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in Contemporary Kerala Society*

Speaking of the stark discrepancy between German thought and its material basis, Marx ominously predicts: 'it will one day find itself on the level of European decadence before ever having been on the level of European emancipation' and be 'comparable to a *fetish worshipper* pining away with the desecrations of Christianity: (MECA, III, 183). In more senses than one, Marx's metaphor poignantly captures the odd curve described by the social development in Kerala. The rising wave of caste hatred, communal riots and the shocking criminalisation of everyday life have rudely shaken the self-complacent, self-congratulatory assumptions of the left regarding the 'essentially progressive character' of Kerala. Spectres of reaction which were thought to have been exercised and safely put away in the heady days of anti-colonial, anti-feudal struggle are once again beginning to stalk the streets. And the once proud bastion of radical politics and enlightened thought has all of a sudden come to wear a slightly jaded and all too vulnerable look. Like a child prodigy who, at the approach of middle age, finds himself under pressure to pay off the overdraft of adulation that he had enjoyed at an early age, so touchingly portrayed by Adorno in *Minima Moralia*, Kerala society too is squarely faced with the problem of living up to the 'early promise' that it had shown. Indeed, the alarming eclipse of women's freedom and the attenuation of their social status in contemporary Kerala society are grim pointers to this.

Modern social scientists are wont to urge, justifiably enough, that a society's progressiveness can be judged from the treatment it metes out to women and children. From this point of vantage the track record of Kerala, in recent years is far from gladdening. Crimes against women, from eve-teasing and molestation to gang rapes and murder, are disturbingly frequent. Instances of suicides and dowry deaths are multiplying. The objectification and commodification of the female

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form in popular media is getting to be crass and cynical. What is more striking is the enigmatic silence of women themselves in the face of these atrocities—and that despite the impressive achievements of Kerala in spheres like women's education and employment! No doubt these disconcerting developments have to be seen against the backdrop of the waning hegemony of the left and the systematic abridgement of the rights of the masses that has come in its train.

THE ULTRA-CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH AND SOME QUESTIONS OF METHOD

Any realistic analysis of contemporary Kerala society and culture will have to come to terms with what can tentatively be termed 'the ultra-conservative backlash'. Nurtured diligently by the popular media, and aided and abetted by the establishment, the 'backlash' has become a well-entrenched and palpable ideological entity in our daily life. Further, its pernicious influence has eroded, to a great extent, the unquestioned hegemony that the progressive forces had enjoyed in the cultural life of Kerala right up to the sixties.

Certainly the 'backlash' is a nebulous phenomenon, eclectic in its ideological composition and protean in its manifestations. This is perhaps no accident when we consider the curious chemistry of ruling-class alliances in response to which the backlash ideologues modulate their voices. No doubt, owing to its bewildering transmogrifications, the backlash defies simple or precise definition. Yet, in general, it can be seen to be characterised by its pronounced anti-progressive, anti-left stances, its unabashed idealisation of the fental past, its belligerent apolitical posturing, its unconcealed male-chauvinistic and sexist bias, its pathological dread of people's movements and its strident revivalist rhetoric.

Emerging rather shamefacedly from the murky aftermath of the infamous 'Vimochana Samaram' in the late-fifties, the backlash has cunningly exploited the numerous dissensions and theoretical convulsions within the left to acquire a certain measure of political respectability and ideological sophistication. The eclipse of women's freedom in Kerala society—and the resultant marginalization—has to be seen in the context of the now insidious, now open, but ever relentless efforts on the part of the backlash ideologues to abridge the rights that had been wrested by the masses from the ruling classes in bitter struggles of the past and to even rewrite the history of our times devaluing these struggles.

Nevertheless, it needs to be emphasised that attempts to dismiss the 'backlash' as a fortuitous development foisted upon us by external agencies—be it the incursion of imperialist culture or the media revolution, though gratifying to a certain species of self-complacency, are, in the last analysis, bad as theory and unsound as a guide for

radical practice. A genuine Marxist critique of culture has *per force* to strive towards a holistic understanding of the 'cultural', seeing it in its dialectical richness within the social formation. Here what Lukacs has felicitously termed the 'ontological' approach—which seeks to 'discover the forms of being that new movements of the complex produce' (1974, 21) becomes a methodological prerequisite.

Expatriating upon the ontological approach Lukacs says,

The fact that new phenomena can be genetically derived on the basis of their everyday existence is only one aspect of a general relationship, namely that being is a historical process. There is certainly no Being in the strong sense, and even that which we call everyday being is a specific and extremely relative configuration of complexes within a historical process. (Lukacs, 21)

Surely, a 'genetic' account of the evolution of Kerala society in modern times and attendant phenomena like class and gender identities and ideological currents such as the 'backlash', requires of us a thorough familiarity with the eye-level history of the times. Such an imaginative walk up and down the bylanes of the past which records with sensitivity even the slightest tremors in the socio-political milieu, is of course, quite beyond the scope of this brief excursus. So what is attempted here is an approximate mapping of one strand of this complex, namely, the making of feminine identity, while keeping an eye on the wider social contexts without which it would hardly be intelligible.

However, before we embark on our enquiry proper, it is necessary to dwell, albeit briefly, on certain terminological problems, for no discussion of the constitution of feminine identity in our society can afford to remain impervious to the vast body of theoretical material on the constitution of femininity and the ideology of the family in the West. The global nature of capitalism rightly insisted upon by Marxist theory makes any such exclusiveness, methodologically faulty. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that the application of theoretical concepts developed by Western Marxists as well as feminists to our reality is fraught with serious difficulties. Of course in the first place, no wholesale importation of theory, which does not take into account the historico-specific and culture-specific differences will be feasible or valuable. But, more than that, the terminological tangles that are to be encountered at every turn in western Marxist and feminist theory can be a serious impediment to a proper appreciation of it in our left circles with their characteristic anti-theoretical, anti-intellectual bias.

THE TERMINOLOGICAL TANGLE

The western Marxist-Feminist discourse, informed as it is by structuralism, semiology, psychoanalysis and the various post-structuralist analytical modes, is at best a complex and forbidding body of thought. The methodological bogs and terminological tangles that appear at every turn in this difficult terrain, makes the mapping of it a daunting task. Yet a closer look its theoretical genesis would reveal that the almost obsessive preoccupation with language which characterizes the work of these theorists, and which makes some of them like Jacques Lacan willfully obscure, was an inevitable consequence of the nature of their project itself. Because language is essentially a 'this-sided' practice, it vigorously thwarts attempts at objective, scientific analysis, forcing the enquirer to take into account his/her own subjectivity. Thus at every stage the analysis has to incorporate the auto-critique into the very modality of the analysis, viz. the language in which it is articulated and by which it is constituted. This methodological dedoubling goes a long way in preventing the insidious operation of ideology and is, as such, a significant step towards the demythification of supramacist and totalizing narratives which have dominated the enlightenment discourse over the ages.

A major drawback of Marxist analysis as developed by Russian theorists was that though it could conceive at once, of a subject who is produced by society and of a subject who acts to support or to change that society (a contradiction pointed out in cryptic terms by Marx, when he stresses on the need for 'the educators to be educated') it could not transcend this duality by positing a radical conception of the subject. Instead, it often tended to 'bracket out the problem of the subject, and concentrate, in a totally mechanistic fashion, on the mode of production, or hypostatise a fixed identity which usually appears under the ludicrous notion of 'false consciousness': (Coward & Ellis, 90). This lacuna in theory, partly the product of idealistic notions of 'the human essence,' and partly of survivals from pre-Marxist, determinist, modes of thought, prevented the conceptualisation of a radical notion of agency in history and subordinated revolutionary practice to a narrow perception of economic determinism.

Indeed, as early as his *History and Class Consciousness*, perceptive theorists like George Lukacs, and Karl Krosch (*Marxism and Philosophy*) had realised this aspect of the problem. But Lukacs' flirtations with Hegelian categories and Krosch's unfortunate expulsion from KPD, effectively prevented them from following up their insights. Again Brecht, and Benjamin, the former in his radical dramatic practice and the latter in his aphoristic literary critical essays had also—indeed in extremely contrary ways—sought to

present the subject as a process. But neither of them could develop their insights into a theoretically coherent system, so much so that, it was only with the emergence of structuralism, semiology and Lacanian psycho-analysis that the positing of a subject in process, which seeks to overcome the contradictory movement between the subjective and the objective, occurred.

Julia Kristeva indicates how this conceptualisation is integral to the dialectical materialist perspective:

The logical expression of objective processes, negativity can only yield a subject in process, the subject which constitutes itself according to the law of negativity, that is according to the laws of objective reality: it can only be a subject crossed over by this negativity, opened onto by non subjected free objectivity in movement. (Kristeva, 1974, 103)

It is precisely here that Marx's project decisively breaks free of the idealist trajectory of Hegelian dialectic, for though Hegelian dialectic starts by 'dissolving the immediate unity, the sensible certitude' returns in the name of a superior, metaphysical and repressive truth, returns to a unitary conception of the subject and 'refills and consolidates it' (Kristeva, 123-4). Marx has described this revolutionary character of dialectic.

In its rational form [the dialectic] is a scandal and abomination for the bourgeoisie. . . . As it includes in the understanding of the given the simultaneous understanding of its negation and necessary destruction, as it conceives any mature form as in motion . . . and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.

(Capital, Althusser's trans., *For Marx*, 90)

To evolve a methodology commensurate with this critical and revolutionary orientation, it is essential to conceive of materialist dialectic as the dialectic between history, language and ideology. For,

To analyse the structure without the subject can only be a form of metaphysical materialism; to analyse language without its object can only be idealism; and to analyse ideology without language will only ever be mechanical materialism, since all of these forms of analysis deny the determinacy of the symbolic system as it is imposed on the human subject in its construction in history and ideological formations. (Coward and Ellis, 92)

Herein lies the significance of the western Marxist and Marxist-Feminist endeavours to integrate the insights afforded by structuralism, semiology and psycho-analysis with Marxist theory. Historically, it marks the convergence of three distinct strands of

enquiry: first, post-Saussurian linguistics which, by insisting on the arbitrary nature of the sign, exploded the well-entrenched humanist myth perhaps as old as Bacon and Locke regarding the perfect and natural fit between words and things, and underscored the lack of transparency of language as a medium, second, the ideology critique, which with the pioneering work of Louis Althusser began to unravel the complex functions of ideology both as a force that fixes the subject in certain positions in relation to certain fixities of discourse and as concretised in stale apparatuses like family, religious institutions, educational system, the media and so on; third, the psycho-analytic theory primarily drawing inspiration from Lacanian reinterpretations of Freud, which provide, the foundation for a non-reductionist conception of a subject in process'. As Kristeva has observed, these formulations point to the 'missing area in human sciences, that of meaning in language and ideology, the process of the 'I' in history, an area which would operate in the same space as dialectical materialism itself. (Kristeva, *Tel Quel*, No. 48).

However, it is far from my intentions to suggest that the Western Marxist-Feminist positions constitute, as it were a full-fledged theoretical construct—the bitter controversies between the various theorists make any such assumption naive and unreal—or that a wholesale importation of a Foucault-crossed, Derrida-tormented problematic would provide us with an infallible analytic scaffolding to analyse the women's question in Kerala. It goes without saying that these insights engendered by political and social conditions which are vastly different from our own, have to be employed in a historically-specific and culture specific manner. But the very global character of the capitalist order and the 'false universality' (Marx) that it has imposed upon the world in general, makes the critical tools developed by the theorists of the West extremely valuable in our project. Perhaps, in the strict sense, it is necessary to interrogate these positions from epistemological and ontological points of vantage before integrating them into our critical repertoire. Such a detailed critique, however necessary and useful it may be, will take us far away from the immediate concerns of this paper, and has to be postponed for the time being. Instead, what is attempted here is merely an adumbration of some of the more significant theoretical issues that have been lighted upon by the Western theorists which are felt to be of relevance to the understanding of our reality.

What is perhaps of radical significance in the context of this enquiry, is the thorough reformulation of the gender question that has been undertaken by modern feminist theory. Gender identity, as well as received notions of masculinity and femininity, have undergone such a radical transformation that gender is no more seen as a biological

given. Rather, thanks to the psycho-analytic and ideological critique of the engendering process undertaken by Jacques Lacan, Michael Foucault, Michele Barrett, Teresa de Lauretis *et al*, it has come to be understood more and more as a construct, produced by social, psychic and ideological practices. If in the early decades of the present century geneticists were fond of insisting that Doberman Pinzer, the notorious watchdog of Nazi concentration camps was a more artificial product than a battle tank, now in the light of psychoanalytic theory it appears that our gender identities are more artificial and mediated than even the most evolved watchdog or race horse. This new emphasis is evident from the words of Coppelia Khan:

They [Dinnerstein, Rich, Chodorow] all regard gender less as a biological fact than as a social product, an institution learned through and perpetuated by culture. And they see this gender system not as a mutually beneficial and equitable division of roles, but as a perniciously symbiotic polarity which denies full humanity to both sexes while meshing—and helping to create their neuroses. Second they describe the father-absent, mother-involved nuclear family as creating the gender identities which perpetuate patriarchy and the denegration of women. . . . They question the assumption that the sexual division of labour, gender, personality and heterosexuality rest on a biological and instinctual base. . . . They present, in effect, a collective vision of how maternal power in the nursery defines gender so as to foster patriarchal power in the public world. (*Diacritics*, 1982, 33)

The theorists focused upon by Coppelia Khan are typical representatives of the quest for 'the recovery of female otherness from the margins of culture' (Susan Bordo, 1990, 146), though even within them it is possible to detect methodological differences—for instance, Rich is, arguably, approaching the problem from a 'Materialist' perspective while Dinnerstein and Chodorow prefer the psychanalytic mode. (At this juncture, it is probably necessary to place on record my feeling that listeners who are reasonably familiar with the writings in question may find the account, here far too brief or even reductionist. However, suffice it to point out that constraints of time as well as the very untractability of the material under study, makes a more nuanced exegesis an impossible ideal).

The deconstruction of gender has been influenced tremendously by Michael Foucault's brilliant, if highly controversial, *History of Sexuality* (1980). Foucault argues that sexuality which is commonly assumed to be natural as well as a private is in fact a cultural construct tailor-made to suit the political aims of the dominant class. Starting from the paradox that prohibitions and restrictions imposed upon

sexuality by religious, legal, and medical authorities instead of repressing it, is only producing it—in much the same way as industrial machinery produces goods or commodities—he arrives at the notion of a 'technology of sex', 'a set of techniques for maximising life', which has been developed and deployed by the bourgeoisie in the West in order to ensure its class survival and continued hegemony (Vol. 1, 115 ff). Foucault's own ambivalence towards the 'technology of sex', and more importantly, his less than progressive political stances in later years, notwithstanding, his work has inspired a number of studies illuminating the mechanics of power in social relations (Mary Poovey, 1986; Mary Ann Doane, 1987).

Again, Foucault argues that the 'technology of sex' involved the elaboration of discourses about four privileged 'figures' (objects of knowledge): the sexualisation of children and of the female body, the control of procreation and the psycheatrisation of anomalous sexual behaviour as perversion. These discourses implemented through pedagogy, medicine, demography and economics and amply supported by the state, served to 'implant' these figures in each individual family and institution, so that sex became not merely a secular concern, 'but a concern of the state as well . . . [it] became a matter that required the social body as a whole; and virtually all of its individuals to place themselves under surveillance' (I, 116).

Combining Foucault's notion of the technology of sex and the insights of feminist film theorists on the sexualisation of the female form in narrative cinema, Teresa de Lauretis advances the notion of a 'technology of gender':

Gender too, both as representation and as self-representation is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices as well as practices of daily life. (de Lauretis, 1987, 2)

In a sense, de Lauretis's formulations go much further than Foucault's normative approach in that, they unravel the dialectical manner in which 'social representation of gender affects its subjective construction and vice versa' (9) and this opens the way to the realm of ideology and the critical strategies developed by Marxist Feminists influenced by Althusser, Lacan and Barthes. Althusser's theory of ideology, implicit in his *For Marx* ('74) but fully articulated in *Lenin and Philosophy* ('76) is premised upon his perception that it operates not only semi-autonomously from the economic level, but fundamentally, by means of its engagement of subjectivity. In Althusser's work the gender question receives no more than marginal attention, but as de Lauretis notes:

When Althusser wrote that ideology represents 'not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the

imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live' and which govern their existence, he was also describing, to my mind, exactly, the functioning of gender.(6)

She even models her own definition of Gender: 'Gender has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as men and women,' on Althusser's celebrated words on ideology (6). Again de Lauretis' radical conception of the female subject which is not only 'distinct from woman . . . as the representation of an essence inherent in all women (which has been seen as Nature, Mother, Mystery, Evil Incarnate, Object of Desire and Knowledge, Proper Womanhood, Femininity et cetera) but also distinct from women, the real historical beings and social subjects who are defined by the technology of gender and actually engendered in social relations' (10), clearly bears the mark of Althusser's subject which is a theoretical construct in process.

Apart from de Lauretis, a number of writers have come under the influence of ideology theory. For instance to Michèle Barrett not only is ideology significant as the primary site of the construction of gender, but the ideology of gender has played an important part in the historical construction of the capitalist division of labour and in the reproduction of labour power'. She underscores 'the integral connection between ideology and the relations of production' (1985, 74). Coward and Ellis have attempted to forge a link between Althusser's theory of ideology and Lacan's concept of the 'imaginary', to understand 'how the positioning of a subject in relation to language and, therefore, social relations is always accomplished in specific ideological formations' (1980, 76). Kaja Silverman employs the semiological model—as well as the famous account of the *Paris-Match* photograph of the Negro saluting the French flag given by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* to understand the working of ideology. She says:

Barthes appropriates Hjelmslev's model but he also complicates it. He identifies connotation with the operation of ideology (also called 'myth'). For Barthes ideology or myth consists of the deployment of signifiers for the purpose of expressing and surreptitiously justifying the dominant values of a given historical period. He cites as an example the full page photographs of ornamental cookery in the French journal *Elle*. These photographs offer a falsification of food—poultry and fish which have been painstakingly glazed and coated, and either made to look like something else altogether or reconstituted in imitation of their original condition. They evoke not merely the concept of 'food', but those of 'wealth', 'art' and 'inaccessibility'. These photographs unabashedly affirm that expensive cuts of meat can never be anything but a dream for the majority of the people who read *Elle*.

At the same time, they articulate the dream for the working class, promoting desire for bourgeois products. (1981, 27-8)

The adoption of semiotic and psycho-analytic critical strategies have greatly enriched the Marxist-Feminist critique of culture. The realisation that art, and more so popular culture, is saturated with ideology has opened the way for innumerable studies which seek to light upon the manner in which ideology is disseminated by cultural forms. Ideology which according to Althusser 'interpellates individuals as subjects', performs this task in a variety of ways. Particularly significant, from the point of view of feminist theory, is the role played by 'gender stereotyping'. Apart from general categorisations like the active male and the passive female and the all too common identification of the female with nature and the male with culture, role models like the all-suffering mother, the vamp, the girl-next-door and so on, are typical exemplars of the stereotypes through which femininity is sought to be channelled. And as such analyses of them, have formed an integral part of the feminist critique of popular art forms like the cinema.

Moreover, feminist theorists have also sought to comprehend the complex psychic processes that are activated by the cinematic apparatus which often operates as a kind of pleasure machine. Thanks to the work of critics like Laura Mulvey, Bellour, Janet Bergstrom, Constance Penley, Teresa de Lauretis and others, we are now in a position to understand better the scopophelic and voyeuristic dimensions of filmic enchantment as well as its exploitation of the male gaze. These insights into the manner in which cinema taps the unconscious psychic processes can be of immense value to us when we undertake a radical critique of Malayalam cinema and its ideological underpinnings.

'Historicize! Always historicize!' is the prescription of Frederec Jameson for a genuine Marxist account of cultural phenomena. And any analysis of the eclipse of women's freedom in Kerala and the consequent marginalization of women in our society will have to fulfil this methodological prerequisite. For that it is necessary to turn our attention to the larger social and cultural contexts which engendered the present state.

HISTORY AGAINST THE GRAIN: A STUDY OF CONTEXTS

The modernisation process in Kerala society in the early decades of the present century can be seen as the product of a three-fold transformation. In the first place, the anti-colonial, anti-feudal struggle radically transformed the social order and paved the way for profound changes in class relations and societal norms. In the second place, the reform movements which sought to cleanse the society of

evils like untouchability, social segregation on the basis of caste, polygamy and so on, dealt a death blow to the oppressive *ancient regimen* with its rigid caste stratification, female servitude and reprehensible practices meant for its perpetuation. In the third place, the struggle against the feudal mores led to a thorough restructuring of the family, not only among the oppressed classes but among the privileged strata.

A significant feature of these transformations was the increasingly significant role played by mass action as an agent of change. Whether it be the struggles waged by the peasants of North Malabar, against the hoarding of grains by the landlords, or the movement for the abolition of the purdah system among Namboodiri women or the fights for temple-entry rights for all sections of Hindus, conscious organization was very much in evidence and the struggles inevitably became more and more ideological.

The emergence of public opinion, on the socio-political arena, sounded the deathknell of the entrenched elitist ethos and signalled an unprecedented democratisation of social life. The effects of this radical process were most visible in the cultural realm. Artistic works imbued with reformist zeal appeared in large numbers and readily found a way into the hearts of the masses, thereby laying the foundation for a genuinely popular culture. In a sense, a 'public sphere' (Habermas), came into existence soon to become the major theatre for ideological struggles. Unlike the 'bourgeois public sphere', in western countries, here it had developed largely under the aegis of the toiling masses contributing to the hegemony of the left in subsequent years.

The spirit of Enlightenment characteristic of the times led to a wholesale critique of the decadent feudal culture which had reduced women into sex objects, the mere playtimes of caste-Hindu overlords. Obnoxious practices like, 'thirandu kalyanam', 'Sambandha kalyanam', injunctions against wearing upper garments in temples, all were given a short shrift and a new dignity was conferred upon women. The national movement and the anti feudal struggles attracted women in large numbers and social life was agog with expectancy. It was in this racial climate that 'the women's question' came to be placed squarely on the political and social agenda, and man-woman relations discussed in a humane and enlightened manner.

The essential thrust of the people's movements in the early decades of the century was anti-feudal, and therefore it was feudal decadence, which disrupted the family life of the community, that came in for maximum criticism. This in turn led to a certain idealization of 'romantic love' and the 'nuclear family' that increasingly came to replace the hated joint family. The left on its part, largely neglected the emerging bourgeois familial ideology. Further, preoccupied as the

left was with ideological dissensions within its own ranks, no rigorous critique of bourgeoisie values made its appearance in the sixties or seventies in spite of the unquestioned hegemony that the left had in the public sphere. This lacuna, was cleverly occupied by the ideologues of the backlash. Soon the cultural sphere saw the incursion of seemingly apolitical pulp journals specifically targeted upon women readership. The film media too was to follow suit before long. The pernicious ideological effects of the wholesale aggrandizement of popular culture by the 'culture industry' has to be studied in this context.

The question of feminine unfreedom is inextricably interwoven into the ideologically constituted feminine identity that is being aggressively popularized by the print media and visual media. The next section seeks to briefly focus on some of the elements that have gone into their construct through an analysis of selected exemplars of popular culture in various genres: theatre, novel, cinema, television serials and advertisements. It is felt that only a much more extensive analysis in these lines would be able to uncover the complex social and psychic processes that are involved in the subject formation of contemporary women.

Changing Images of Femininity

The profound ambivalence that characterizes male conceptions of the feminine is well attested by the archetypal figures of the great mother and the whore. In Judaeo-Christian myth woman is at once venerated as Jerusalem, the bride of God and as the city of sin, Babylon. In ancient Indian scriptures we find the antithesis between the beatific mother figure, Gouri the white goddess and the terrible dark goddess of destruction, Kali. This binary opposition, by and large, frames the main matrix of feminine representation in feudal times also. Adoration, the impulse of approach, is counterpoised with repugnance, the impulse of retreat, so much so that woman is always seen as an immutable essence whose identity is circumscribed by male desire.

The male-female relations that existed in the feudal era is amply reflected in the manipravala literature of the period. Sandesha Kavyas, like *Unnineeli Sandesham* and such early poems like *Chandrotsavam*, *Unniyachi charatham* and *Unniyati charitham* show a society totally at the mercy of the caste Hindu overlords. The prevailing hedonistic ethos had reduced women into sex objects and the male-female relations portrayed in art are invariably casual and carnal. The objectification of the female form is accentuated by the customary head to toe descriptions which are often graphically sensual and frankly erotic. It is a if love then needed no emotional nuance which is unborrowed from the senses.

The image of woman that emerges from these works is clearly a product of male fantasy and the penchant for extravagant tropes evinced by the neo-classical writers further aids this fantasy formation. In contrast, the male hero, pining for the beloved, is a conventionalised figure, often stereotypical to the point of being ludicrous. The element of fantasy that has entered into the depictions of the feminine is particularly marked in the legendary figure of the Yakshi that had become entrenched in popular imagination. The Yakshis of Kerala are vastly different from their Northern counterparts. They are blood-sucking vampires who lure way-fares to their doom using their sexual charm. The fear and aggression in the male psyche is clearly projected onto these figures and it is perhaps possible to see them as typifying feelings of post-coital rejection and guilt. It is not therefore accidental that in the famous legend about Suryakkaladi, recorded by Kottarathil Shankunni, it is the Namboodiri who refuses to let go of the *Devimahatmyam* who escapes from the clutches of the Yakshi. The ascetic rejection of sexuality is but a step away from this. Thus for all their candour, the manipravala literature is hardly a celebration of sexuality or gratified desire and the vision of human relations that inspired it is very different from the tantric vision that the unknown artists of Khajuraho had.

Indeed the fascination/repugnance, dyad that is discernible in female portrayals points to the deep seated schizophrenia running under the times. Cherussori's, *Krishnagadha*, even employs highly sensual picturisations to evoke repugnance, hardly surprising when we note that the explicitly stated aim of the work is to inculcate ascetic rejection. Particularly striking is his account of the meeting between Subhadra and Arjuna (disguised as a yogin). The author has absorbed in ample measure the precepts preached by the high-priest of Brahminical asceticism: 'Do not be overwhelmed with desire when you espy the breasts, bullocks and navel of women, cogitate again and again in your mind that it is mere flesh' ('Bhaja Govindam . . .'). So what might have been a tender or even light-hearted depiction of a love-at-first-sight situation becomes shot through with ominous overtones. The 'yogin' blinded by desire,—literally so, for his eyes, having freely ranged over the voluptuous figure of the girl, is finally lost in the 'deep well of her navel'—ends up by eating the skin of the banana placed in front of him. The graphic account of the sensuous beauty of Subhadra, comes to acquire a grotesque dimension which is almost tinged with hysteria. This fear of female sexuality and its essential concomitant, the feeling that it has to be curbed lest it become destructive, is the well-spring of the poignant climactic scene of the famous Kathakali piece—*Keechakavadham*. After a highly elaborate and bewitching sringarapadam in Kambhoji, Keechaka,

proceeds to embrace the covered figure which he thinks is Sairandhri, but proves to be actually his death. In the hands of the vengeful Valala, Keechaka literally becomes a 'bolus', and the cautionary message is not lost on the audience—even children know well the adage: 'Keechakan chettan, urula, urula!'

This well-entrenched misogyny that we find encapsulated in the literature of feudal times must warn us against any idealization of the matrilineal past hoping to discover in it 'feminine spaces'. The matriarchal forms that existed in Kerala, particularly among the Nayar's and in some measure among Muslims in certain parts of Cannanore, existed in the shadow of the overarching patriarchy of the dominant Namboothiri aristocracy. The stringent enforcement of primogeniture, and the attendant prohibition of marriage for the younger brothers of Namboothiri families, was the most important precondition for the existence of 'matriarchy' among the lower echelons of the caste hierarchy. Thus it was as concave to convex that the various forms of polyandry, with differing degrees of 'liberality,' thrived in the feudal context. The women were certainly 'free', in the sense that marriage bonds were extremely tenuous and paternity was quite often literally a matter of conjecture. And the freedom did not include the right to reject the advances of the overlords or choose a partner after their heart. It is in this context of overweening feudal decadence that 'romantic love', and 'nuclear family', acquired prestige and the aura of freedom in the early years of this century.

At this juncture it becomes necessary to consider the celebrated portrait of Indulekha in Chandu Menon's classic novel. On the face of it Indulekha has all the makings of a feminist heroine. She is educated, bold, and can with impunity refer to her man as a dunce ('Sappan') though she later passes it off as a term of endearment and an indication of the depth of her feeling. Indeed *Indulekha*, was a refreshing, even a liberating experience and significant as a forerunner of the wave of realism that was to overwhelm the tottering fortress of neo-classical taste. But its value as a record of the social identity of Nayar women is suspect. To get a glimpse of the real conditions of women in Kerala society at that period one has to turn to works like *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* and to protest songs as the poignant piece which laments that 'a girl as soon as she reaches puberty is taken off from studies and then, for ever, she is immured in the kitchen'. It is not as if there were no women like Indulekha in Kerala society—there is even the speculation that she was actually modelled upon a real, highly westernised rhiyya woman of North Malabar with whom Chandu Menon was acquainted—what is important is that she can hardly be expected to prop up any conception of a golden age of matriarchy.

As we saw in the historical enquiry, the next important phase in the constitution of feminine identity starts with the emergence of the public sphere in the wake of the anti-colonial, anti-feudal struggle. Indeed, the critique of feudal decadence conferred a certain measure of dignity upon women and they began to emerge on the social scene as actants with the rudiments of individuality. However, the romantic idealism that inspired the writers of this period tended to mystify female representations. This tendency is particularly marked in the works of Kumaran Asan and Changampuzha. Indeed Asan was combating the feudal hedonism by postulating a love which is free of flesh. But it had rather unfortunate consequences on his hapless heroines who are, either like Vasavadatta in *Karuna*, is literally hacked up to facilitate their accession to spirituality, or, as in the typical *libenshod* narrative, at the point of death, when fulfilment finally descends. Asan's works for all their revolutionary significance are seriously marred by the unconscious fear of female sexuality and the ascetic credo that is adopted largely as a defence mechanism.

Surely, even in this climate of romantic idealization of women and the family, certain credible portraits of women did emerge thanks to the socialist and Marxist theories that were beginning to grip the consciousness of the masses. Also the work of women writers like Saraswathi Amma and Lalithambika Antharjanam created the rudiments of a feminine view-point in culture. However, these trends hardly got an opportunity to develop and became entirely submerged in the backlash.

I propose to conclude the paper; as it were, at the threshold of the 'backlash' which established its stranglehold over our cultural life in the sixties. With the shrinkage of the public sphere, the bourgeois conceptualisation of the 'private' began to more and more seep into the consciousness of the people. The emergence of the culture industry and its twin products, popular journals and popular cinema, paved the way for the commodification and objectification of women. The complex processes that were set in motion by these transformations can be traced out only through an elaborate study of popular culture and the visual media, adopting the insights provided by structuralism, semiology, ideology critique and psycho-analysis. But that should properly form the subject of a separate paper.

In sum, the ideological constructs of feminine identity in contemporary Kerala society, are quite depressing. The objectification of the female form in the visual media, and the marginalization of women in daily life, should make any progressive minded person hang his/her head in shame. Yet, as Marx has once remarked, 'even shame is a revolutionary sentiment'—if it spurs us on to action.