ideas in literature that has consistently been discussed as an aesthetic canon. M.V. Devan wrote that picture is not just ‘saying something’. That is a ‘writerly’ trick. Artist picturises well-balanced forms of natural objects. The status of artistic rendering is defined distinct from the literary, at the occasional instances of articles on art written by people who were not necessarily artists or art critics but writers or thinkers like Kesari, M.P.Paul K.M.Daniel, E.M.J.Venniyoor, Vakkam Abdul Khadar, K.P.Padmanabhan Thampy, K.T.Ramavarma and others. Most of these writers thought on art in terms of a genealogy and history provided by books on European art and traditional Indian Art
written by western scholars. These carried ‘occidental orientations’ as Partha Mittar uses the phrase to explain the euro-centric formations of aesthetic ideas in the art and nationalism in colonial India. Post colonial phase of cultural life in Keralam in which ‘illustrations’ were canonized in the journalistic sphere also witnessed outsider projects of ‘modern art’. Art developed in far off urban centers were regularly photo featured here. The Madras based writers and thinkers kept constant touch with the periodicals here. Kalakaumudi used to publish ‘Paris letters’ – reflections written by artist viswanathan. Contemporary Indian artists operated in urban centers like Bombay Delhi and Calcutta were also featured in Malayalam periodicals. ‘Illustrators’ supposedly in service of literary texts did not take up the ‘other’ issues of art. In the evolving sphere of a graphic picturing of ideas by way of journalistic communication, they worked out some amendments on academic sketching of life models. M.V.Devan abbreviated human body effectively using means of graphic suggestions. Namboodiri and AS worked out photogenic compositions in 1960s that were intended to convey ‘narrative situations’ of life. The culture shocks and un-graspability of the ‘modern’ in literature was in effect minimized by the communicative ‘minimum means of figuration’ that only made some amendments in the familiar photographic and filmic communication.

Illustrators transgressed the limits of photographic and photogenic. They worked out ‘more real’ intimacies and more provoking titillation than that a photographic language could give within the cultural confinements of this locale. Photographic pedagogy on modern art especially formed in Kalakaumudi by late 1970s established an artistic acceptability for nude. Sexuality modernity urbanization and ‘Modern Art’ as such were consistently discussed as the ‘other’ categories of modesty, pastoral simplicity and communicability of art in general verbal discourse.
These ‘other culture’ texts were circumscribed by a (human) figuring mould of ‘illustration’ photo featuring, devised in all journalistic categories of periodical communication. ‘Illustration’ that gave ‘well balanced form to nature when transcribed to the literary text’ was in effect a very refined journalistic attitude that could be canonized as a ‘creative act’.

‘Illustrated images’ in periodical magazines function within a culture industry that constructs and reproduces meanings. In this reproductive mechanism of cultural meanings, ‘Illustrators’ operated almost like anthropologists. Alan Radley says in ‘Balenese Character: A photographic analysis’, a famous work in 1942, anthropologists Bateson & Mead marked the beginning of a particular anthropological approach that made bodily life central to social analysis. They spoke on the ‘character of movement’ that viewed the body as reflective of culture. They placed the body as the locus of traditional practices concerning birth, child rearing, courtship and marriage everyday survival and death². ‘Illustrators too established the general patterns of the body’s use by recording people’s movements. The much loved figures for illustrators here lingered around domesticity, man-woman intimacy, landlord-servant behavioral patterns as can be conveyed through body, biological specificities of the female form in pregnancy feeding etc. ‘Illustration’ thus worked around privacies and pleasures of reading through such anthropological interest easily containable in each periodicity with constraints of time. This anthropocentrism is not explicitly understood as political while cultural public domain constantly discussed the political significance of literary activity only. Even when talked about the illustrator’s anthropocentric interest, it was to appreciate ‘the skilled observer’. ‘Illustration’ has clearly emerged as a regulatory and productive means of popular (male) pleasure and engagement but builds up with some amount of conceit in the
mainstream culture sites. The literal photographic and anthropocentric presentation of the male voyeur and the reciprocating glances from the female is part of that snobbish means. The ‘illustrator’ performing his art to the tunes of music in background on a canvas stretched, in a public place, is also such a conceit that solidly gathers the artistic capital of the ‘illustrator’ for the uses of the media. ‘Illustrator’s dealing with the human physicality bears upon a range of questions concerning people’s personalities and expressions in everyday life. Norms for men women, children, laborers and landscape never changed but refashioned in the dominant modes of exerting focus on body in actual life. Seemingly liberating sexuality expressed through nudes always counter-acted through consistent objectification of female in a male circle of respondents where ideology of ‘aesthetic’ operates through media texts of art reviews and interviews. The explanation of ‘illustrators’ epitomizing the greatness of ‘line’ as an ‘aesthetic choice’ rather than a limitation caused on them by the lack of printing facilities on multi-colour productions till 1990s, is also one among various snobbish means that seems to sustain this practice within ‘mainstream culture’.

History helps to see things out of the vague confines of ‘memory’. It investigates texts with specificities of time and locale. This research identified the media texts of art and culture from the specificities of this milieu that sustain ‘illustration’ partially in the main-stream in spite of its redundancy and ossification of sensibility.

This study has worked out its conclusions mostly within the visible texts available in periodicals. Equally pertinent are the invisible texts that determine commercial potential of visuals in a media world. Those texts need to be further
culled out of the documents of the routines of media houses. It may further explicate the functional realities of this practice.

The areas newly opened up for further academic research from this study are twofold. As traced in this thesis, the verbose but informative essays on art simplistically orienting on a sort of ‘bookish experience’ of art has throughout been a political force that kept all perceptions of visual art uncritically on a ‘literate-media’ level. Those texts should be further comprehensively recuperated from periodicals and critically assorted to form a new way of writing on art that can base itself on the material realities of producing art works.

The diminishing hold of literature as a coherent aesthetic force to determine visuals today has opened up new critical means for practicing artists to introspectively construct an identity of ‘an artist living and working in Keralam’ in the current scenario of ‘contemporary art’. It will be an effective critical distancing from the circumscribing habits of ‘mediatic’ artist subjectivity of this cultural milieu.

Notes
