Constructing Publics: Visual Arts in Post-Independence Kerala

A thesis submitted to Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted by

Sreelakshmi Santhini Bahuleyan

Registration Number: 186141015

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati

Assam, India

April 2024

TH-3461_186141015

Dedicated to the loving memories of Anil Xavier.

TH-3461_186141015

Declaration

I hereby declare that this doctoral dissertation, "Constructing Publics: Visual Arts in Post-Independence Kerala," is an outcome of my original work and has been completed under the supervision of Dr. John Thomas, Assistant Professor of History in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, and Dr. Prasad Khanolkar, Assistant Professor, School of Environment & Architecture, Mumbai. This thesis has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. The work presented in this thesis is original, except where otherwise indicated by appropriate references and acknowledgments. The arguments and conclusions presented in this thesis are based on my own analysis and interpretation of the archival sources.

Sreelakshmi Santhini Bahuleyan

Registration Number: 186141015

Research Scholar, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, Assam, India

TH-3461_186141015

Certificate

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation titled “Constructing Publics: Visual Arts in Post-Independence Kerala,” submitted by Sreelakshmi Santhini Bahuleyan for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati embodies a bonafide record of research work carried out under my supervision and guidance. The present thesis or any part thereof has not been submitted anywhere else for the award of any degree or diploma.

Dr. John Thomas

Supervisor

Assistant Professor of History, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

Dr. Prasad Khanolkar

Local Supervisor from an External Organization

Assistant Professor, School of Environment & Architecture, Mumbai

TH-3461_186141015

Table of Contents

TH-3461_186141015

TH-3461_186141015

TH-3461_186141015

TH-3461_186141015

Abstract

The prevailing scholarship on visual arts in India creates a binary between the publics of modern art in institutions and non-institutional spaces, leaving the interrelationship between the two unexplored. It suggests that art in institutions primarily serves the elites, while non-institutional art promotes a democratic public sphere characterized by accessibility and inclusivity for the common people. In this context, by interrogating the dominant narrative, this dissertation explores the relationship between publics of visual arts in modern institutional and non-institutional spaces in post-independence Kerala.

Modern art evolved within the confines of art institutions in colonial India, intertwining with debates on colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. However, visual arts in Kerala diverged from this trajectory, evolving in a space beyond the confines of formal art institutions. In the post-independence period, this development positioned artworks at the boundary of what is considered art and non-art in a modern sense. Deviating from imagining the audiences solely as connoisseurs of high art within art institutions, artworks situated at this boundary have presumed their audiences consisted of three types: literate Malayalis who engage with art through printed images, strangers who gaze at art in public spaces, and marginalized communities who interact with art through narrative art practices. In these scenarios, the audiences of modern art at the boundary are assumed to be common people. While studying the audiences of visual arts at the boundary, contemporary scholarship tends to normalize the binary between art institutions and non-institutional spaces by emphasizing the latter's proximity to the democratic public sphere.

This study disagrees with the binary assumption and adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating archival research and ethnography while using a range of case studies. Archival research explores the representation of the female body in print media by examining illustrations

TH-3461_186141015

and photographs in Malayalam periodicals. This analysis is guided by the concept of the male gaze in Chapter Two and female nudity in Chapter Three. Furthermore, it locates the representation of the female body in relation to the state, consumer market, and art history, elucidating how these factors contribute to the production of multiple public spheres, ultimately resulting in the formation of gendered publics. The ethnographic study explores the representation of communities in narrative-based artworks in public spaces. Chapter Four analyses the concept of the bilateral movement of narrative installations between art institutions and non-institutional sites. Chapter Five explores the relationship between intimacy and strangeness produced through the narrative wall murals in the urban city of Kochi. Both chapters examine multiple public spheres produced by the narrative artworks that ultimately produced the gallery-viewing publics.

Analysis of publics produced by the case studies reveals that visual arts at the boundary create their publics at an in-between space as connoisseurs of high art adhering to the protocols of modernism. In this context, the dissertation proposes that the concept of the democratic public sphere is not solely defined by its accessibility and inclusivity but rather should be analyzed by considering art itself as an institution, thereby diffusing the binary framework.

TH-3461_186141015

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors and the Doctoral Committee members for their investment and faith in my work. I extend my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. John Thomas, who has been a constant source of support and inspiration, playing a crucial role in shaping my academic insights since the beginning. His consistent availability, both academically and personally, has been a source of strength during times of challenge and uncertainty in my career. Next, I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Prasad Khanolkar, my external supervisor, whose guidance was instrumental in shaping my research project and editing the dissertation. This dissertation began to take shape after a conversation with Dr. Khanolkar, who not only shared the idea of "publics of visual art" but whose theoretical and methodological advice was vital to the development of this dissertation. His expertise in the concept of the public sphere, urban studies, and art and aesthetics, among many other topics, has influenced several aspects of my research.

I extend my sincere thanks to Prof. Arupjyothi Saikia, Chairperson of my Doctoral Committee, who has always kept his doors open to discuss my work in depth and gave me insightful feedback. He encouraged me to think about how the cultural history of Kerala plays a significant role in my research. Then, I am deeply indebted to Prof. Sawmya Ray for her guidance in shaping my research focus on gender and sexuality. I consider myself fortunate to have collaborated with her in various capacities since 2018. Lastly, I extend my thanks to Dr. Abhishek Kashyap for his insightful suggestions, both formal and informal, which greatly influenced the direction and structure of the dissertation.

TH-3461_186141015

Aside from my DC members, I owe a great deal to several faculty members in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. I am profoundly thankful to Dr. Ranu Roychoudhuri and Dr. Kiran Keshavamurthy for their guidance during my formative years, particularly in directing the methodology. Also, I am grateful for the financial support I received from IIT Guwahati. I thank the department office staff for their availability and guidance in technical and clerical work.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Kavitha Balakrishnan and Dr. Sunil P. Elayidom, who both served as my academic mentors in the field of study in Kerala. Comments and references offered by them played a crucial role in drafting my dissertation proposal. I don't have words to express my gratitude to Kavitha teacher for her warm guidance, and the opportunities she extended to me to collaborate with her. Much of my thought process has evolved through the informal discussions I frequently had with Kavitha teacher. Equally, I thank Bose Krishnamachari, the President of the Kochi Biennale Foundation, who served as my practical mentor in the field. My sincere thanks to Krishnamachari for giving me an opportunity to work as a mediator with the Kochi Biennale team.

I take this opportunity to remember and thank Ammini Teacher and Jessykkutty Teacher from my village, whose care and love during my formative years inspired me to pursue higher education.

I also extend my deep gratitude to several individuals in Kerala who assisted me during my ethnographic and archival research. I am thankful to Murali Cheeroth, the president, and Balamurali Krishnan, the secretary of Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, for their support and for providing opportunities to advance my research. I want to thank artists Anto K. G, Blodsow, Smitha G. S, and Anilkumar for sharing their love and care during my stay in Alappuzha. I couldn't

TH-3461_186141015

feel more comfortable than I do with you all, sharing the laughter and fun. Additionally, I extend my gratitude to artists P. S. Jalaja, Alex Mathew, K. M. Madhusudhanan, K. Raghunathan, and C. F. John for generously sharing their time and precious insights with me consistently. Apart from them, I am grateful to other artists including Abhijith, A. J. Joji, Ameen Khaleel, Aami Athmaja, Anil Xavier, Anu John David, Anupama Alias, Biju Ibrahim, Dinesh P. G, Jaya. P. S, Joy Chacko, Kajal Deth, Karthikeyan Muringoor, Shaji Appukkuttan, and Thaj Backer, for sharing their thoughts with me. Also, I owe a great deal to art historians and critics Sudheesh Kottembram, Pavel Suresh, Sujeech Oncheri, Muhammad Shafi, and Praveen Ashok for their endless support.

I attribute the timely completion of my research to the availability of necessary secondary sources. I express my gratitude to the publishing house Nidhi Books, operated by Sivan P. S. and Lijina. Sivan Chettan consistently provided assistance whenever I required books, while Lijina's dedication to promptly packing and sending them to me is commendable. Additionally, I extend my thanks to Arun Ezhuthachan, reporter of Manorama, for his assistance in forwarding important documents to me.

I want to thank Dr. Biju B. L., Gayathri Mammen, Dr. Manojan Madhavi Maloor, Dr. Nirmala Unnikrishnan, Dr. Rashmi, Dr. Sanal Mohan, Dr. Shinod N. K, Dr. V. J. Varghese, and Dr. Vishakh Madhusudhanan for their professional advice and timely availability to listen to me.

I have no words to thank my wonderful friends and editors Abhilasha, Adeep Hussain, Ajay Salunkhe, Ajmal Rasaq, and Thomas Kuriakose who were always there to proofread and edit my drafts.

TH-3461_186141015

My dear friends at IITG, including Abi, Anshul, Arjun, Arun Sathyan, Asif, Aswinah, Barnic, Bikash, Biswajith, Christy, Halim, Irene, James, Jith, Mayank, Mawon, Nazir, Ritika, Riya, Sambashiva, Shafeeq, Shilpa Majumdar, Shivam, Shivangi, Smrithi, Snigda, Suja, Sujisha, Upasana, and Vikavi, played a crucial role in making my campus life easier. I will always remember how you stood by me during difficult times.

I awe my gratitude to my comrades and friends, Abheesh Shashidharan, Adwaith Prabhakar, Adwaith Puthilan, Alaka, Alisha, Amal M. S, Amalu, Amritha Mather, Anaswara, Arun S, Aswath, Avani, Ebil, Greeshma Gouri Gopinath, Haris, Jayaram Janardhanan, Jishnu, Joel, Junaina, Kadambari, Lighin, Muhammad Zuhrabi, Naveen, Nileena, Nipin Narayanan, Pratheesh Prakash, Muhammad Rashid, Smitha Neravath, Somy Solomon, Sreejith Sivaraman, Dr. V. Sivadasan and Dr. Vincent Benny.

I would like to extend my gratitude to a bunch of amazing women who were always there for me, including Abhirami, Arya Suresh, Aswini, Basitha, Gadha Madhav, Khadeeja Dilfa, Mariyam, Marjan, Saranya, and Shilpa Krishnan.

I am grateful to the people across Kerala who helped me with their accommodation and compassion including Antony white shore, John Rumold, Kunjachan, Madhu Mash, Meena Teacher, Padmanabhan Manathana, Stephen Robert, and Vinod Antony.

I want to extend my love to a handful of children: Adriel (Vasu), Eva (Ibnu), Daya Sooraj (Dayootti), Druvdev, Rishi (Ambadi), Shriyan (Kunjoottan), Vamika (Vami), Vedika (Vedootti). I have learned a lot from you and am still learning. I consider engaging with you to be the most relaxing and productive thing I can always do.

TH-3461_186141015

A big thanks to Sooraj V. K. (Maman) and Daisy Sooraj (Chechi) for adding so much colour and warmth to my research life. Your home has become the warmest space for me, just what I always needed.

My brothers Dayal Paleri, Nipun Chandran, and Nitheesh Narayanan have been a tremendous support and inspiration for the past decade. I am grateful to them for sharing their political insights, fruitful arguments, and most importantly, for their love and companionship.

I am immensely grateful to my family, particularly Amma (Santhini V) and Achan (Bahuleyan TK), who have consistently provided me with their care, trust, and support whenever I needed it. My sisters Anjali (Sreenanda) and Anagha (Sreechandra) have always been there to listen to me. A special thanks to Anaghootty for editing my chapters. I feel blessed to have you all by my side, making our home a lively space for music, art, and political discussions. These gatherings have significantly enriched my understanding of social relationships. Additionally, I am lucky to have my in-laws, Jaya and Balakrishnan, who have joined my journey and supported me morally to pursue my career. Furthermore, I am thankful to my relatives, who often provided me with accommodation and food, and cheered me up whenever we gathered together. Completing this doctoral journey wouldn't have been possible without their invaluable support and the happy moments.

Above all, my dearest Dheeraj, I want to say thank you for being my partner. You have been there for me, listening to my rants and moments of silence, whipping up delicious meals, and showing me care and love. Thank you for taking the time to edit my drafts. And let's not forget our journey in my research fields together! Looking ahead, I am happy about growing up with you by my side.

TH-3461_186141015

List of Figures

TH-3461_186141015

TH-3461_186141015

Abbreviation

AICTE	- All India Council for Technical Education
AITUC	- All India Trade Union Congress
BJP	- Bharatiya Janata Party
BMW	- Bavarian Motor Works
CPCLU	- Cochin Port Cargo Labour Union
CPI	- Communist Party of India
CPIM	- Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DLF	- Delhi Land and Finance
DYFI	- Democratic Youth Federation of India
FACT	- Fertilisers And Chemicals Travancore
FTAK	- Fair Trade Alliance Kerala
INC	- Indian National Congress
IRS	- Indian Readership Survey
IRPSA	- Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association
KGTE	- Kerala Government Technical Exam
KSCC	- Kerala State Coir Corporation
KMB	- Kochi-Muziris Biennale
LDF	- Left Democratic Front
MGTE	- Madras Government Technical Exam
MRUC	- Media Research Users Council
NDA	- National Democratic Alliance
NSS	- Nair Service Society

TH-3461_186141015

RCC	- Reinforced Cement Concrete
RLV	- Radha Lakshmi Vilasam
SSLC	- Secondary School Leaving Certificate
UDF	- United Democratic Front

TH-3461_186141015

Introduction

1. Introduction

This thesis explores the construction of publics in relation to visual arts in the post-independent Kerala, India. The prevailing scholarship on visual arts in India creates a binary between the publics of modern art in institutions and non-institutional spaces, leaving the interrelationship between the two unexplored. It suggests that art in institutions primarily serves the elites, while non-institutional art promotes a democratic public sphere characterized by accessibility and inclusivity for the common people. In this context, by interrogating the dominant narrative, this dissertation explores the relationship between publics of visual arts in modern institutional and non-institutional spaces in post-independence Kerala.

In colonial India, modern art evolved within the confines of art institutions, intertwining with debates on colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. However, visual arts in Kerala diverged from this trajectory, evolving in a space beyond the confines of formal art institutions. In the post-independence period, this development positioned artworks at the boundary of what is considered art and non-art in a modern sense. Deviating from imagining the audiences solely as connoisseurs of high art within art institutions, artworks situated at this boundary have presumed their audiences consisted of three types: literate Malayalis who engage with art through printed images, strangers who gaze at art in public spaces, and marginalized communities who interact with art through narrative art practices. In these scenarios, the audiences of modern art at the boundary are assumed to be common people. While studying the audiences of visual arts at the boundary, contemporary scholarship tends to normalize the binary between art institutions and non-institutional spaces by emphasizing the latter's proximity to the democratic public sphere.

TH-3461_186141015

This study disagrees with the binary assumption and adopts a mixed-method approach, incorporating archival research and ethnography while using a range of case studies. Archival research explores the representation of the female body in print media by examining illustrations and photographs in Malayalam periodicals. This analysis is guided by the concept of the male gaze in Chapter Two and female nudity in Chapter Three. Furthermore, it locates the representation of the female body in relation to the state, consumer market, and art history, elucidating how these factors contribute to the production of multiple public spheres, ultimately resulting in the formation of gendered publics. The ethnographic study explores the representation of communities in narrative-based artworks in public spaces. Chapter Four analyses the concept of the bilateral movement of narrative installations between art institutions and non-institutional sites. Chapter Five explores the relationship between intimacy and strangeness produced through the narrative wall murals in the urban city of Kochi. Both chapters examine multiple public spheres produced by the narrative artworks that ultimately produced the gallery-viewing publics.

Analysis of publics produced by the case studies reveals that visual arts at the boundary create their publics at an in-between space as connoisseurs of high art adhering to the protocols of modernism. In this context, the dissertation proposes that the concept of the democratic public sphere is not solely defined by its accessibility and inclusivity but rather should be analyzed by considering art itself as an institution, thereby diffusing the binary framework.

2. The Background

Scholarly writings on modern art in Kerala in the early twentieth century generally agree that the period presented significant challenges and constraints to modern artistic development

TH-3461_186141015

within the region.[1] This period is crucial as it marks a transitional phase in colonial India's artistic landscape, characterized by the intersection of colonial modernism, anti-colonial nationalism, and indigenous artistic practices.[2] Despite this development, the absence of modern visual art in the region raises intriguing questions about indigenous artistic production and its response to the development of modern art in British India. One particular aspect that astonishes scholars is the fact that although the period witnessed the emergence of a pioneering figure in modern Indian art that was Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), from the erstwhile princely state of Travancore, the region still faced stagnation in modern art during the post-Ravi Varma period.

2.1. Modernism: Colonialism and Anti-Colonial Nationalism

Modern art in India was developed during colonial rule, marked by the emergence of artist Raja Ravi Varma, who played a significant role in the Indian artists' transition towards modernism. Varma was a self-taught artist who belonged to an aristocratic family of Travancore.[3] Varma's life paralleled the introduction of European, particularly British, art practices in colonial India, during

[1] During this time, the region that would later become present-day Kerala consisted of two princely states, Travancore and Cochin, along with the British-administered Malabar district. To understand the writings on visual art in twentieth-century Kerala, See. Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, *Naveena Chithrakala* (New Visual Art), ed. M. N. Vijayan, Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2016; Kavitha Balakrishnan, *Kalayude Navalokam* (The New Art World), Kottayam, DC Books, 2017; Vijayakumar Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram,* (History of Art in Kerala), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2021.

[2] Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram.*

[3] Raja Ravi Varma was born on April 29, 1848, in an aristocratic family in Kilimanoor, princely state of Travancore. His uncle and artist, Raja Raja Varma, identified and nurtured Ravi Varma's artistic skill. In 1886, when the Dutch artist Theodor Jenson came to the palace, Jenson allowed Varma only to watch the way Jenson did oil portraits, and that was the training Varma got in his early days. See. Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India,* New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000; Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; R. Siva Kumar, "Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview," *Art Journal,* Vol. 58, No. 3, 1999, 14.

which the use of oil medium and easel format gained significance as markers of modernism.[4] In Europe, the history of modernism is predominantly framed as the history of the avant-garde.[5] The development of new artistic languages during the avant-garde movement served as a means of reevaluating and redefining the post-Renaissance realist tradition.[6] While "modern" and "avant-garde" are often used interchangeably in European contexts, this conflation can be misleading when applied to non-Western modernism. In colonial India, visual artists were heirs to several non-realist traditions that had been cultivated over centuries.[7] The encounter with Western academic art under colonialism provided the first impulse for artists in colonial India to rethink the conceptual basis and expressive means of traditional art practices.[8]

The works of some Western academic artists who visited India in significant numbers between the 1760s and the 1860s played a crucial role in shaping the perception of what was considered to be a more scientific and advanced form of art in nineteenth-century India.[9] Within the constrained art educational environment of Travancore, Raja Ravi Varma diligently seized

[4] Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 147.

[5] The term "avant-garde" literally translates to "vanguard" or the "advanced guardian" of revolution. It is commonly associated with the transcultural revolutionary movement within Western modernism that liberated 19th-century European art from its academic constraints and bourgeois conformity. Its pioneering spirit and cutting-edge experiments characterised the avant-garde movement. It inaugurated a new aesthetic expression that challenged tradition and contributed to modernism as an aesthetic discourse. See. Partha Mitter, "Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin in Calcutta: The Creation of a Regional Asian Avant-garde Art," In *Arrival Cities: Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century*, eds. Burcu Dogramaci, Mareike Hetschold, Laura Karp Lugo, Rachel Lee, Helene Roth, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020, 147; Kumar, "Modern Indian Art," 14.

[6] Kumar, "Modern Indian Art," 14.

[7] In the precolonial era, Mughal miniatures and Rajput miniatures were typically depicted in two-dimensional forms. In Kerala, *Kalamezhuthu* paintings and murals similarly employed two-dimensional representations.

Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*, Ibid.

[8] Kumar, "Modern Indian Art."

[9] Ibid.

every available opportunity to enhance his proficiency in the scientific and advanced form of art, particularly through the mastery of oil painting techniques and academic naturalism.[10] By blending Western artistic techniques with Indian subject matter, particularly Hindu mythological characters, Varma pioneered a significant aspect of Indian modernism.[11] It challenged prevailing notions of what constituted European "high art" of realistic representation by elevating Indian themes and narratives to the same artistic significance as their European counterparts in colonial India.

At the same time, colonial modernism began to acquire an institutional character, coinciding with the establishment of art schools, galleries, and art pedagogy.[12] Within the institutionalized modern art, the colonial pedagogy emphasized a clear separation between two domains of artistic expression, categorizing academic naturalism as a higher form of artistic

[10] Academic naturalism is the technique that uses linear perspective, chiaroscuro and other naturalist devices widely used by artists in the Renaissance period. See. Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 90, No. 4, December 2008, 532.

[11] Kumar, "Modern Indian Art," 15.

[12] The institutional character of colonial modernism was not only manifested in tangible forms but also through the intangible forms such as beliefs and system through which colonial notion of art and aesthetics developed in India. One of the earliest art institutions in India was founded in 1798 by Sir Charles Warre Malet, the British resident in the Peshwa's domain at Poona. This art school aimed to provide local painters to assist visiting British artists. The school was later overseen by British artist James Wales but eventually closed after his sudden death. In 1820, another institution known as the School of Industry was established by Reverend Charles Mead in Nagercoil, within the erstwhile princely state of Travancore. The primary objective of this school was to promote useful arts and provide instruction to the children of industrious parents. In 1839, the Calcutta Mechanic's Institute and School of Arts was founded by Frederic Corbyn. In 1854, art schools in India began to take on a more rigid institutional character with well-defined curricula, objectives and architectural structures. The East India Company initiated this development as a part of its project to improve Indian taste and promote moral amelioration. Art schools were established in the major colonial cities of Calcutta, Mumbai, Lahore, and Madras for the purpose of training artisans. See, Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922*, 31; See. I. H. Hacker, *A Hundred Years in Travancore: 1806-1906,* London: London Missionary Society, 1908; Deepali Dewan, *Crafting Knowledge and Knowledge of Crafts: Art Education, Colonialism and the Madras School of Arts in Nineteenth-Century South Asia*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2001, 19.

practice, while the indigenous craft was relegated to a lower status.[13] Highly valued within the colonial education system, Varma's artworks elevated his status within the artistic hierarchy of modernism which enabled him to represent his artworks in modern museums and galleries since the 19th century.[14]

As colonial powers imposed their cultural norms upon the colonized, a group of nationalist sought to reclaim and assert their own cultural identities, which resulted in the foundation for broader movements of political resistance.[15] It involved a rejection of academic realism as an anti-colonial gesture and a revival of indigenous values and forms.[16] Raja Ravi Varma's art, characterized by its embodiment of academic realism and its status as a marker of modernism, faced scrutiny and critique from proponents of cultural nationalism, particularly in Bengal.[17] In the first decade of the twentieth century, with the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Swadeshi movements, artists and pedagogues E. B Havell (1861-1934), Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) and A. K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) emerged as influential spokespersons in defense of Indian art against colonial art, although Havell and Tagore were the very product of colonial art education.[18]

---

[13] R. Nandakumar, "Adhunika Indian Chithrakala: Oranubandam" (Modern Indian Art: An Epilogue), In *Kala Vimarsham: Marxist Manadandam* (Art Criticism: Marxist Framework), ed. Raveendran, Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2012.

[14] Besides showcasing his works in art galleries and exhibitions, Varma opted to publicize his works by circulating multiple copies of his paintings as chromolithographs, leveraging his artistic status. See. G. Arunima, "Ravi Varma's Many Publics: Circulation and the Status of Art-Work," In *The Public Sphere from Outside the West*, eds. Divya Dwivedi, and V. Sanil, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015.

[15] Kumar, "Modern Indian Art," 15.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Debashish Banerji, *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore*, London: Sage, 2009.

[18] Art historian Partha Mitter identifies the cultural nationalist movement in Indian art as part of a broader Pan-Asian movement, drawing parallels between artists from India and Japan in their shared resistance against European

E. B. Havell called for the accumulated skill of hand and eye of the craftsmen to be retained for their own national development.[19] Along with the promotion of industrial craft and design, he reproduced the Mughal miniatures as decorative Indian art.[20] Abanindranath Tagore began with realism and later modified it with selective assimilations of Mughal, Japanese, and Persian elements.[21] He was considered the founder of the art movement, later to be called the Bengal School. The school came to represent a break from the prevailing norms of Western academic naturalism and espoused alternative, subjective, and spiritual standards of aesthetics and art creation.[22] Like E. B. Havell and Abanindranath Tagore, A. K. Coomaraswamy tried to emphasize reinventing the Indian tradition in the wake of the national movement. In his work, *Introduction to Indian Art,* published in 1956, Coomaraswamy appreciated Havell and Tagore for "recapturing the great spiritual past of India."[23] Within the ongoing Swadeshi movement, he was drawn towards an idealist national movement that could seek a promised Indian future in art.[24] However,

---

colonialism. He noted the arrival of Japanese artists Okakura Tenshin and his pupils Yokohama Taikan and Hishida Shunsho at Kolkata, which enabled a symbiosis between Indian and Japanese artists. See. Mitter, "Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin in Calcutta." Tapati Guha-Thakurtha, *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850- 1920,* UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 146-148; E. B. Havell, *The Basis of Artistic and Industrial Revival in India,* Adayar: The Theosophist Office, 1912, 11.

[19] In 1896, as soon as E. B. Havell took charge in the school of art in Calcutta, he recommended the artists stop following Western academic art and include Indian traditions in their artworks. Havell criticized colonial art pedagogy for its demeaning of industrial crafts. He wrote, "Europe in fact has been for years deeply engaged in exploring the knowledge of Indian handicrafts men for the benefit of her own industries, while Indian industrial reformers, as well as Anglo- Indian administrators, can only think of importing from Europe, those mechanical processes which kill all art in industry." See. Havell, *The Basis of Artistic and Industrial Revival in India.*

[20] Guha-Thakurtha, *The Making of a New Indian Art.*

[21] Kumar, "Modern Indian Art," 15.

[22] Banerji, *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore.*

[23] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Introduction to Indian Art,* Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1956.

[24] Guha-Thakurtha, *The Making of a New Indian Art*, 163.

Coomaraswamy placed the Rajput miniatures and Ajanta murals over the Mughal miniatures by explaining that Mughal miniatures were less Indian in tradition.[25] Therefore, the nationalism that Coomaraswamy put forth was based on consolidating those religious sects that originated in pre-colonial India as more traditional and thus Indian. His idea of religion was later followed by Sister Nivedita, who was a disciple of the spiritual philosopher Swami Vivekananda.[26] The quest for national art originating from Bengal gained momentum within the art institutions in other regions. It evolved into a broader Indian art movement during the early 20th century, persisting until the time leading to Indian Independence.

2. 2. Responds to Modernism in Kerala's Art World

While nationalist cultural movements and resistance against colonial rule were prevalent in major art institutions across India, those in Kerala exhibited distinct characteristics that deviated from this trajectory. There is no historical evidence to suggest that any movement against colonialism took place within the region's modern art institutions at the time.

During the first half of the twentieth century, four art schools were operating in the region, with their syllabus primarily derived from one institution, the School of Arts Trivandrum, situated in the Travancore Princely State.[27] The school was started in 1872 by the government of

[25] Ibid.

[26] Guha-Thakurtha, *The Making of a New Indian Art.*

[27] Following the developments in the School of Art, Trivandrum, an art school that was established in Thrissur in 1910 and began operating as a technical, commercial, and industrial school. Another institute was formed in 1915 in Mavelikkara, located in the Alappuzha district. Additionally, a private art school was established by the royal family in Thrippunithura, the capital of old Cochin, in 1936. This institute, named Radha Lakshmi Vilasam (RLV) Academy, was founded by Maharaja Kerala Varma, also known as Kochunni Thampuran, and his wife Lakshmikkutty Neithiyaramma. See. A Sreedhara Menon, *Gazetteer of India; Kerala; Alleppey*, Trivandrum: State Editor, Kerala Gazetteer, 1975, 736; Manu S. Pillai, *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore,* Uttar Pradesh:

Travancore in Trivandrum with the name *Dantha Aappis*.[28] It was later transformed into a formal industrial school under colonial influence, and it offered employment to many skilled craftsmen and artists from the local guilds.[29]

As cultural nationalism was reaching its peak due to the efforts of E. B. Havell, the School of Art, Trivandrum also became a venue for hosting propaganda activities. Havell visited the institute in the later years of the 19th century and encouraged the craftsmen to abandon European design in favor of native patterns.[30] He advised them that high-quality native ivory work had a nearly limitless market in Europe and America. However, Havell's call went largely unheard, as the craftsmen at the school were primarily influenced by the academic realism propagated by Raja Ravi Varma. Historian Sharat Sunder Rajeev observed that "Raja Ravi Varma's art, driven by an escalating inclination towards European aesthetics, had a remarkable impact on the indigenous craftsmen and artists of Travancore in the last quarter of the nineteenth and early 20th century."[31]

It was particularly evident during the partition of Bengal in 1905 that art responded to colonial academic traditions with Swadeshi ideas.[32] Nationalists not only rejected the academic

---

HarperCollins Publishers, 2015, 41; "About Us," College of Fine Arts, Thrissur, Accessed on February 16, 2021, http://gcfatcr.ac.in/history/.

[28] *Danta Aappis* is translated as the Ivory Office. The art school was mainly operated for developing craftsmen for ivory carving. See. "About Us," College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum, Accessed on February 16, 2021 https://www.cfakerala.ac.in/about-us.

[29] The school employed indigenous craftsmen who made artifacts using ivory, wood and coconut shells. These craftsmen were mainly from a caste community called Vishwakarma, who are considered below Nairs and Namboodiris in the caste hierarchy. See. Sharat Sunder Rajeev, *The King's Craftsmen: History of the Ivory Carvers of Thiruvananthapuram*, Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2016, 68.

[30] Ibid, 201.

[31] Ibid, 200-201.

[32] In 1905, the British government divided the Bengal Presidency of British India into two separate entities. The decision to partition Bengal was driven by administrative reasons, as the Bengal Presidency was too large to be

realism of Raja Ravi Varma but also denounced his popular chromolithographs by indirectly adhering to the principles of high art.[33] Their criticism was not solely because the chromolithographs were reproductions of realistic art but because they considered them a cheap device for ensuring easy popularity among the artistically untutored.[34] However, in 1905, the School of Arts, Trivandrum, served two times as a venue for exhibitions featuring paintings by Raja Ravi Varma. Varma, along with his brother Raja Raja Varma, occasionally visited the institute during this time.[35] In the school, a collection of prints by Ravi Varma was available, which served as valuable resources for artists and craftsmen employed there.[36] These prints were utilized for studies and as references for their work.

Additionally, many senior craftsmen and artists in Trivandrum maintained personal collections of Ravi Varma's oleographs. The compositions created by Ravi Varma, particularly those designed for his famous paintings, became popular subjects for ivory craftsmen. The figures of goddess Lakshmi and Saraswathi, the celestial beauties such as *Mohini playing with a ball*, Fresh *from Bath*, and themes inspired by *Radha Madhavam* were reproduced by the local

effectively governed by a single provincial government. The partition resulted in the creation of two new provinces: the Muslim-majority Eastern Bengal and Assam, and the Hindu-majority West Bengal. The partition was seen as a strategy to weaken the growing nationalist movement in Bengal, as it aimed to divide the Hindu and Muslim populations and thereby dilute their political unity. The Partition of Bengal sparked widespread protests and agitation led by figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Surendranath Banerjee, and Aurobindo Ghosh. See. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, New Delhi: Pearson, 2014.

[33] Arunima, "Ravi Varma's Many Publics," 166.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Rajeev, *The King's craftsman,* 142.

[36] Ibid.

craftsmen.[37] The notion of Ravi Varma as the ultimate artist existed among them, and whoever got the financial opportunity to pursue academic realism started to follow Varma's style of artwork.

In twentieth-century Kerala, being seen as an academic artist was important, marking a step forward from the traditional craftsmen who worked within established institutions. Hence, artists who sought to surpass the limitations of being classified as craftsmen or industrial artists and who aimed to position themselves as modern artists in all aspects, including fostering their unique artistic identities, explored alternative paths.[38] Some of the artists faced financial constraints that prevented them from receiving the training needed to excel in this particular style, so they pursued careers as drawing masters. Apart from that, the emergence of Malayalam stage theaters in the 1930s created a demand for artists to create background curtains for the stage, providing some opportunities for them.[39] Artists who had the financial means opted to migrate to art institutions located in metropolitan centers throughout colonial India.[40] This decision was driven by the absence of dedicated gallery spaces and a lack of metropolitan culture that appreciated art in Kerala until the 1990s. As a result, artists seeking professional careers and recognition found themselves compelled to relocate. During the early 20th century, many artists chose to enroll in art schools situated in colonial cities like Bengal and Madras, where they believed they would have better opportunities to develop their skills and gain acclaim. The developments in the post-Ravi Varma

[37] Ibid.

[38] Balakrishnan, *Kalayude Navalokam.*

[39] Ibid, 31.

[40] K. Madhavamenon (1911-1984) was a prominent artist who emerged in the post-Ravi Varma period from Kodungalloor. He received training from the Madras School of Arts and Crafts and Santiniketan. Madhavamenon was known for his expertise in watercolor technique. See. T. G, Jyothilal, *dhunika Malayala Drishyakala* (Modern Malayalam Visual Art: History and Discourse), Kalady: Sree Shankaracharya Sanskrit University, 2017, 13; Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram.*

period in Kerala suggest that modern art was mainly moving away from the tangible institutional structure in Kerala.

During this time, the region experienced significant socio-cultural shifts characterized by social reform movements, increased literacy rates, and the widespread dissemination of print media. Malayalam newspapers and magazines began to proliferate in the market, shaping a middle-class literate public sphere.[41] Social scientist Robin Jeffrey wrote that "throughout the twentieth century, Kerala was India's most literate corner and provided a lively laboratory in which to examine how print arrives, spreads, and affects people's lives."[42] In response to the developments, artists in Kerala began to explore and experiment with these new opportunities facilitated by print capitalism.[43] The culmination of this shift was marked by the integration of printed images in Malayalam periodicals starting in the 1920s.[44]

Over time, numerous periodicals started incorporating illustrations for cover designs and advertisements, aiming to expand their circulation and readership.[45] As the number of images increased, photographs were readily accepted. The popularity of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings had already established a visual taste for realistic representation. This helped the publishers include more photographs that could satisfy the realistic taste of Malayalis. However, by the end of the 1930s, friction arose between the traditional, realistic representation of illustrations and the

[41] J. Devika and Mini Sukumar, "Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, Issue, 42, October 21, 2006.

[42] Robin Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics: Kerala, India, 1800-2009, 2009, 466.

[43] Balakrishnan, *Kalayude Navalokam*, 31.

[44] *Vidhyabhivardhini*, S. T Reddyar and Sons, Quilon: V.V. Press, Vol. 2, No. 8, 1921.

[45] The emergence of Malayalam periodicals can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, primarily as tools for religious propaganda. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, they covered a diverse range of subjects. Chapter 2 provides more details on it. See. Kavitha Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram*, (Art History of the Reader-Viewer), Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2020, 77.

inclusion of photographs.[46] As photographs became more accessible and prevalent, there was a need to redefine the role of illustrations from that of photographs. This tension led to a shift in the approach of illustration artists. They began to recognize the importance of imbuing their work with a sense of imagination and creativity that could differentiate it from the straightforward realism of photographs.[47] By the end of the 1940s, illustrations started becoming an integral part of Malayalam literary texts in periodicals.[48]

The art scene in Kerala in the early twentieth century witnessed three parallel phenomena. First, art institutions focused on developing crafts and industrial products that had been considered low art within the framework of modernism. Second, artists who aspired to be recognized as modern artists migrated to art institutions in colonial metropolitan centers. Third, artists who could not afford the facilities provided by modern institutional settings remained in Kerala and sought career opportunities in stage decoration, teaching as drawing masters, and contributing illustrations to print media. The five decades witnessed no significant engagement with modern art in the region. However, a shift began to occur in the 1950s as artists who had migrated to Madras school started to return to Kerala as illustration artists. They began working within the region as professional artists, albeit with a non-institutional character, contributing to a gradual evolution of the visual art landscape in Kerala.

[46] Ibid, 63.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Kavitha Balakrishnan, *Adhunika Keralathinte Chithrakala: Ashayam, Prayogam, Vyavaharam,* (Visual Art in Modern Kerala: Ideology, Practice and Discourse), Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Language, 2007, 97.

2.3. Visual Art in the Post-Independence Kerala

Post-independence, a restructuring of art institutions has emerged as a central driving force in India. There was pressure upon the newly emerged nation to be equal members of a new world order, which was envisaged through international organizations in the context of education, arts, and cultural development.[49] It was a complex process that, at the same time, the nation had to modernize to be recognized in the international sphere and project its nationhood as an independent country. As a part of the nation-building project, the Indian Government, under the prime ministership of Jawaharlal Nehru, started to build a national museum, the National Museum in New Delhi, founded in 1949, filled with art treasures that traced the nation's history from the earliest times.[50] Along with this, the consolidation of other art institutions also took place, which resulted in the art schools in Kerala being brought under the Directorate of Technical Education.[51]

The foundation of technical education took place in the colonial period, but it was only when the Second World War broke out that the need for technicians for the war effort was felt, and some attention was paid to the problem of technical education and training.[52] It led to the establishment of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) in 1946. After independence, a certain awareness of the importance of technical education to national

[49] Kapila Vatsyayan, *Transmissions and Transformations,* Delhi: India International Center, 2011, 6.

[50] Kavitha Sing, "The Museum is National," *India, International Center,* Vol. 29, No. ¾, 2003.

[51] Technical Education is the field that was trying to meet the occupational needs of an industrial age. It was an amalgamation of academic education with skill training to meet the challenges of the new situations. See. Biman Sen, "Development of Technical Education in India and State Policy- A Historical Perspective," *International Educational Consortium,* New Delhi, July 29, 1989, 3.

[52] L. S. Chandrakant, *Technical Education in India Today,* New Delhi: Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, 1963, 2.

TH-3461_186141015

development had grown.[53] On October 30, 1954, the Government of India issued a directive to all state governments, recommending the establishment of separate units for technical education within each state.[54] These units were to be headed by senior officers possessing technical qualifications.

On April 5, 1957, the newly elected ministry, which marked the world's first communist-elected government headed by E. M. S. Namboodiripad, assumed office.[55] The Education Minister, Joseph Mundassery, implemented new educational policies in the field of education, which benefited a large section of people.[56] On September 4, 1957, the government established a Board of Technical Education.[57] As a result, all the schools of arts except Radha Lakshmi Vilasam (RLV) Academy came under the direct control of Technical Education.[58] The Education Bill aimed to

[53] It was a four-tier structure that comprised post-graduate and research courses, first-degree courses, diploma courses, and vocational training. The general policy of the AICTE was that degrees and diplomas should not be conducted at the same institution. Apart from concentrating on the nation's need for skilled workers for industry, technicians, engineers and scientists, it gave importance to designers also. Designers generally denoted the labor force needed to draw architectural plans and industrial design. See. Ibid.

[54] Directorate of Technical Education, Kerala, "A Handbook," 1, Website, Accessed on January 6, 2021, http://www.dtekerala.gov.in/index.php/en/.

[55] The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed several social transformations in Kerala, with the emergence of caste reforms and peasant movements. More politically oriented movements arose among the peasants to form the Communist Party of India in 1940. The Party participated in the elections in 1945. See. N. E. Balaram, *Keralathile Communist Prasthanam: Adyanalukal* (Communist Movement in Kerala: Early Days), Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House, 1990.

[56] Georges Kristoffel Lieten, "Education, Ideology and Politics in Kerala 1957-59," *Social Scientist*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1977, 3-21.

[57] Directorate of Technical Education, Kerala.

[58] RLV Academy came under the Directorate of Collegiate Education that was established in 1957. If the Directorate of Technical Education gave more weight to occupational and technical skills, the Directorate of Collegiate Education focused on subjects like humanities, social sciences and science and technology. RLV school came under this because it imparted knowledge in music, *Kathakali* and *Mohiniyattam* apart from fine art subjects by this time. Hence, more than craft-oriented courses, it was seen as more oriented towards performance and fine arts. See. A. Sudheesh,

control the unlimited powers enjoyed by private management in the field of education. From 1958-59, there was an intense protest in Kerala, *Vimochana Samaram* (Liberation Struggle), targeting the government against their education reform.[59] In 1959, the state government was dismissed by the central government headed by the Indian National Congress (INC).[60]

During the 1960s, the Communist Party of India (CPI) faced major challenges and internal conflicts due to ideological differences and debates over the direction of the party's policies and strategies.[61] It eventually led to a split in the party in 1964, forming another party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and CPI(M).[62] After that, CPI(M) emerged as a significant political force in the state.

Since then, Kerala witnessed a period of political realignment that saw alternating governments led by two political parties: the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the INC-led United Democratic Front (UDF).[63] In the 1970s, Kerala was identified as the home of the "Kerala Model of Development."[64] It refers to the social indicator that gained prominence in development discourse due to Kerala's achievement in having the longest life expectancy, lowest

Graduating Tensions? Fine Arts Colleges in Modern and Contemporary Discourses in Kerala, Unpublished MPhil dissertation, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University: New Delhi, 2017.

[59] Apart from the Education Bill the protest equally targeted another bill Agrarian Relations Bill. The opposition to the government was led by influential groups like the Syro-Malabar Church, the Nair Service Society (NSS), and the Muslim League. Lieten, "Education, Ideology and Politics in Kerala 1957-59."

[60] E. M. S. Namboodirippad, *The Frontline Years: Selected Articles*, New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2010.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Shafeeq Thamarassery, "Party Vanna Vazhi: Indian Communist Prasthanathinu Nooru Vayasu" (History the Party: Hundred Years of Indian Communist Movement), *Dool News*, October 17, 2020, Accessed on July 5, 2023, https://www.doolnews.com/hundred-years-of-indian-communist-party-412.html.

[63] Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, July, 2006.

[64] Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics," 468.

infant mortality, lowest birth rate, and highest literacy rate within its slow economic growth.[65] Kerala became the only state in India where women outnumbered men.[66] Additionally, due to the left movements, large segments of the population were mobilized to assert their demands and expectations from their respective governments.[67]

The political landscape of Kerala experienced a significant shift in the mid-1970s. This period was marked by political upheaval in the wake of the Emergency movement imposed by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977.[68] The period saw the central government invoke emergency powers that curtailed civil liberties and suppressed political dissent. Many political opponents and activists were arrested, and censorship was imposed on the media.[69] It coincided with the emergence of Naxalism in Kerala. The Naxalite movement took root in Kerala following the Naxalbari uprising in West Bengal in 1967, which inspired radical leftist groups across the country.[70] Additionally, influenced by the radical left politics propagated by Naxalites,

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid.

[68] The Emergency was officially proclaimed on June 25, 1975, citing internal disturbances and threats to national security. During this time, civil liberties and political freedoms were severely curtailed, with widespread censorship, arrests of opposition leaders and activists, and suspension of fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and assembly. The government exercised authoritarian control over the media, judiciary, and political opposition. The Emergency period was marked by widespread abuses of power, including mass detentions without trial, and suppression of dissent. The Emergency was lifted on March 21, 1977, following widespread public opposition and a significant defeat for the ruling party in the general elections held soon after. See. Vijay Prashad, "Emergency Assessments," *Social Scientist*, Vol. 24, No. 9/10, 1996, 36-68; Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary.*

[69] Shahulhameed Medappil and Jidda, "Adiyantharavastha: Ormmakalkk 46 Vayas" (46 Years of Emergency), *Malayalam News*, June 25, 2021.

[70] Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary.*

writers, and filmmakers actively participated in public cultural activities, seeking avenues to express their ideas and engage with political issues.[71]

Since the new education policies in 1957, art schools have been considered institutions for vocational education. These schools offered diploma courses and strongly encouraged candidates to pursue careers as drawing teachers in primary schools. At that time, the qualification required to become a drawing teacher included completing the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) and obtaining a certificate from a two-year course in painting, drawing, sculpture, craft, and modeling issued by the Commissioner for Government Examination Kerala and Board of Technical Education.[72] A diploma certificate from art institutes or diplomas from the Kerala Government Technical Exam (KGTE) or Madras Government Technical Exam (MGTE) were also considered valid qualifications. Consequently, there was a significant increase in student enrollment in art schools as more individuals sought these qualifications to secure careers as drawing teachers.[73]

Despite the restructuring of art institutions in the state, Malayali artists expressed disappointment with the continuing vocational-oriented training provided. Many of them sought to establish themselves within the modern art world, drawing upon the art pedagogy at institutions, especially the Madras School of Arts and Crafts in the 1950s.[74] A Malayali artist, K. C. S. Panikker,

---

[71] K. Raghunathan, Interview with the author, November 27, 2021; Harikrishnan Sasikumar, *Social Spaces and Public Sphere: A Spatial-History of Modernity in Kerala, India,* unpublished doctoral dissertation submitted to the Dublin City University, 2020, 117.

[72] *The Kerala Education Act, 1958 and The Kerala Education Rule, 1959*, General Education Department, 2010, 4.

[73] Ibid.

[74] On May, 1, 1850, the art school was opened and run by Alexander Hunter, a resident surgeon with an object of improving native taste through fine arts. It was started as a private enterprise and in the following year, 1851, he opened a School of Industry to produce better domestic articles. In the early twentieth century, artist and pedagogue Roy Choudhuri reformed the school that stopped being an institution for future drawing teachers and a manufactory

TH-3461_186141015

who had already joined the school in 1936, was developing influential pedagogical practices that would later influence other Malayali artists in the 1960s.[75] In the 1950s, under the leadership of Panikker as the principal, the Madras School experienced an integration of modern and regional art forms.[76] Between 1940 and 1960, many Malayali artists such as T. K. Padmini, M. V. Devan, K. Madhava Menon, Kanayi Kunhiraman, A. Sivaraman Nair, K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri, V. M. Sadanandan, P. Gopinath and K. V. Haridasan joined the institute and were drawn towards the art practice of Panikker.

Nevertheless, in the 1960s and the 1970s, art institutions in Kerala were responding to the changing political and cultural landscape in the state that affected the structure of art institutions and courses. The split among the communists, who were seen as proponents of progressive politics in Kerala, left a mark on the institutionally trained young art community, serving as a reminder of the limitations and challenges faced by progressive movements and ideologies.[77] This event further fuelled the artists' determination to engage in more radical political activities beyond institutions. In 1975, under the ministry of C. Achuthamenon, the School of Art, Trivandrum, was upgraded to

---

of craft products and turned it into a school for creative artists. See. Sudheesh A, *Graduating Tensions? Fine Arts Colleges in Modern and Contemporary Discourses in Kerala,* Unpublished MPhil dissertation, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University: New Delhi, 2017, 17; Ashrafi S. Bhagat, *Framing the Regional Modern: KCS Paniker and the Madras Art Movement,* Thrissur: Lalithakala Academy, 2011.

[75] Ibid

[76] Panikker vibrantly recreated the traditional forms of *Kalamezhuth* and *Theyyam* in his paintings. See. Bhagat, *Framing the Regional Modern,*17

[77] Ameet Parameshwaran and Rahul Dev, "To be Partisan, Unsettled and Alert: Conversation with Geeta Kapur," *Artmargins,* 3 November 2015, Accessed on June 30, 2023, https://artmargins.com/to-be-partisan-unsettled-and-alert-conversation-with-geeta-kapur/.

the College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum.[78] However, except for providing a certificate course, the art schools did not create a lively space for artists. Due to the lack of infrastructure and a well-defined syllabus, artists influenced by the politically oriented cultural activities engaged in protests in the college. In the 1980s, as the college failed to fulfill their demands, many artists migrated to other institutions beyond Kerala, this time to Santhiniketan and the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda. The Malayali artists in Baroda later formed the "Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association," and their activities resonated with a critique of the bureaucratic nature of art institutions and the corporate interest in it.[79]

The 1990s witnessed a period of neoliberalism, globalization, and the growth of Hindu nationalism, against which the Malayali artists in art institutes across the country severely responded.[80] During this period, artists in Kerala recognized the absence of adequate institutions to showcase their artworks and engage in political discussions effectively.[81] They advocated for the idea that art should transcend its institutional elitist nature and be accessible to the masses. As

[78] Balakrishnan, *Adhunika Keralathinte Chithrakala: Ashayam, Prayogam, Vyavaharam*; Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Last Decade," In *Contemporary Art in Baroda,* ed. Gulammuhammed Shaikh, New Delhi: Tulika, 1997, 241; Sudheesh, *Graduating Tensions?* 17.

[79] Chapter 4 discusses it in detail. See. Safiya Fathima O. C, "Fine Arts College, Radical Movement, Pala Jeevithangal: Shilpi Jeevan Thomasinte Jeevitha Chitram Thudarunnu" ("Fine Arts College, Radical Movement, Different Lives: Continuation of Biography of the sculpture Jeevan Thomas"), *Azhimukham,* June 3, 2017, February 24, 2021, https://www.azhimukham.com/art-jeevan-thomas-the-painter-and-sculptor-who-brought-together-art-and-protest-his-life-history-third-part-by-safiya-oc/ .

[80] The Indian government led by Prime Minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh implemented a series of liberalization measures known as "The New Economic Policy" in 1991, that marked a departure from the country's previously socialist economic policies. The policy intended to attract foreign investment by deregulating market, reduction of trade barriers, privatization of state-owned enterprises and opening them for global competition. Amidst this, there was a rise of extreme Hindu right-wing fundamentalism that is exemplified with the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. See. Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram.*

[81] Ibid.

traditional art institutions lagged behind, state-sponsored and private open galleries emerged with a focus on *Janakeeyam* (democratic) to emphasize art for the people.[82] Their initiatives aimed to democratize art and ensure that it served the people without interference from private corporate interest and elite institutional nature.

The twenty-first century witnessed a remarkable shift in the art world in Kerala, where more discussions on gender, caste class, and religious minorities have emerged.[83] Artworks and scholarly discussions have emphasized the non-institutional aspects of art through the incorporation of the term *Pothu* in their discourse, which has become frequently used parallel to the English word "public," albeit without much interrogation of its nuanced meaning and implications.[84] *Pothu idam* (public space), *Pothu mandalam* (public sphere), and *Pothujanam* (common people) became frequent words in the art discourses to emphasize the democratic non-elite-institutional nature of art.

When the state witnessed India's first Biennial, Kochi- Muziris Biennale (KMB), in 2012 in Kochi, art institutions in the state started redefining the institutional structure to be a more democratic and open space for the *Pothujanam*.[85] Curator Riyas Komu, who was the co-curator of the first edition of Kochi-Muzirs Biennale, commented that Biennale was "born of the conviction

---

[82] Ibid.

[83] Balakrishnan, *Adhunika Keralathinte Chithrakala: Ashayam, Prayogam, Vyavaharam*; Savithri Rajeevan, "The Female Body Problematized: The Paintings of T. K. Padmini," In *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art,* eds. Shivaji. K Panikkar, Parul Dave Mukherji, and Deeptha Achar, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2003, 245.

[84] Art historian Vijayakumar Menon argued that, the intervention of new media in contemporary art since the 1980s became more democratic and created a space for visual art to reach to the people. He emphasized that the spread of installation art, site specific art, participatory art and virtual curation have opened up a space for the people to have an immediate access, evaluate art and thereby shedding the elitism of art. See. Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram.*

[85] Riyas Komu, "Riyas Komu on the Third Edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale," *Architectural Digest,* December 6, 2016, Accessed on February 11, 2024, https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/riyas-komu-third-edition-kochi-muziris-biennale/.

that India needed a platform to democratize and bring contemporary art into the sphere of daily life."[86] Hence, the word contemporary art began to connect democracy in the art world to emphasize inclusivity and accessibility for the people. Scholar Neelima Jeyachandran, while studying art in Kochi, critically analyzed,

> "However well founded the popular sense may be that all contemporary art appeals to an elite commodity culture and is promoted by capitalistic cultural institutions, such a position decreases scholarly study of political motives for such expression. The emergence of academicians who also practice as curators is certainly shifting the ways that critical discourses are generated. Moreover, many place-specific art events such as biennials and triennials not only promote protest art because of its attractively edgy qualities, they often shows works that rethink histories, often in resonance with subaltern, bottom-up logic of revision."[87]

In many academic writings, the KMB, with its open art exhibitions, gives the idea that the art is inclusive and represents common people. The curator of the 2018 edition of Biennale, Anita Dube, argued that the "Biennale had attempted to explore the possibilities of a non-alienated world and to create a safe public sphere where they can think freely, exchange ideas, ask questions of themselves, have conversations and dialogues rather than ideological- loud mouthing and best of all provide a safe pedagogic haven where people do not feel threatened, judged or not qualified enough."[88]

---

[86] Ibid.

[87] Neelima Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India)*, Unpublished PhD dissertation submitted to the University of California, Los Angeles, 2014, 133.

[88] Rinku Ghosh, "Get Art Out of the Box," *The Pioneer*, December 15, 2018, https://www.dailypioneer.com/2018/columnists/get-art-out-of-the-box.html.

At present, the term *Pothujanam,* with its English translation as "public," is used in the visual art world that encompasses various ambiguous elements. At its most basic level, the term "public" denotes those individuals who engage with an artwork displayed in a gallery, public space, or through print or digital media.[89] Sometimes, the term "public" takes on a different connotation, referring to a subaltern community for whom a specific artwork is produced as an emancipatory project. Yet, in another context, the term is situated within the physical boundaries of an exhibition space. Here, it denotes the ephemeral gathering of an audience during an exhibition. The term is frequently used to evoke the democratic principles of accessibility and inclusivity in the art world.

Within the discourse surrounding the visual arts, democracy, and the public in Kerala, three distinct trajectories of artistic development emerge, which I will delineate below. The trajectories are characterized by the artworks positioned at the boundary between what is art and non-art in the modern sense, sometimes challenging the distinction itself. This thesis aims to explore the three trajectories by specifically interrogating the artworks that have been functioning at the boundary in producing their publics.

3. Art at the Boundary: Three Trajectories

The evolution of Kerala's visual art scene deviated from the trajectory of institutionalized modern art, manifesting in three overlapping trajectories that exist at and often challenge the boundary between art and non-art. The primary trajectory involved the emergence of printed images in Malayalam periodicals, which positioned them at the boundary between literary text and high art. This transition marked a departure from conventional perceptions of modern art. Following the periodical images, another trajectory emerged with the introduction of modern

[89] P. Sudhakaran, *Kalavidhyabhyasam: Marunna Pariprekhyangal*, (Art Education: Changing Perspectives), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2021.

sculptures into public spaces, initiated by the Malayali sculptor Kanayi Kunhiraman in 1969. This development positioned visual art within a realm between the established institutional space of modern art and the more accessible, non-institutional public spaces. Lastly, in the 1980s, artists in Kerala began utilizing art practices as narratives to redefine the institutional boundaries of art and non-art. They challenged traditional institutional practice and opened up new avenues for visual expression. The three trajectories led to the emergence of scholarship aimed at exploring the concepts of accessibility and inclusivity, framing artworks as more democratic than traditional, modern art practices.

3. 1. Printed Images in Malayalam Periodicals

After the initial emergence of illustrations and photographs in Kerala during the early twentieth century, the period following India's independence saw a reinforcement of the significance of printed images as a modern artistic expression. The need for illustrations arose primarily to accompany Malayalam literary texts, and photographs for the cover pages. Starting in the 1950s, the weekly publication began dedicating more space to literary texts that celebrated the Malayalam language and regional culture.[90] In 1952, the arrival of artist M. V. Devan, who received training at the Madras School of Arts and Crafts, marked a significant turning point when he assumed the role of staff artist at *Mathrubhumi Weekly*.[91] In the 1960s, two artists, K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri and A. Sivaraman Nair, who were also trained at Madras School, joined

[90] N. P Chandrashekharan, *Mathrubhumiyude Samskarika Parinamavum Mathrubhumi Azhchappathippum: Oru Prameyadhishtitha Vishakalanam*, (The Cultural Evolution of Mathrubhumi and the Mathrubhumi Weekly: A Conceptual Analysis), Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Calicut, 2017.

[91] Chapter 2 provides more details on *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, "Kerala Artist M. V. Devan Dies at 86," *Indiatimes*, April 30, 2014.

TH-3461_186141015

the weekly.[92] From this period onward, illustrations substantially played a major role in shaping the visuality of the region.

As printed images appeared along with printed texts, a critical examination of them is lacking in art historical discourses that are dominated by writings on institutional art practices. However, a significant study emerged in 2020 by art historian Kavitha Balakrishnan, who critically examined the printed images' location in the discipline of art history.[93] She contends that while printed images serve as accessible forms of artistic expression for a mass reading public, they also harbor a voyeuristic gaze within the context of mass production. Balakrishnan's analytical framework views printed images as a window to understanding the public sphere shaped by print capitalism. Building upon her insights, my objective is to explore the concept of the public within the public sphere theorized by Balakrishnan. In addition, I examine the institutional influences on printed images and the nuances of democracy within the power relation, an aspect that Balakrishnan has not addressed in her study.

Scholars have primarily directed their attention towards illustrations while studying print images, neglecting the importance of photographs featured on the cover pages. I aim to address this oversight by examining both illustrations and photographs, analyzing how they have operated at the intersection of art and non-art to shape their respective publics.

[92] M. Jayaraj, "Mathrubhumiyum Namboothiriyum" (Mathrubhumi and Namboothiri), *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* Vol. 101, No. 19, July 23, 2023, 57. I will discuss in detail artists on M. V. Devan, K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri and A. Sivaraman Nair, their illustrations and periodicals in Chapter 2.

[93] Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram.*

3. 2. Modern Art in Public Spaces

Following the proliferation of printed images accessible to Malayalis from the 1950s onwards, a subsequent shift occurred, entailing the expansion of modern art beyond its traditional institutional boundaries into public domains. This transition was initiated by the Malayali sculptor Kanayi Kunhiraman, and it was marked by his installation of the prominent female nude sculpture "Yakshi" at the Malampuzha dam garden in the Palakkad district in 1969.[94] Since then, the ability of sculptures to enrich parks, gardens, restaurant locations, government buildings, and beaches was immediately recognized as a tool to rejuvenate urban spaces. Kunhiraman created a series of works for urban beautification in open spaces across Kerala for the following two decades. By the 1990s, several Malayali sculptors started creating commissioned artworks intended for urban beautification projects, often with the backing of modern art institutions.[95]

With the inauguration of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012, wall murals became significant public art that started to adorn the street walls in Kochi and subsequently spread to other major cities such as Thiruvananthapuram, Alappuzha, and Kozhikode. The presence of modern art in public spaces has become more prevalent, extending to tangible areas where strangers gather and interact, including beaches, courtyards of buildings, city squares, and street walls throughout Kerala. With growing funding from governmental and private institutions, artists have begun to explore the emancipatory potential of public art, transforming it into community upliftment projects and pedagogical practices. This integration has allowed public art to become intertwined with people's everyday experiences in urban spaces.

---

[94] I will discuss about this work in detail in Chapter 3.

[95] According to art historian R. Nandakumar, the majority of the outdoor artworks were created because Madras School-trained painters had to rely on commissions as a realistic alternative to starting their independent artistic careers. See. R. Nandakumar, *Insight and Outlook: Selected Essays on the Contemporary Art of Kerala*, Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2022, 76.

TH-3461_186141015

Vijayakumar Menon's examination of the "Yakshi" sculpture explores the broader implications of integrating artworks into public spaces, suggesting that this represents a gradual secularization of traditionally elite modern art spaces.[96] Art critic P. Sudhakaran further contributes to this discussion by highlighting how art displayed in public spaces transforms people's perceptions of art, making it more accessible.[97] Sudhakaran emphasizes that, unlike the confined and often intimidating environment of art galleries, public spaces offer a sense of openness and accessibility to individuals from all walks of life. In these narratives, the introduction of art into public spaces serves as a solution to the limitations imposed by traditional, modern art institutions. However, unlike the accessibility produced by printed images in the private sphere, public art invites a collective gaze, an aspect that runs through Chapter 3 to Chapter 5.

Scholar Harikrishnan Sasikumar identified this form of public space as a social space, a feature in Kerala.[98] He argued that just like publics formed through print media's public sphere, social spaces such as public grounds, beaches, and *bazaars* played a significant role in bridging the gap between the bourgeois public sphere and the commoners.[99] Integrating both the concept of art and social spaces, particularly those where strangers come together to socialize, my objective is to investigate the conflicts that arise between artworks and modern art institutions within these contexts. Specifically, I aim to understand what distinguishes the experience of strangers in a modern gallery space from those in social spaces.

[96] Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram.*

[97] Sudhakaran, *Kalavidhyabhyasam*

[98] Sasikumar, *Social Spaces and Public Sphere.*

[99] Chapter 1 conceptually analyses the terms "Public" and "Public sphere," Ibid, 27.

3.3. Redefinition of Art in the Institutional Spaces

The third trajectory emerged in Kerala with the formation of an art movement by Malayali artists, the "Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors' Association." The collective of artists aimed to challenge the institutional art and intervention of the market and explore alternative modes of artistic expression. They developed the notion that art should not be confined within the capital-driven contemporary art institutions. Instead, they advocated for art to resonate with the people, emphasizing a more inclusive and accessible engagement with art.[100] The exhibitions organized by the Radical group held across India showcased engaging art through narrative forms.[101] Building upon the movement in the 1990s, students from various fine arts institutions in Kerala, alongside art critics and historians, incorporated the idea of "art for the people" into their discussions. They imagined the people as non-specialized audiences outside the confines of the art world.[102] The radical collective's exploration of medium and materials recognized that found materials, which symbolized a non-elitist nature, had the potential to make an alternate narrative to challenge the modernist notion of permanence and preservation of art objects in institutions.[103] Following this short-lived movement, the development of narrative-based art practice since the 1990s influenced Malayali artists to represent the subaltern voices.

Vijayakumar Menon analyses the narrative art practices as a Democratic Art Activity.[104] In the twenty-first century, art historians began analyzing the visual art practices at these

---

[100] Anita Dube *Questions and Dialogue,* Faculty of Fine Arts Gallery, Baroda, 1987.

[101] Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram.*

[102] Interview with Anto K. G, July 19, 2021.

[103] Sharmistha Ghosal, "Acclaimed Painter-Sculptor N.N. Rimzon Talks About Art and What Inspires his Life-Size Sculptors.", *Indian Express*, February 4, 2022, Accessed on June 6, 2023, https://www.indulgexpress.com/culture/art/2022/feb/04/acclaimed-painter-sculptor-nn-rimzon-talks-about-art-and-what-inspires-his-life-size-sculptures-38806.html.

[104] Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram*, 128.

boundaries in Kerala and noted a dominance of democratic nature in the artworks.[105] They emphasized that artworks that emerged in Kerala post-independence are popular, accessible, and inclusive compared to the institutional art world.

4. Publics in Relation to Visual Arts

In this dissertation, I examine the scholarships on visual arts in Kerala to explore the extent to which visual arts existing at the boundary between art and non-art can construct a democratic public sphere devoid of modern art institutional influence. My objective is to challenge the notion that a democratic public sphere and institutions of modern art are mutually exclusive binaries. I analyze the objective by exploring the idea of "public" inherent in the public sphere constructed by visual arts. As mentioned in the beginning, I borrowed the idea of "public" from Michael Warner, who observed the formation of publics in the modern world through the circulation of printed texts. He analyzed that publics are plural and formed through the overlapping of different public spheres where the circulation of textual discourse happens. Redirecting from textual analysis to visual analysis, I examine how visual discourse, along with textual discourse, is formed within different public spheres and the nature of publics produced there. Chapter I provides more conceptual clarification of my analysis of the "public" and the "public sphere."

My study primarily focuses on two parallel forms of art production: printed images and narrative artworks exhibited in public spaces. I use both art forms as tools to investigate and understand two corresponding aspects of public spheres: the discursive aspect related to printed images and the spatial aspect related to public space. The dissertation proposes a mixed

[105] Vijayakumar Menon, "Kanayi Kunhiramanile Samskrithi Chihnangal" (The Cultural Symbolism in Kanayi Kunhiraman), *Granthashala,* Vol. 57, No. 8, 2005; Nandakumar, *Insight and Outlook*; M. L. Johny, *Yakshiyanam,* Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2019.

TH-3461_186141015

methodology encompassing archival research and ethnography. Archival research was conducted to analyze printed images, while ethnography primarily focuses on narrative artworks. The methodological aspects are elaborated upon in Chapter 1. The research was carried out through a range of case studies involving different visual forms such as illustrations, photographs, installations, a video installation, and wall murals. The case studies predominantly represent art forms that consistently challenge the distinction between art and non-art within scholarly discourses, particularly through their embrace of democratic principles.

5. Structure of the Dissertation

The thesis comprises five main chapters organized into three sections based on the methods and case study. Section I consists of Chapter 1, "Visual Arts and Publics: On Concepts and Methods," which presents an extensive literature review and methodology. The literature review analyses the concept of the "public." I examine existing scholarships in the public sphere and aim to gain a comprehensive understanding of their significance within the context of my research on visual art. The methodology part elucidates the rationale behind selecting art and the public as focal points of my investigation. This chapter lays the groundwork for the subsequent analysis and findings presented in the dissertation.

Section II comprises Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. This section is outlined on the basis of archival research, with a primary focus on printed images within the case study. It focuses on publics produced by the representation of the female body in Malayalam periodicals. Chapter 2, "Print and Publics: Images in Malayalam Periodicals, 1950 to 1990," involves a critical examination of the concept of a democratic public sphere facilitated by print media. To achieve this, I concentrate on the representation of the female body in illustrations in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* and *Painkili* Magazines from 1950 to 1990. Through a formal analysis of these images, I analyze

how these representations reinforce the male gaze within society and the multiple public spheres that emerge as a result. I intend to critically analyze the complex relationship between the notion of democracy, the dissemination of printed images, and the influence of the male gaze in producing gendered publics. While the primary emphasis lies on illustrations, I also conduct a comparative analysis with photographs.

Chapter 3, "The Nude and Publics: Representing the Female Body in Kerala since 1950," builds upon the argument established in Chapter 2 regarding the construction of gendered publics. The primary objective of this chapter is to investigate how the gendered publics engage with printed images of female nudity through the intervention of the state and the consumer market. A specific case study is examined in detail: the portrayal of a semi-nude female figure on the cover page of *Grihalakshmi*, a women's magazine, in 2018. Through an iconographic analysis of this case study, various discourses surrounding the representation of female nudity and sexuality in India and Kerala are explored. The chapter further explores the relationship between images, the state, and the public sphere, shedding light on how these elements intersect and influence each other in producing the gendered publics.

Section III of the thesis constitutes chapters 4 and Chapter 5. This section is based on ethnographic research and narrative art practices in public spaces since the 1980s in Kerala. Chapter 4, titled "Art, Institutions, and the Public Sphere: 1947-2020," explores the analysis of two exhibitions, L*et Me Come to Your Wound; Heal Myself*, held in the rural village of Kelakam in the northern Malabar region in 2020, and its reproduction in another exhibition titled *Lokame Tharavadu* in an urban city in Alappuzha in 2021. The objective of this chapter is to examine the transition process of artwork from institutional space to non-institutional space and vice versa, along with examining the resulting public sphere generated through this transition. The chapter

TH-3461_186141015

employs a formal and historical analysis of the exhibition and introduces the visual narrative technologies in artworks in producing their publics.

Chapter 5, "Art and Urban Space: Strange and Intimate Publics in Kochi," examines the case study of a community-based exhibition project, *Mattancherry*, and its relation with the contemporary urban city of Kochi. *Mattancherry* brought visual artists and urban planners together to produce an alternate narrative of the city by criticizing the city's tourist-based art world. Moving away from the concept of transition of artwork between institutional and non-institutional space, this chapter focuses on the formation of the public sphere through art activities in Kochi by considering the city itself as a gallery space. The main objective is to engage with the concept of strange and intimate publics in relation to the modern city that is produced through the visual discourse.

The concluding chapter draws upon the analyses conducted in the preceding case studies outlined in the four chapters to conceptualize three parallel insights: First, it emphasizes the distinction between visual discourse and textual discourse. Second, it explores how the discourse transcends the binaries of art and non-art, the institutional and democracy, and the discursive and spatial public spheres. Finally, the chapter argues that art itself functions as an institution, and the publics produced through the visual discourse in each case study, emerge as connoisseurs of high art in modern institutional space.

TH-3461_186141015

Chapter 1

Visual Arts and Publics: On Concepts and Methods

1. Introduction

This chapter aims to provide the evolution of theoretical concepts and research methodologies that I developed throughout the course of this study, leading to the final formation of the thesis. The first section provides a comprehensive review of the literature, focusing on key concepts related to the term "public." This includes an exploration of various theoretical trajectories used to analyze the public sphere in relation to print and images. This section offers insight into my conceptualization of the publics within the realm of visual art. The second section elaborates on my engagement with the discipline and methodological aspects of carrying out the research.

2. Concepts

The conceptual methodology draws on the discourse of the term "public" as it is debated in interdisciplinary studies. Before exploring the scholarships on visual arts and their publics, it is essential to examine the theories on the concept of "public." This term encompasses a wide array of theoretical perspectives from various disciplines. Some of the critical theories include Jürgen Habermas's idea of the public sphere, which explores the role of discourse in shaping public opinion and political participation. There were various criticisms emerged in the public sphere postulated by Habermas regarding its failure to acknowledge subaltern communities. Elaborating on their scholarships, this chapter provides a solid foundation for exploring how these theories apply to the realm of visual arts and the publics.

TH-3461_186141015

2.1. The Public and the Public Sphere

In his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962, Jürgen Habermas explored the historical development of the public sphere in European nations in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[1] Habermas discussed the evolution of the public sphere, starting with the monarchical model, which he terms the "representative public sphere."[2] In this model, the monarch visibly displays power before the public. However, a shift from the monarchical model towards more democratic forms of public engagement began to take shape during the Enlightenment period in the 18th century. According to Habermas, the public sphere as a democratic domain was facilitated by spaces like coffeehouses, salons, and newspapers.[3] He wrote,

> "The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor."[4]

[1] The work was originally published in German and its English translation became available only after 1989. See. Jürgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1980; Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Notes Towards a Concept of the Colonial Public", In *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, Eds. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmet Reifeld, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005, 130-156.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," Tran. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique*, No. 3, 1974, 49-55.

[4] Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 27.

Habermas conceptualized the public sphere as a bourgeois society where public discussion deals with the objects connected to the activity of the state but is not interfered with by the state.[5] In brief, for Habermas, the public sphere is a democratic domain that mediates between the state and civil society, where public opinion emerges through the assumption of a rational public engaging in discourse around printed or verbal form. For him, the print industry, particularly newspapers and the press, operated like a "small handicraft business" before the advent of industrial capitalism.[6] In this context, the "public" represents homogeneous bourgeois men, which is an ideal construct shaped by a liberal society.

Nevertheless, in contrast to the ideal democratic public sphere, Habermas observed a process of "refeudalization" of the public sphere towards the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century with the emergence and dominance of mass media.[7] This term refers to a shift in the nature of public discourse away from the idealized, rational-critical debate characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere towards a more controlled form of communication within the earlier existing "small handicraft business" stage of printing presses. He argued that, with the rise of mass media such as editorial journalism, radio, and later television, the public sphere became increasingly commercialized and dominated by powerful interests, such as corporations and political elites. Instead of fostering rational debate among equals, mass media often manipulated public opinion and promoted particular agendas. He noted that this transformation was accompanied by a blurring of the boundaries between the private and public spheres, resulting in

[5] Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)," 49.

[6] For Habermas, capitalism refers to a cultural and economic system characterized by private ownership of the means of production. He highlighted the influence of private interests, especially in the press, where profit-making through advertisements could shape the flow of information and public discourse. See. Ibid.

[7] Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 195.

TH-3461_186141015

the superimposition of private interests over public matters.[8] The dissertation aims to critique the Habermasian notion of the democratic public sphere by interrogating the boundary between private and public in terms of art.

Over the last few decades, criticism of the Habermasian understanding of the "public" has surfaced, particularly regarding the exclusion of women. Feminist studies have contested this exclusion, highlighting assumptions of homogeneity, abstractness, and the neglect of subaltern publics. Feminist critic Nancy Fraser argued that alongside the homogeneous bourgeois public envisioned in the Habermasian public sphere existed various counterpublics.[9] They included nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women publics, and working-class publics, which competed with the dominant masculinist public sphere.[10] She argued that within the Habermasian public sphere, there is a bracketing of the inequalities the subordinate public faces.[11] According to Fraser, these subordinate publics, such as women, workers, people of color, and gays and lesbians, form alternative publics without the interference of the dominant public. She called them subaltern counterpublics, where the subordinated social groups can invent and circulate counter discourses. She mainly considers the publics as participants in the dominant and counterpublic sphere.

In 2002, literary critic Michael Warner analyzed the concept of the "public" outlined in both the Habermasian public sphere and Nancy Fraser's perspectives. He aligns with Nancy Fraser's critique of the Habermasian public sphere regarding the question of gender. Warner

[8] Ibid, 181.

[9] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, No. 25/26, 1990, 61.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid, 65.

argued that movements around gender and sexuality do not always conform to the bourgeois model of rational-critical debate.[12] He wrote,

> "The stronger modification of Habermas's analysis- one in which he has shown little interest, though it is clearly of major significance in the critical analysis of gender and sexuality- is that their tension with a larger public defines some publics."[13]

Warner agrees with Nancy Fraser's concept of counterpublics, which challenges the dominant public sphere. However, he disagrees with the notion of subaltern counterpublics. Warner argues that certain groups participating in counterpublic discourse, such as fundamentalists or certain youth cultures, cannot be considered subalterns within these counterpublics.[14] He posited that counterpublics are more than just gatherings of marginalized individuals; they are another publics shaped by the circulation of discourse.

For a clear understanding of the public sphere, Michael Warner conducted a detailed examination of the concept of the term "public." He argued that the idea of "public" is primarily linked to the discourse of contemporary print media that centers around text and words. Warner posits that "public" is plural and a unique formation of modernity.[15] He emphasizes that, in particular contexts, the terms "public" and "a public" can convey different meanings. Essentially, "public" refers to the totality of society, often grouped under broader entities such as nations, cities, or communities. On the other hand, "a public" refers to a group of people gathered in a defined space.

---

[12] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York: Zone Books, 2002, 51.

[13] Ibid, 56.

[14] Ibid, 121.

[15] Ibid, 8.

TH-3461_186141015

In addition to these interpretations, Warner explores a third dimension of "public," identifying it as "*a* public" centered around literature. Warner introduced specific criteria to comprehend what "a public" of this sort entails. The first criterion is that "*a* public" is self-organized, arising from certain literary practices and addresses made to them. Warner points out that such publics are distinct from the general population and a spontaneously gathering crowd. The second factor is that "*a* public" represents relations among strangers, with "strangers" encompassing those within the modern world. Third, the address to "*a* public" is both personal and impersonal, recognizing each individual's self-interest as equal to others. Fourth, "*a* public" is produced from the feeling of being addressed, necessarily requiring attentive engagement. Fifth, "*a* public" is the social space formed by the reflexive circulation of a discourse anticipating responses. Sixth, publics acts historically according to their discourses, operating within the time frame of its relevant discourse. Finally, "*a* public" forms a poetic world, with emergent language and sentiment shaping the public discourse. It is understood that the public is not a monolithic entity but a relationship constructed of multiple public spheres.[16]

Michael Warner, diverging from Habermas's concept of the public sphere argued that publics are made of stranger sociability through circulation of discourses in print media. For him, there was no deterioration of the public sphere, but it has been in the process of constant formation and reformation through textual discourse among strangers in modern societies.

Historian Benedict Anderson, though not directly focused on publics, conceptualized how modern nations functioned as imagined communities despite their size and geographical distance.[17] His concept of "imagined communities" suggests that a sense of shared identity and

[16] Ibid, 65-124.

[17] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1983.

TH-3461_186141015

belonging binds people together, even if they have never met. This feeling of connection, Anderson argues, is largely forged by the rise of print capitalism. According to him, people are geographically distant strangers, but they feel connected by a common language, shared experiences shaped by the news, and a collective understanding of their nation's story. This, in turn, contributes to the formation of a national identity and a sense of belonging to a larger whole. Anderson suggests that the spread of printed materials like books and newspapers, along with other technologies that disseminate information to the masses, created a novel sense of contemporaneity that constructed a more horizontal sense of solidarity within imagined communities.[18] Anthropologist Francis Cody argued that Anderson has pushed for standardization of language that entailed a homogenization of the very means by which national publics are imagined.[19]

Critiquing Anderson's homogenized national publics, historian Partha Chatterjee argued that Anderson's framework does not fully account for the complexities and variations in the formation of national identities in postcolonial contexts like India. Chatterjee's book *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, published in 1993, presented an alternative understanding of nationalism and state formation in countries with colonial legacies.[20] Chatterjee argued that nationalism in colonial India asserted its independence by creating its own realm of authority separate from imperial control. This division of society into distinct spheres, one concerned with material matters and the other with spiritual or cultural aspects, enabled nationalist movements to challenge the dominance of colonial powers.

[18] Francis Cody, "Publics and Politics," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 40, 2011, 37-52.

[19] Ibid, 39.

[20] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

TH-3461_186141015

The material realm, encompassing economic activities, governance, scientific advancements, and technological innovations, was external and largely influenced by Western ideals. In contrast, the spiritual domain was internal and reflected the unique cultural identity of the nation. This division between material and spiritual realms was further emphasized through various contrasts such as external/internal, public/private, Western/Indian, modernity/tradition, and feminine/masculine.[21] In the external realm, the dominance of the West was recognized, and the principles of modernity, along with its institutional structures and practices, were embraced. Within this public arena shaped by colonization, nationalism functioned by utilizing the frameworks of Western modernity.[22] The nationalist endeavor was not to challenge Western statecraft with its indigenous traditions but rather to extend and implement the fundamental principles of Western governance and eliminate the distinctive features of colonial subjugation, such as the limitations that prevented the colonized from participating fully in the political sphere. In contrast, the inner sphere, pertaining to the spiritual domain, aimed to preserve the nation's cultural distinctiveness and colonial interference.[23] Within this realm, nationalist movements in colonial India worked towards developing a modern cultural identity for the nation that was rooted in Indian traditions and values rather than adopting Western cultural norms entirely.

Partha Chatterjee's analysis of the division between the private and public spheres represents a departure from Habermasian theory. While Habermas posits harmony between the public and private spheres, Chatterjee observes distinctiveness and opposition between them in the

[21] Bhattacharya, "Notes Towards a Concept of the Colonial Public."

[22] Ibid.

[23] Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments.*

Indian context. Additionally, whereas Habermas views the public sphere as independent from the state, Chatterjee's concept intertwines the public sphere with the state.

Historian Neeladri Bhattacharya challenges Chatterjee's conceptualization of these dichotomies. He argued that the public sphere in colonial India was not a singular, unified space but instead characterized by divisions and segments with different voices.[24] Unlike Chatterjee, who envisioned the public sphere as a domain where colonial consensus was developed with the Indian subject, Bhattacharya saw there developed a friction between the colonial authority and the subject within the public sphere itself. He wrote,

> "If the colonial authorities sought to build their power through the public sphere, Indians sought to control the same space to debate their past, critique their heritage, define their identities, and question the premises of British rule. The public language of reason was used by the colonial power to critique Indian society and legitimate British rule as the bearer of rationality, but the same language was turned around by Indians to critique colonialism as the embodiment of unreason."[25]

Bhattacharya's analysis draws parallels with the Habermasian concept of the public sphere in India, emphasizing the importance of establishing a public sphere that operates independently of state authorities. In doing so, he critiques the intervention of the colonial state in shaping national subjects. However, Bhattacharya's theoretical framework is limited in its ability to fully grasp the conditions that shaped the formation of the public sphere and the democratic derivatives in post-independent India. Here, the public sphere operated as an extension of the new nation-state while

[24] Bhattacharya, "Notes Towards a Concept of the Colonial Public."

[25] Ibid, 156.

TH-3461_186141015

also evolving to represent subaltern voices, thereby complicating traditional notions of public discourse and authority, a feature that is further explored in the following chapters.

2.2. Public Sphere in Kerala

In the literature on Kerala, scholars often refer to the concept of the public sphere based on Jürgen Habermas's idea. Specifically, they focus on a historical period marked by the involvement of the Communist Party in mobilizing working-class and peasant members since the 1930s.[26] This period is viewed as significant for the development of an idealized version of the public sphere in Kerala. In the twentieth century, Kerala underwent a significant political and social transformation in response to colonial and feudal authority.[27] The reform movements against caste untouchability, polygamy, and women's suppression restructured feudal family relations regardless of class.[28] The transformations facilitated by mass mobilization among the people restructured the political public and intimate private spheres. Scholar T. K. Ramachandran observed that the mass mobilization and the emergence of public opinion on the socio-political issues "signaled an unprecedented democratization of social life."[29] He wrote,

[26] Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary,* 13.

[27] Feudalism in Kerala has distinctive trajectory from the West due to its ties with the region's caste element. Scholar and the first Chief Minister of Kerala, E. M. S. Namboodirippad identified feudalism in Kerala encompasses three elements- the caste dominance in society, feudal dominance in economy and local rulers dominated in politics. See. E. M. S. Namboodirippad, *Kerala Charithram: Marxist Veekshanathil* (Kerala History: Marxian Perspective) Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1990; T. K. Ramachandran, "Notes on the Making of Feminine Identity in Contemporary Kerala Society," *Social Scientist*, Vol. 23, No. 1/3, 1995, 109- 123.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid, 119.

TH-3461_186141015

> "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."[30]

Ramachandran argued that the hegemonic left was unable to interrogate the further intervention of the bourgeois model into the familial structures in the 1960s and the 1970s, which led to the intervention of apolitics in culture and literature.[31] Cultural critic Ratheesh Radhakrishnan sees Ramachandran's analysis as an attempt to invoke the political role attributed to the Habermasian public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe, albeit with a proletarian foundation, as an integral aspect of left political discourse.[32]

Similar to Ramachandran, historian Robin Jeffrey also endeavored to link the mass political activism of the left in Kerala to the Habermasian public sphere. Jeffrey's analysis focused on the formation of the public sphere through print media. He identified three stages of print development in Kerala: rare, scarce, and mass.[33] In the "rare stage," printing presses exist but are exclusively rare. In the "scarce stage," only a small percentage of the population had access to printed materials, resulting in a ratio of approximately 30 copies per 1000 people. Jeffrey equates this stage to Habermas's concept of publishing newspapers as a "small handicraft business," indicating that printed materials were expensive and circulation was limited. Following Habermas's observation, the third stage termed the "mass stage," marks a significant shift characterized by the

---

[30] Ibid.

[31] Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 elaborates the emergence of magazines targeting women in modern nuclear families in Kerala, Ibid.

[32] Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary*, 61.

[33] Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics," 467.

TH-3461_186141015

widespread availability of printed materials, particularly newspapers, at affordable prices. Jeffrey observed that the majority of households had access to daily newspapers during this stage, facilitated by advancements in mass media and advertising.[34]

The scarce medium period in Kerala was from the 1870s to the 1960s. According to Jeffrey, it is the "scarce stage" that reaches and influences people and, in turn, alerts and troubles the political authorities.[35] He pointed out that print media, in its scarce form, played a crucial role in facilitating political activism among the Malayalis, which in turn contributed to the formation of a vibrant "public sphere" in Kerala.[36] As Habermas noted the diminishing public sphere in Western societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jeffrey argued that a similar stage was reached in Kerala since the 1960s. However, contrary to the Habermasian notion that economic development facilitated the penetration of mass media, Jeffrey noted a different scenario in Kerala, where mass politics played a significant role. He wrote,

> "What triggered the transformation of print into a mass medium in Kerala? It was not rampant economic development. For the first fifty years of Indian independence, the average annual income in Kerala was lower than the all-India figure. Nor was it the spread of cheap, efficient technology. From the 1950s, controls on the economy made it particularly difficult to import printing equipment, and Indian-manufactured presses and typesetters were old-fashioned and few. Rather, I would argue that it was mass politics that began to turn print into a mass medium. Politics came first; mass circulations followed."[37]

[34] Ibid, 467-468.

[35] Ibid, 473.

[36] Ibid, 478.

[37] Ibid.

In Jeffrey's analysis, the political mobilization in Kerala is strengthened by two factors: the communist movements and the place of women. In my study, I consider the question of women as an essential factor in forming the public sphere in Kerala. The first two chapters will analyze the place of women and the visual representation of women in depth to study the nuances of the concept of the public sphere. While Jeffrey's analysis aligns with Habermas's argument that the public sphere declined after the intervention of mass media in the 1960s due to private capital interests in print, I challenge this perspective. Instead, I argue for a redefinition of the private and public spheres that emerged without a decline in the public sphere. This redefinition is illustrated through the evolving representation of the female body in printed images since the 1970s in Kerala.

Ratheesh Radhakrishnan offered a critique opposing the theory of decline in the public sphere in Kerala. He stated that these theories were centered around the spatial participation of people in mass left politics. But the public domain constituted through narratives would cut across the spatially organized public sphere.[38] Radhakrishnan's effort was not to reduce the importance of a spatially formed public sphere but to redirect his attention to the one formed through narratives that were hitherto unexplored. He argued that if something has to be public, it has to satisfy a discourse produced through narrativisability. Radhakrishnan drew his argument from extending Warner's idea of the circulation of discourse. However, neither scholar's theory explicitly addresses how visuality can generate publics beyond the realm of the verbal or textual.

[38] Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary*, 64.

TH-3461_186141015

2. 3. Visual Arts: Redirecting the Discourse

Michael Warner's idea of publics is produced through textual discourse. According to him, the publics of visuality are already embedded in the textual or verbal form. Warner wrote,

> "Texts cross one's path in their endless search for a public of one kind or the other: the morning paper, the radio, the television, movies, billboards, books, official postings."[39]

Warner sees little distinction between text and images if they construct a practice based on discourse. He wrote,

> "Often the texts themselves are not even recognized as texts- as, for example, with visual advertising or the chattering of a DJ- but the publics they bring into being are still discursive in the same way."[40]

Warner viewed both the word and the visual through the lens of practice, discourse, stranger sociability, and attention. Warner suggests that the publics formed by words and visuals are not fundamentally different; therefore, visuals are seen in conjunction with the sensory experiences of the word.

By seeing the dominance of text in forming the discourse, Art historian Sandria B. Freitag, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, analyzed how visual images uniquely encapsulate the cultural history of South Asia and the visual publics. She argued that there is always a limitation of the scholarships on print media and the formation of the publics because all its analytical frameworks are rooted only in texts.[41] To solve this issue, she proposed a framework that exclusively concentrated on visual images and their discourse, independent from text. She

---

[39] *Publics and Counterpublics*, 7.

[40] Ibid, 68.

[41] Sandria B. Freitag, "Visions of the Nation: Theorizing the Nexus Between Creation, Consumption and Participation in the Public Sphere," In *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India,* ed. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

TH-3461_186141015

recognized three realms that she believed are untouched by verbal or written texts: South Asian courtly culture, such as *Jharoka Darshan* in Mughal times, religious practices, including both the centrality of *Darshan* and the special reshaping effected under *Bhakti* and, finally, the mobile gaze in a religious procession out in the street.[42] In each of these realms, she wrote, "visual vocabularies operate not as an extension or transmutation of oral or written words, but as basic building blocks in the process of "knowing" that is achieved by acquiring and processing information through the eyes."[43]

Freitag observed that three of these visual acts created a consuming public of the visuality that, in turn, caused the state and religion to produce more visual practices. She argued that the visual culture that is devoid of any textual or verbal support is capable of making a consuming public and can drive towards forming a modern nation itself.[44] In her three instances of the public gazes, she associated a sacredly drawn crowd, who was physically witnessing a spectacle embedded in state or religion. However, her use of the term "public" was broadly understood as a collective of people in public space who are directly engaging with the visual object or subject.

If Freitag's interpretation of the term "public" is juxtaposed against the criteria set forth by Michael Warner to define the modern concept of a public, it becomes evident that her understanding aligns with some of the criteria but diverges in others. Her idea of the public aligns with Warner's first four criteria, whereas it begins to diverge with the fifth criterion that engages with the textual discourse and circulation. Regarding her idea of public, one of the pressing

[42] *Jharoka Darshan,* is a practice introduced by the Mughal rulers in which they presented themselves to the public through a window opening to the outside of the palace. See. Catherine B. Asher, "Sub-Imperial Palaces: Power and Authority in Mughal India," *Arts Orientalis,* Vol. 23, 1993, 282.

[43] Freitag, "Visions of the Nation," 39.

[44] Ibid, 3.

TH-3461_186141015

questions that arise is: how does visual art, devoid of textual or verbal cues, influence the discourse's formation and circulation? The ambiguity lies in understanding the type of discourse generated when relying solely on visuals. Given this deviation, the sixth and seventh criteria put forth by Warner, which predominantly focus on the nature and structure of discourse, seem less pertinent in the context of Freitag's interpretation.

When dissecting Freitag's interpretation, her utilization of the term "public" appears to lean towards groups or crowds drawn by the three specific examples she highlights. These examples primarily pertain to instances of a "gaze devoid of words," which points towards the formation of a crowd. Distinguishing "publics" from the commonly used term "crowd," anthropologist William Mazzarella, in one of his articles, "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who is Afraid of the Crowd?" argued that "crowds are generally considered in a register of intellectual history where they are treated as the paradigmatic social formation of an earlier "mass" phase of modernity."[45] He emphasized that a crowd exists by virtue of some external trigger to turn on the feelings and thoughts of the collectivity in an identical direction.[46] In reciprocity to the external trigger, Mazzarella observed,

> "Participants in a crowd are beside themselves not only in an ecstatic sense but also quite literally in that a crowd seems to tune everyone into the same frequency. Crowd contagion stereotypically comes down to simple duplication. In a crowd I feel what you feel; mirroring each other we amplify the sentiment to infinity and pass it on to those around us until the crowd is a single buzzing block of unified affect."[47]

[45] William Mazzarella, "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who is Afraid of the Crowd?", *Critical Inquiry,* Vol. 36, No. 4, 2010, 699.

[46] Ibid, 716.

[47] Ibid, 716-717.

Anthropologist Francis Cody added his argument to the crowd to complement that of Mazzarella's. He distinguished the publics from the crowds by stating that a "crowd is driven by excessive, embodied passion making it more prone to manipulative suggestion and violence."[48] He wrote, "Crowd-like behavior has been associated not only with face-to-face gatherings, but also with the dangers of new technologies, as in the case of cinema's purported capacity to work directly on the senses, thereby escaping rational intellection."[49] By making the comparison between the crowd and publics, Cody emphasized that even though the crowd represents people, it lacks a self-measuring agency possessed by the publics.[50]

This statement suggests that what Freitag identifies may align more closely with crowds rather than publics. Therefore, her framework has limitations in comprehending visuals and their publics. This limitation brings to the forefront a significant insight: the inescapability of verbal and written words. Even when any framework primarily centers on visuality, the discourse brought about by spoken or written words remains indispensable.

Historian G. Arunima identified the inescapable textual discourse while orienting towards analyzing the publics of visual arts in her article "Ravi Varma's Many Publics: Circulation and the Status of Art-Work" in 2015. She acknowledges the limitations of Michael Warner's theory in understanding the artworks but expands his concern of strangerhood as an essential factor.[51] Additionally, Arunima moves beyond the spatial organization of strangers in gallery spaces and puts the centrality of circulation at the forefront by analyzing the chromolithographs popularized by Raja Ravi Varma in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Arunima argued that the

[48] Cody, "Publics and Politics," 41.

[49] Ibid, 41.

[50] Ibid, 37-52.

[51] Arunima, "Ravi Varma's Many Publics."

TH-3461_186141015

chromolithographs of Ravi Varma enabled a cross-class public through a democratization process of fine art. She wrote,

> "[...] the lithograph enabled people across class to not merely see and develop 'a love for the fine arts' but also touch and possess something that would hitherto have been out of their reach. The immense popularity of Ravi Varma's paintings and the retention of his imagery within popular memory were also to do with the democratizing possibility of this technology."[52]

Arunima's idea of the democratizing possibility of the print media comes from her analysis of philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

In this essay, Walter Benjamin contends that mechanical reproduction emancipates art from its dependence on "aura," the sense of authenticity tied to an object's original time and space.[53] He argues that this emancipation makes artworks more suitable for public display, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. Benjamin suggests that as authenticity becomes less important in artistic production, the purpose of art shifts away from ritualistic preservation to alignment with politics.[54]

In Arunima's writing, there is a sudden leap where she concludes that chromolithographs have a political nature, specifically emphasizing their democratizing aspect. With the leap, the initial intention of understanding the publics of artwork becomes less clear or loses its focus. While Arunima attempted to shift her focus towards the public constructed by printed images as opposed to printed text, her analysis lacks an understanding of what distinguishes visual images in their

[52] Ibid, 171.

[53] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

[54] Ibid.

creation of publics compared to printed text. Furthermore, it is not clearly explained how visual artworks beyond printed images are to be examined regarding their construction of publics.

2.4. Literature on the Spatial Binaries

There are scholarships in the discipline of art history that analyze the relationship between publics and visual art, either in institutional space or non-institutional space. Among them, the earlier theory developed in the United States centering on the concept of democracy embedded in art outside museums and galleries. Art historian Rosalyn Deutsche is known for her contributions to the study of public art and urban space, particularly her critiques of the politics of public space. In her essay "Agoraphobia," written between 1985 and 1993 alongside other essays and initially published in 1996, Deutsche offers an elaboration on the conventional notion of the democratic public sphere theory.[55] She took the question of democracy seriously by drawing her analytical tool from radical theories of democracy. By analyzing its historical emergence, Deutsche observed that the concept of democracy is that power stems from the people but belongs to no one.[56] Nevertheless, she interrogates the nuances of how democracy functions in public spaces. In order to do that, she examines the category of public art. By public art, she refers to the government or private commissioned art in public spaces in North America.

By studying public art, especially community-based art practices, Deutsche broadens the scope of the public sphere to include a diverse range of publics, such as the homeless, who are often marginalized and disenfranchised victims of gentrification. By doing so, Deutsche highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the needs and perspectives of all members of society

[55] Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

[56] Ibid, 273.

TH-3461_186141015

within discussions of public space and urban politics. However, Deutsche's understanding of community as the public is a result of a narrow conceptualization of the public sphere and participation. There is a lack of relation between strangers in forming the public sphere in her work due to her overemphasis on spatiality.

Philosopher and museum studies scholar Hilde Hein interrogates the over-emphasis on the spatiality given to visual arts while understanding publics. She argued,

> "Strictly speaking, no art is "private". Even those abortive essays consigned to flames in frustration by their authors were, presumably made for, but withheld from, publication. But neither does art become "public" simply in virtue of its exposure and accessibility to the world. Publicity and social and political connotations that are untranslatable to public access. Conventionally, the term "public art" refers to a family of conditions including the object's origin history, location and social purpose."[57]

She argued that in the premodern era, privacy was well demarcated from shared social experiences. On the contrary, modernism, with its individual glorification reversed the order, and "social" came to be seen as a derivative aspect of the individual. Hein argued that this reversed order was also reflected in art. She posed a challenge to the modernistic view of art and privacy by stating that art is not a private entity as outlined by modernism. She argued that it became a complex process to distinguish the "public" of art in public space as contemporary debates around public art require justifications that extend beyond mere physical presence or accessibility. Instead, considerations such as the nature of public space, ownership, representation, interest, and the broader public sphere have become central to discussions about the role and significance of public art.[58] For Hein,

[57] Hilde Hein, "What is Public Art? Time, Place and Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,"* Vol. 54, No. 1, 1996, 1.

[58] Ibid, 2

being in public denotes the work is inherently political. Although Hein identifies discourse as an important factor in analyzing the public, she made a clear distinction between formal institutional space as private and informal space as public. This demarcation obstructs an analysis of the nature of publics in relation to the arts that play at the boundary between the two, which the dissertation aims to address.

In the 1990s, theories regarding art and the public predominantly focused on informal or public spaces as avenues for understanding the democratic potential of art, particularly in terms of accessibility and inclusivity. However, in the twenty-first century, art critics have shifted their focus to analyzing how the art institution itself can shed its undemocratic criteria and become more public-oriented.

Museologist Nina Simon, who is known for her advocacy for participatory museum practices, explores the aspects of public engagement within museums in the United States. In her book, *The Participatory Museum*, published in 2010, she argued that the traditional models of museums, which prioritize authoritative curatorial voice and passive visitor reception, are no longer sufficient for addressing the needs and interests of contemporary audiences.[59] Simon's argument emphasized the importance of democratizing museum and gallery spaces by inviting visitors to contribute their perspectives, stories, and creative expressions. She advocated for the development of participatory exhibits, interactive programs, and collaborative initiatives that foster dialogue, reflection, and community-building within museum settings. Simon believed that by embracing participatory approaches, museums can become more relevant, accessible, and responsive institutions that empower people to connect with cultural heritage, express their

[59] Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, California: Museum, 2.0 Press, 2010.

TH-3461_186141015

identities, and actively participate in shaping museum content and experiences. She attributed the meaning of public to the people who are audiences.

Next year, museologist Jennifer Barret explored the relationship between the public nature of museums, which represent modern institutions.[60] Her work is centered around the concept of the public sphere by Jürgen Habermas. She identified the main characteristics of the public as its process of forever attempting to be democratic. Her attempt was to redirect the attention to the public sphere produced from institutional spaces. Barret has not defined the term public; rather, she locates it in a more nuanced position to think beyond the barriers of institutions. Barret's work presented a counter-narrative to earlier theories positing the elite nature of modern art institutions. She sought to highlight the political dimensions inherent in non-institutional spaces, thereby challenging the notion of institutional spaces as being inherently apolitical.

Scholarships focused on analyzing the public sphere through spatial analysis frameworks have often emphasized the distinction between institutional and non-institutional spaces. While scholars like Rosalynd Deutsche and Hilde Hein primarily associated public aspects with non-institutional spaces, others such as Nina Simon and Jennifer Barret have expanded the concept to include institutional spaces. The concept of the public, as depicted in these scholarly works, presents a one-sided narrative, a perspective that this dissertation aims to challenge and interrogate.

In this study, I conceptualize the visual publics by analyzing the theory of the relationship between text and images by art historian W. J. T. Mitchell. In 1986, Mitchell played a significant role in examining the relationship between text and image without neglecting either in his work *Iconology: Image, Text and Ideology*. Mitchell's work emphasized the interconnectedness and mutual influence of text and image, challenging traditional notions of their separation and

[60] Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

hierarchy. While he argued that there is no inherent difference between the two realms, he posits that the distinction varies across societies. Considering poetry and painting as manifestations of text and images, Mitchell contends that the difference between them arises from a history of practical variances in the utilization of distinct symbolic marks rather than from a metaphysical divide.[61] In contrast, visual literacy, or the ability to "read" and interpret images, has not been granted the same emphasis in traditional educational settings. This has, in many ways, positioned text as a dominant form of communication. Images were considered an activity that needed skill, even in the print media. Mitchell observed that eyes are the primary tools for both reading text and interpreting images, but the cultural and educational systems have historically been skewed towards textual literacy, creating a hierarchy.

Extending Mitchell's observation, I argue that this historical preference for text over image have created an artificial divide among the publics, without recognizing its interconnected nature. Images existed as silent bearers of gaze from the viewers shaped by their lived experiences and formed a discourse that is passive. At the same time, they operated within the framework of pre-existing textual and verbal discourses in society. In his work, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," Mitchell explored the complex relationship between visual images and audience. Mitchell argued that images are not passive representations but active agents that participate in the construction of meaning. The discourse communicated in passive form is not entirely passive but an active process of interpretation influenced by various cultural, social, and historical discourses.[62] Therefore, the visual publics produced through such discourse is not independent from the textual discourse.

[61] W. J. T. Michell, *Iconology: Image, Text and Ideology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 69.

[62] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 2002.

TH-3461_186141015

3. Methodology

Situated in a relatively new discipline in India- art history, the study had to adopt methodologies from the discipline of anthropology. The methodology employed to investigate the relationship between visual arts and publics is complex due to the act of juxtaposing the two entities. Bringing together a method connecting art history and anthropology, art historian Kajri Jain posited that the responsive mode called for by an aesthetic understanding of politics is well served by art history's method of working from descriptions of objects or spaces and anthropology's close ethnographic observation of practices.[63] She stated, "Images as objects with value, power, and efficacy are at the heart of art history; anthropology also knows such beings well." I used the archival method from the discipline of art history and ethnography from anthropology for the study. I consider these methods a mixed-method approach as none acted independently. I had to employ ethnography when I was doing the archival research and vice versa, which allowed the research findings, both expected and unexpected, to guide the direction of my study.

The primary reason for the concern regarding visual arts and their relationship with publics stems from a growing discussion within visual art in Kerala, centering on a perceived polarization between art practice and art theory. Art practitioners, including artists and curators, argue that art theory is often viewed as an elitist academic pursuit, disconnected from the general public, and inaccessible to those outside academic or intellectual circles. Conversely, art critics and art historians contend that the practice of art itself has become elitist due to the influence of the global art market, which prioritizes commercial interests and institutional frameworks over artistic

[63] Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, 9.

integrity, creating barriers to entry for the public.[64] Both perspectives are grounded in a shared notion that visual art should promote art as an emancipatory process and a potent political realm that aims to make art more inclusive and accessible, and therefore, democratic for the public.[65] These discussions have led me to contemplate an investigation into the nature of the public and the associated notion of accessibility, inclusivity, and democracy as engendered by visual arts. This inquiry encompassed the tangible manifestations of art practices and virtual discourses.

As I mentioned above, I collected my primary archives through ethnography and archival research. I started my field research in 2020, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in India when mobility restrictions were implemented. For one and a half years, accessing the field posed difficulties due to intermittent lockdowns implemented by both central and state governments. Consequently, I initiated my research through online interviews with artists, curators, and art historians to analyze the nature of art institutions in the state. I started my interview with Dr. Kavitha Balakrishnan, an artist and art historian at the College of Fine Arts, Thrissur. She has directed me to the people and archives needed for my study. Following that, I conducted interviews with the artists Anupama Alias and P. S. Jalaja, who were students at Radha Lakshmi Vilasam College of Fine Arts. Then, I interviewed Anto K.G, who was a former student at Fine Arts College, Thrissur, and art historian Manoj Kannan, who is the principal of the college.

---

[64] Menon, *Kerala Kalacharitham*; Sandip K. Luis, "Disappearing Strands of Historicity: Critical Notes on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 49, no. 20, May, 17, 2014; T. V. Chandran, Ratheesh Mullamkod and Ashkar O. C, "Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Vyaja Prakeersthanangale Kurichu Chila Chindakal" (Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Some Thoughts on the False-Praising), *Azhimukham,* May 17, 2015, Accessed on October 23, 2022, https://azhimukham.com/offbeat/kochi-muziris-biennale-art-criticism-chandran-tv/cid2761134.htm;

[65] Vijayan, *Naveena Chithrakala*; E. M. S Namboodirippad, *Marxisavum Sahithyasamvadavum* (Marxism and Literary Dialogues), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1995; Sunil P. Elayidom, *Neethiyude Parppidangal,* (Abodes of Justice), Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2020; Menon, *Bharatheeya Kalacharithram.*.

They have provided me with exhibition brochures, photographs of their works, catalogues, and manifestos. I utilized the lockdown time to access the digital archives, *Internet Archives,* where many Malayalam periodicals are digitalized for public access. Another archive was the digitalized *proceedings of the state Legislative Assembly*. It has information regarding the courses taught in the fine arts colleges and the protest that took place at the College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum.

3.1. Ethnography

I conducted ethnographic research in two locations: Alappuzha and Kochi, both modern port cities in Kerala that have invited interest from the art world as potential hosts for exhibitions. These places have been instrumental in shaping a new language of visual art, weaving together the history of oceanic trade, postcolonial city culture, and art practices. While Kochi has been actively developing such a narrative since the inception of Kochi- Muziris Biennale (KMB) in 2012, Alappuzha was in the nascent stage, which coincided with my fieldwork.[66] My analysis was twofold: unstructured interviews and participatory observation.

In Alappuzha, I conducted ethnographic research at an art exhibition named *Lokame Tharavadu* (World is One Family) from August to December 2021, once the government started to lift the lockdown restriction.[67] During my three-month stay, I connected myself with the local art scene, dedicating each day to visiting six different exhibition venues. I seized the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with numerous stakeholders, including artists, art historians, and

[66] Chapter 5 elaborates more on KMB

[67] *Lokame Tharavadu* was an exhibition that was organized by the Kochi Biennale Foundation and the Government of Kerala. It was curated by the president of the Kochi Biennale Foundation, Bose Krishnamachari. It featured the works of 267 Malayali artists from 15 countries and exhibited over 3000 artworks. Chapter 4 has detailed this exhibition.

TH-3461_186141015

curators. As the exhibition featured the works of 267 Malayali artists, I regarded it as a veritable pool from which to gather my primary archives. I employed participant observation to engage with visitors, study the spatial distribution of galleries, participate in workshops and talks held at exhibition sites, and analyze the involvement of various communities, including Kudumbashree workers and working-class individuals, in the exhibition. By examining their participation and the organizers' efforts to ensure inclusivity and accessibility, I gathered data to inform the writing of Chapter 4.

My second location was Kochi. During my fieldwork in Kochi from August 2, 2022, to December 13, 2022, I stayed in Kochi and observed the everyday art activities there. The cafeterias, restaurants, and art galleries often refreshed their walls with new murals and the visitors to the city often captured photographs of these images. Many artworks, whether signed or anonymous, lacked conventional gallery facilities. These artworks were exposed to natural elements like rain, dust, and sunlight. Despite this exposure, more and more artworks continue to adorn the city, contributing to Kochi's ever-evolving artistic panorama. The ephemeral nature of these artworks prompted me to reflect on their historicity, their connection to the place, their position in the KMB, and the narratives that take place in the city through the visual discourse that, in turn, constructed the city itself. The cultural environment transformed the city streets into an open gallery through open exhibitions, art projects, and wall murals.[68]

From both the ethnographic locations, I collected interviews with the artists, the residents of the cities, and the gallery owners. Generally, the interview followed an unstructured pattern sometimes, even directing me with my overall analysis of the research. As all of the people whom

[68] Chapter 5 provides details on the art scene in Kochi. See. Neelima Jeyachandran, Memory, *Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India).*

TH-3461_186141015

i interviewed were the main stakeholders in my field, most of the discussions centered around the aspects of art theory and practice. Although major interviews started from the ethnographic locations, I have continuously contacted them throughout the research by meeting the artists and curators and sometimes over the phone and emails. I have recorded their responses by recording them and sometimes by taking notes. My interviews were mainly in Malayalam and I transcribed them in both Malayalam and English.

From these locations, I collected the interviews of curators Bose Krishnamachari and Riyas Komu, as well as the artists C. F. John and P. S. Jalaja, that contributed to the case studies for Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. I collected the interviews of four artists, K. Raghunathan, Alex Mathew, and K. M. Madhusudhanan, who were part of the group the "Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors' Association" in the 1980s.

My second method was participant observation, which mainly focused on an artwork, "Segregated Discarded," by artist C. F. John. The work encompassed oil paintings, a video installation, and an installation. I found this work important in thinking about the relationship between art at the boundary between institutional and non-institutional space. Therefore, I considered C. F. John's video installation work, "Let Me Come to Your Wound: Heal Myself," which was a reproduction of another exhibition at a rural village, Kelakam. This serves as my primary archives to constitute Chapter 4, where I elaborate on the movement of art objects in and out of art institutions.

3.2. Archival Research

My ethnographic study revealed a limitation in understanding the concept of the public if I restrict my focus solely to artworks' spatial contexts. This is because, owing to Kerala's high

literacy rates since the early 20th century, print media has played a significant role in disseminating images through illustrations and photographs, alongside literary texts. An understanding of art's public would not be possible without exploring the public sphere produced by the print media. It diverted my attention to collect printed images from a few archives and personal collections.

One of the important archives was the Appan Thampuran Library in Thrissur, where I had been able to access Malayalam periodicals since 1950. The collection was centered around periodicals; *Mathrubhumi Weekly, Kala Kaumudi, Mangalam Weekly, Manorama Weekly, Manorajyam Weekly, Granthalokam* and *Samskara Keralam.* The collection was of two types: images of illustrations and photographs representing the female body in the periodicals, which was my main analysis in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Second was the discussion that took place in the periodicals around the sculpture "Yakshi" by Kanayi Kunhiraman, which was one of my discussions in Chapter 3.

Although the periodicals in the library served as the primary archive, many of the images were torn and even crumbling when I turned the pages, due to their poor state of preservation. This led me to turn to personal collections. Kavitha Balakrishnan's personal collection of printed images provided major data. She has collected information on periodicals and images from various archives for her study on illustrations, which she shared with me. Another personal collection included the library of Padmanabhan Manathana, Kannur. His library consisted of various periodicals, including *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. I could go there and refer to the periodicals frequently.

Apart from the periodicals, another archival collection was the exhibition manifestos, catalogues, and brochures. I collected exhibition brochures of *Mattancherry* from the personal collection of Riyas Komu. The brochure of *Lokame Tharavadu* was collected from the exhibition

TH-3461_186141015

site. The exhibition catalogue *Questions and Dialogue* was collected from the digital repository of Asia Art Archive. The manifesto *Prathiloma Drishyabodhathinethire Kalakaranmar Sankhadikkunnu* (Artists Organize Against the Conservative Visual Consciousness) is from Anto K. G's personal collection. Apart from that, Kavitha Balakrishnan provided several curricula used in art institutions in Kerala.

Additionally, I used several digital archives. One of the main digital archives was the magazine *Grihalakshmi*, from which I used cover images of a semi-nude representation of a woman for Chapter 3. I collected the public debates surrounding the cover image from social media accounts including *Facebook* and *X*. The digital archives, such as *Internet archives*, served as another major repository. I used digitalized institutional archives, including proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly and important legal verdicts of the Supreme Court and High Court, which are my main archives for Chapter 3.

TH-3461_186141015

Chapter 2

Print and Publics: Images in Malayalam Periodicals, 1950 to 1990

1. Introduction

While examining the representation of the female body in illustrations in Malayalam periodicals from the repository, Appan Thampuran Library in Thrissur, I came across cover pages from the two different issues of the literary magazine *Mathrubhumi Weekly*.[1] These cover pages featured photographs of women that had been altered using a pen after their publication. One showed a moustache drawn over the face of Indira Gandhi, India's first woman Prime Minister (Figure 2.1).[2] The second image, titled "Amidst the labour," displayed exaggerated armpit lines on a woman representing the working class (Figure 2.2). The altered images suggest that something is lacking in the depiction of women on the cover page, potentially hindering the fulfilment of visual pleasure. In the first instance, it suggests a woman prime minister lacks a moustache, prompting the need to draw one to enhance the image's satisfaction. The second case points to the lack of a precise contour to highlight the working-class woman's bosom. My objective is not to contextually analyze the two cover images but to pose them as questions regarding the role of print media, images, and the nature of the public sphere in a broader context of representing the female body.

[1] The term "periodical" encompasses any printed materials published at regular intervals, which includes magazines among other publications. I provide a detailed explanation of this concept in Section 1 of this chapter. The Appan Thampuran Library, situated in Ayyanthol, Thrissur, is the primary archive of Malayalam periodicals in Kerala. Founded in 1976 under the Kerala Sahitya Akademi, it commemorates the esteemed writer Ramavarma Appan Thampuran. More details about *Mathrubhumi Weekly* are provided in the following sections.

[2] The Weekly released a special edition titled the "Mathrubhumi Republic Issue" to commemorate Republic Day on January 26, 1968.

TH-3461_186141015

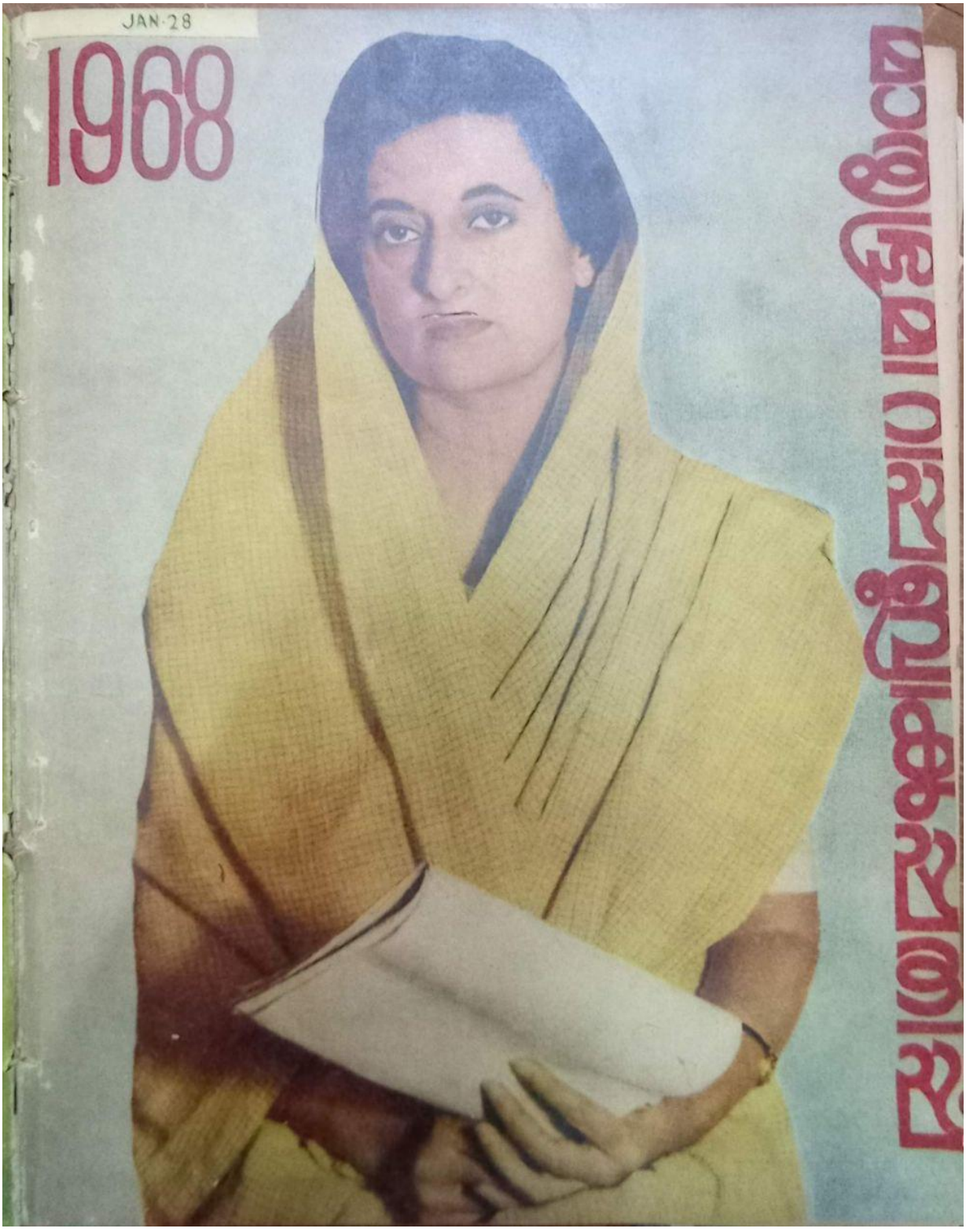


Figure 2.1. A cover page of *Mathrubhumi Weekly* shows a mustache drawn with a pen on the face of Indira Gandhi's photograph. *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* January 28, 1968, Source: Appan Thampuran Library, Thrissur

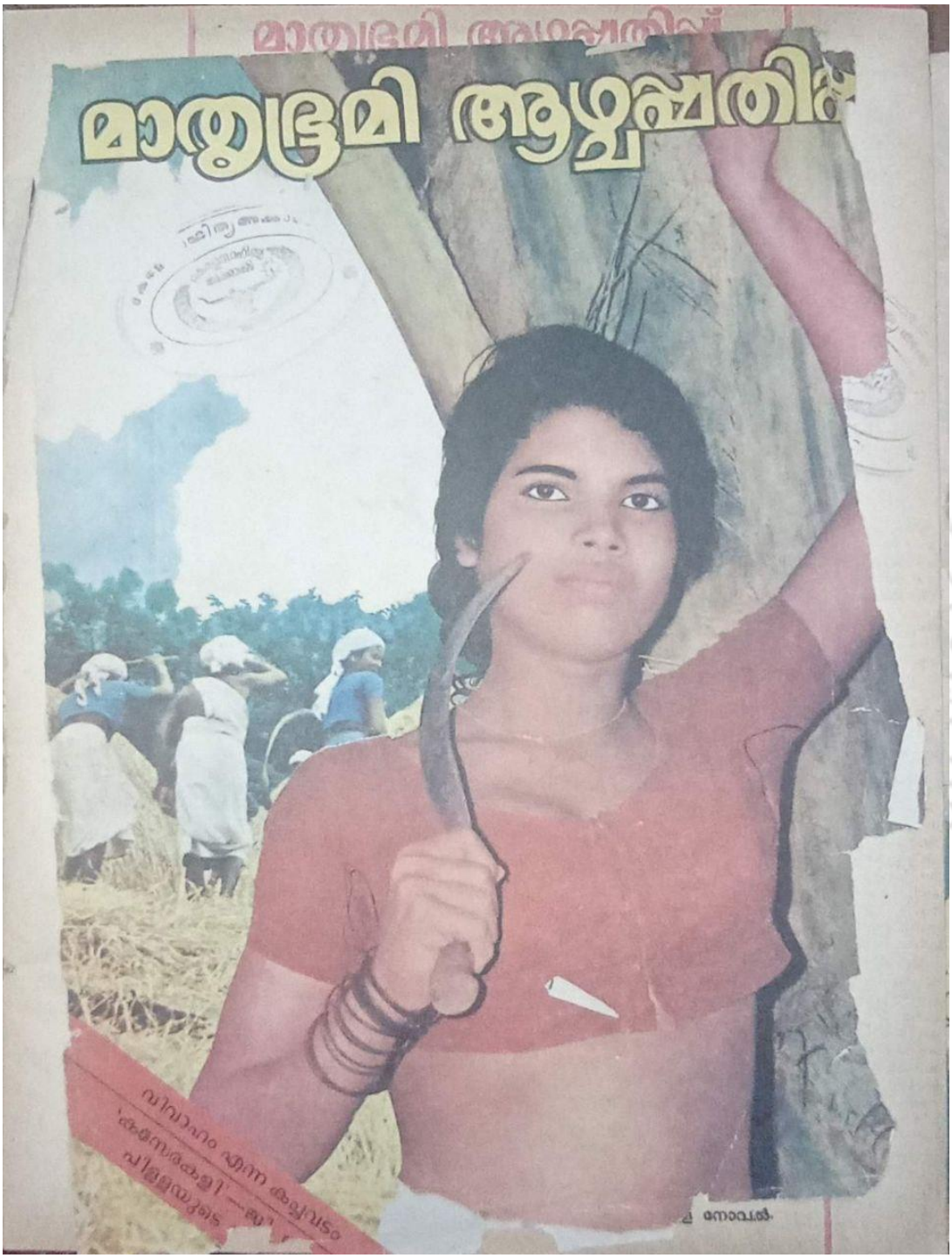


Figure 2.2. Cover page of *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. It is visible that some modifications have been made to the image, particularly with pen markings on the armpit side. Source: *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 54, Issue. 21, August 8, 1976.

TH-3461_186141015

The alterations in the photographs suggest a closer engagement of the visual image with the viewer within a private sphere facilitated by print media. This proximity is perceived to be more accessible compared to the exclusivity often associated with modern art institutions. By studying illustrations, art historian Ajayakumar distinguished between the spatial distribution of printed images and the institutional space of modern art. He argued that illustrations, along with literary texts, became ubiquitous in everyday private spaces such as domestic spaces, offices, and buses.[3] According to him, unlike traditional art forms exhibited in galleries, a periodical held in one's hand or placed on a private table within the domestic sphere doesn't create the same distance from the viewer as a canvas image or a framed image in exhibitions.[4] He suggests that the proximity to the viewer in the everyday private sphere blurs the boundary between art and daily life and makes them more democratic. Art historians Vijayakumar Menon and Sudheesh Kottembram have similarly emphasized the democratic nature of illustrations by framing them within the context of public accessibility to modern art, contrasting them with the more exclusive institutional spaces.[5]

This chapter aims to interrogate the extent to which the notion of democracy can operate in relation to the accessibility of printed images, particularly those depicting the female body, which are widely circulated in the public sphere and facilitated a male gaze in the latter half of the twentieth century Kerala. By the "male gaze," I refer to the theory of film critic Laura Mulvey.

---

[3] Ajayakumar, *Anukalika Kalachinthakal* (*Thoughts on Contemporary Art*), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2011, 39.

[4] Ibid, 40.

[5] Menon, *Kerala Kalacharithram*; Sudheesh Kottembram, *Thadankal Dinathile Kalachinthakal* (Quarantine Notes), Kottayam: Current Books, 2021.

Mulvey theorized the "male gaze," in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which was published by *Screen* in 1975.[6] Her essay discusses cinematic techniques that shape the viewer's experience, particularly in relation to women's representation, and explores how patriarchal ideology is reinforced through visual and narrative strategies in mainstream cinema. She observed,

> "The presence of a woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, freezing the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation."[7]

In Mulvey's analysis, women were represented in films as castrated subjects who lacked a penis. Consequently, these representations led to women becoming subjects of voyeurism and fetishism, which Mulvey identifies as two key elements at work in films. Voyeurism, according to Mulvey, is associated with sadism, wherein the viewer seeks control and domination over the object of desire (in this case, the castrated woman) through acts of punishment or forgiveness. Fetishism, on the other hand, involves an obsession with the object's physical attributes, transforming it into something satisfying in and of itself. In the context of films, this often manifests as an intense focus on the physical beauty of female characters.[8]

Many facets of Mulvey's analysis resonate with printed images. However, unlike films, the print media enables the publics to feel privacy by holding the printed images close to their eyes, as emphasized by Ajayakumar. They become part of the private sphere where they can decide how to hold the periodical to align their gaze with the illustrations and even what they could physically

[6] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, New York: Palgrave, 1989

[7] Ibid, 19.

[8] Ibid, 21-22.

TH-3461_186141015

do with the images, as in the case of the two cover images mentioned above. Art historian Kavitha Balakrishnan conducted a significant study regarding printed images in Malayalam periodicals. She observed that although the images created a space of accessibility for visual arts among the reading public, they enabled a voyeuristic gaze toward the representation of women.[9] Balakrishnan's study revolves around the potential of printed images to foster the contemporary Malayali male gaze. However, her study does not analyze how these male gazes were produced in the larger context of visual art and its institutions in India. By expanding Balakrishnan's study, the chapter situates printed images as a medium to explore the relationship between institutions of modern art and publics, which were perceived as opposing entities in scholarships. The chapter argues that modern art institutions found the democratization of print media to be conducive to shaping the male gaze in Kerala.

For this study, I focus on the printed images in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* from 1950 to 1990. The Weekly represented women in various forms, including nonrealistic depictions in illustrations with exaggerated bodily features, photographs of sensuous women used for advertising, and photographs documenting women's real lives on the cover pages. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on the illustrations. *Mathrubhumi Weekly* is significant, as it offers a microcosmic view of the broader illustrative trends in Kerala. Through these illustrations, the chapter aims to have a comparative analysis of illustrations with a group of popular magazines called *Painkili* magazine.[10] It is to explore the different public spheres formulated by the two categories of periodicals and

[9] Balakrishnan's concept of voyeurism does not align with Mulvey's. It is instead an act of looking at images with fascination without aware of a preexisted historical knowledge of its production and circulation. I use the word, "voyeurism" to translate the similar concept here after. See. Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram.*

[10] *Painkili* magazines were popular because of their literary genre, *Painkili Sahithyam* (Young adult fiction).

TH-3461_186141015

their representation of women. Furthermore, the chapter considers photographs in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* to locate the illustrations in a broader context of printed images.

The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section, "Illustrations in Periodicals: Concepts," is a conceptual analysis of the significance of periodicals and illustrations in Kerala in the twentieth century. It outlines how illustrations became artworks that functioned at the boundary between high art and literary text.

The second section, "Illustrations: 1950 to 1970," outlines the history of illustration in periodicals and their institutionalization in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* from 1950 to 1970. It analyses the emergence of artists as illustrators, their drawing style inspired by the Madras School of Arts and Craft, and the acceptance of illustration in the public sphere. The section also provides a context of how the female body is represented in illustrations of this period.

The third section, "Female Body in Illustrations and *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* 1970 to 1980," provides an examination of illustrations done by two artists, A. Sivaraman Nair (1930-1988), and K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri (1925-2023). It locates the illustrative trends in the broader context of print media by analyzing photographs printed in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. By critiquing the Habermasian public sphere, the section aims to understand the nature of the public sphere in Kerala when private interests intervene in the publishing houses.

The fourth section, "Literary and Popular Magazines: Formation of Two Public Spheres," provides a comparative analysis of the two categories of magazines that are the literary and popular magazines, in the 1980s. Its objective is to understand the influence of modernism in illustration in these two categories of magazines to produce a distinction between high art and low art in the print media based on the representation of women.

TH-3461_186141015

2. Illustrations in Periodicals: Concepts

Throughout the twentieth century, Kerala was India's most literate region.[11] Therefore, the dominant scholarship on the emergence of the public sphere is mainly focused on print media.[12] However, within this literature, an analysis of print and the public sphere is always focused on the newspaper. Such theorizing has often neglected the working of periodicals, the private interest, and the publics they address.

2.1. Periodicals

The term "periodical" typically refers to any publication issued regularly at scheduled intervals, such as weekly, monthly, or quarterly. This broad definition means everything from daily newspapers to monthly magazines can be classified as periodicals. However, in today's common usage, when people discuss "periodical publications" or just "periodicals," they typically refer to magazines.[13] Scholar N. P. Chandrashekharan provides a framework for distinguishing periodicals from other forms of print media. Firstly, he noted their similarity to newspapers' format and presentation, often featuring columns, headlines, and articles arranged similarly. Secondly, periodicals tend to exhibit a preference for short-form content. Thirdly, they are characterized by their periodicity of publication, whether weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly. Finally, they feature a diverse range of content, from articles to fiction, catering to varied readers' interests.[14]

---

[11] Since the beginning of systematic censuses in the 1870s, Kerala has consistently been documented as the most literate region in India. By the end of the twentieth century, literacy rates in Kerala surpassed 90 percent among individuals over the age of seven, exceeding those of any comparable administrative unit within India. See. Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics," 467.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Chandrashekharan, *Mathrubhumiyude Samskarika Parinamavum Mathrubhumi Azhchappathippum*

[14] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

Regarding the content, media critic N. Sam differentiates periodicals from daily newspapers by emphasizing that newspapers serve as immediate informers of daily happenings, and periodicals go beyond mere reporting.[15] The immediacy of daily events does not bind them but facilitates discussions on diverse subjects, presenting topics that might otherwise only be accessible through more extensive and dense books. Periodicals can be categorized based on their focus, such as religious, community-based, scientific, educational, political, and literary themes. Each category serves a distinct public and addresses specific areas of interest. However, it is crucial to recognize that these categories are not rigid; they often overlap and evolve over time. Furthermore, Chandrashekharan emphasizes the importance of visual images as a prominent feature of periodicals.

2.2. Illustration

Among the printed images, illustrations gained popularity in periodicals. The fundamental definition of illustration is "an example or instance that helps make something clear."[16] In Malayalam, the term *Regha Chithranam* denotes the illustration concept, specifically signifying line drawing. The field of illustrations in periodicals remains a relatively unexplored realm in the discipline of art history. There are two main reasons for this negligence. First, based on the definition of illustrations, there is a widespread notion that illustrations primarily serve as decorative elements for literary texts in periodicals.[17] This perception is not exclusive to the

[15] N. Sam., *Malayala Pathrapravarthanam: Pathonpatham Noottandil* (Malayalam Journalism in Nineteenth Century), Kottayam: DC Books, 2003, 77.

[16] Leigh G. Dillard, Patricia Okker, and Nancy M. West "Teaching Illustrations and Periodicals: Three Scholars Share Their Ideas and Materials," *Victorian Periodicals Review,* Vol. 39, No. 4, 2006, 368.

[17] Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram*; Kottembram, *Thadankal Dinathile Kalachinthakal.*

context of Kerala. While studying Victorian periodicals, cultural critic Nancy M. West observed that, historically, the illustrated novel suffered from a deadly combination of logophilia (love for words or language) and iconophobia (an aversion to images).[18] She noted that readers have tended to treat the illustrations that accompany a novel as secondary to the text, generally regarding them as a means of revising certain scenes or textual moments.[19]

The second reason for the negligence of illustrations is the dominance of high art within the disciplines of art history. It is not specific to illustrations; instead, with the rise of modernism, any printed images were considered of lower status. Raja Ravi Varma's chromolithographs also encountered such denunciation. The reason was that when a painting as art was rendered as a lithograph, there was an ambiguity regarding its status as art.[20] Historian G. Arunima suggested that this ambiguity was due to the binary between high and low art.[21] For similar reasons, illustrations were also considered of lower status in the traditional discipline of art history. Addressing this neglect of illustration, Kavitha Balakrishnan remarked that one cannot find illustrations in art history or any literary histories as significant instances despite their prominent role in many people's habits of looking at, reading, and discussing art and literature during the 20th century.[22]

For these two reasons, illustrations remained subordinate and at the boundary between literary texts and the high art world. Although the demand for images and artists increased in the latter half of the twentieth century, the inclusion and survival of illustration in magazines was not

[18] Dillard, Okker, and west "Teaching Illustrations and Periodicals," 367.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Arunima., "Ravi Varma's Many Publics," 166.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram.*

a linear development. The cultural history of illustrations in Malayalam periodicals reveals enduring dichotomies between words and images. Whether word or image should take precedence, whether artists should design images to complement the text, or if words cater to the literate while images appeal to the illiterate have long been prevalent in the art historical discourses.[23] Among these discussions, the representation of the female body is often overlooked. The evolution of female representation in illustrations can be categorized into three distinct phases: initially characterized by minimal depictions from 1950 to 1970, followed by a surge in their portrayal from 1970 to 1980, and the establishment of the sensuous female body as an inevitable element of illustrations from 1980 to 1990. The socio-political landscape of Kerala significantly influenced the transformation.

3. Illustrations: 1950 to 1970

Robin Jeffrey categorized this period as a scarce medium when print reached and influenced people and altered and troubled political authorities.[24] Jeffrey drew his argument from the functioning of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere in the time of the circulation of newspapers as a "small handicraft business."[25] Since the 1880s, the increase in education in Travancore and Cochin led to a high demand for printed textbooks, with private publishers playing a significant role in meeting this demand.[26] This led to the inclusion of educational and literary content in the periodicals, ultimately integrating images.

---

[23] Ibid.

[24] Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics," 473.

[25] Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*

[26] The Travancore school system required 77,000 textbooks annually, with one call for tenders seeking bids for 10,000 copies of Book 1 and 2 readers in Malayalam. Additionally, in 1889, the government abolished its book depot due to

Images juxtaposed with the texts in periodicals are rooted in the activities of missionaries in Kerala. In 1847, *Pashchimodayam* (Rise of the West), the second periodical published in Kerala, included a map diagram in its third edition. The printing was done at a lithograph press in Thalasseri in the Malabar region.[27] In *Sathyanathakahalam* (The Trumpet of the Voice of Truth), published in 1976, an illustration was used on the cover page of each issue.[28] In the twentieth century, periodicals such as *Vidhyabhivarthini* (One Who Advances Knowledge) and *Bhashaposhini* (One Who Promotes Language) included smaller images, particularly of natural scenery, on their pages.[29] By 1920, many magazines began to include illustrations for cover design and advertisement purposes to widen circulation. Since the 1930s, there have been notices calling for illustrators and photographers to send their artworks to magazines.[30]

---

the presence of private bookshops in Travancore. See. Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics," 472.

[27] The first Malayalam periodical was *Rajyasamacharam,* founded by the Basal missionary activist Herman Gundert. It was printed in 1847 from the lithopress Thalasseri Mission Press in Thalassery, which was established in 1845. The second periodical, *Pashchimodayam,* was also printed by the same press. *Pashchimodayam* was in circulation from October 1847 to August 1851. It typically consisted of eight pages and was priced at two paise per issue. See. Puthuppalli Raghavan, *Kerala Pathrapravarthana Charithram* (History of Journalism in Kerala), Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1985; M. Jayaraj, *Malayala Achadimadhyamam: Bhoothavum Varthamanavum* (Malayalam Print Media: Past and Present), Kozhikode, Mathrubhumi Press, 2013.

[28] *Sathyanathakahalam* was jointly printed by a group of Catholic priests and laymen from Koomankavu, a location in today's Ernakulam district. See. Sam, *Malayala Pathrapravarthanam.*

[29] *Vidhyabhivarthini* was published by Vidhyabhivardhini Press, which was established by S. T. Reddiyar in Quilon (present-Kollam) in 1886. *Bhashaposhini* began its publication in 1898 under the editorship of Kandathil Varghese Mappila. It was the first Malayalam magazine to emphasize prose over poetry. See. *Vidhyabhivardhini,* S. T Reddyar, and Sons, Quilon: V. V. Press, Vol. 2, No. 8, 1921, *Internet Archive;* Raghavan, *Kerala Pathrapravarthana Charithram,* 95; Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram,* 24.

[30] In 1937, *Kerala Kaumudi* included a notice that asked its readers to send entertaining illustrations and photographs for which they would be rewarded. The next year, the magazine *Mathrubhumi Weekly* also published a notice asking people to send photographs of the landscape and images that show the everyday culture of Kerala. See. *Kerala*

3.1. *Mathrubhumi Weekly*

One of the early magazines experimenting with illustrations for literary texts was Mathrubhumi Weekly, published by Mathrubhumi Printing and Publishing Company. Prior to the magazine, the company began publishing the newspaper *Mathrubhumi*, which started as a platform to report on the ongoing Indian national movement.[31] K. P. Kesava Menon, the then secretary of the Kerala State Congress Committee (KPCC), decided to start a press and newspaper with his colleagues. As a result, the press company was registered on February 15, 1922, with its managing director as K. Madhavan Nair.[32] Occupying a place in Calicut in the colonial Malabar district, the company launched the *Mathrubhumi* newspaper on March 17, 1923.[33] Nine years later, the company introduced *Mathrubhumi Weekly* on January 18, 1932.[34] The editor's note in the inaugural issue of the weekly shared the weekly's objective with its readers,

Kaumudi, editor, C. V. Kunhuraman, Thiruvananthapuram, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1937; Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manusyante Kalacharithram*, 13.

[31] *Mathrubhumi* was founded after Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, as a public limited company. Its shareholders included 350 Malayalis including men and women. Media scholar N. Sam observed that until the emergence of Mathrubhumi, there was not a strong opinion about national movement circulated in Malayalam print media. See. Robin Jeffrey, "The Day-to-Day Social Life of the People," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. ½, January 1997, 18; Sam, *Malayala Pathrapravarthanam."*

[32] K. Madhavan Nair was one the members of the shareholders. See. Raghavan, *Kerala Pathrapravarthana Charithram*, 182.

[33] Ibid.

[34] The first edition was numbered in continuation with the newspaper. Hence its number was 9. See. Chandrashekharan, *Mathrubhumiyude Samskarika Paninamavum Mathrubhumi Azhchappathippum*, 134.

TH-3461_186141015

> "A newspaper cannot fully satisfy a reader's enthusiasm. Its primary objective is limited to circulating news. To bridge this gap in newspapers, there are periodicals already launched by publishing houses in other languages"[35]

The weekly grew within just a few months of its launch, providing a glimpse into the editor's decision. By its 9th issue in March of the same year, the weekly divided its content into literary and non-literary texts. Out of twenty pieces of the content, three were literary texts. Six were photographs depicting various sceneries and people. Eleven pieces were non-literary content.[36] In its nascent stage, the weekly experimented with visual appeal.

The main representational themes were scenery, women, children, and laborers, which was the usual theme in any other periodicals at that time.[37] More than making the realistic image as an art object, illustrations invited the curious gaze of imagination. On November 13, 1933, the weekly published a short story titled "Andarjanathinte Krithanjatha" (Gratitude of an Antharjanam) by writer P. G. Ramaiah, accompanied by illustrations of an artist M. Bhaskaran.[38] At that time, publishing houses did not generally employ artists as permanent staff members.[39] However, despite this fact, Bhaskaran, an alumnus of Madras School of Arts and Craft, maintained a close association with the editorial board of Mathrubhumi.[40] By the late 1930s, the weekly gained

---

[35] M. Jayaraj, "Azchappathippinte Charithrapadhangal" (Historical Trajectory of the Weekly), *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 99, No. 45, January 23, 2022, 26, Translation mine.

[36] Chandrashekharan, *Mathrubhumiyude Samskarika Paninamavum Mathrubhumi Azhchappathippum*, 135.

[37] Balakrishnan, *Kalayude Navalokam*, 39.

[38] *Antharjanam* refers to a woman from the Namboodiri Brahmin caste in Kerala, See. Jayaraj., "Azchappathippinte Charithrapadhangal."

[39] Jayaraj, "Mathrubhumiyum Namboothiriyum," 54.

[40] This relationship marked one of the earliest business partnerships between an artist and an editor within Malayalam periodicals. Before coming to *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Bhaskaran was doing independent cartoons for the periodical

significant attention due to the unique illustrations by Bhaskaran. Occasionally, his illustrations, themed around village life, adorned the cover page of the weekly.[41] On December 22, 1943, Bhaskaran passed away. In his absence, an artist from the Madras School, M. V. Devan (1928-2014) Mathrubhumi Printing, and Publishing Company began contributing illustrations to fill the void.[42] The weekly began to include illustrations for Malayalam literary texts from the following year onwards. However, starting in the 1950s, it began allocating more space to literary texts highlighting language and regional culture.[43]

3.2. Press, Malayali Artists, and the Madras School of Arts and Crafts

Illustrations as an important part of literary texts emerged in the 1950s when M. V. Devan became the staff artist of *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. In 1952, the journalist and Malayalam poet N. V. Krishna Warrier assumed the role of the weekly's chief editor.[44] The same year, Devan joined the Weekly as a staff artist.[45] Devan had trained under artists D. P. Roychowdhury and K. C. S. Panikker at the Madras School.[46] While in Madras, he developed a close association with the

Sanjayan, run by writer M. R. Nair. In the 1930s to 1960s, Madras School of Arts and Crafts became a significant art school for the Malayalis to do their formal education. See. Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram.*

[41] Jayaraj, "Azchappathippinte Charithrapadhangal," 34.

[42] Jayaraj, "Mathrubhumiyum Namboothiriyum," 55.

[43] Chandrashekharan, "Mathrubhumiyude Samskarika Paninamavum Mathrubhumi Azhchappathippum."

[44] "Kerala Artist M. V. Devan Dies at 86", *Indiatimes,* April 30, 2014.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Upon Devan's admission to the Madras school, he presented some drawings to Panikker that he had copied from other artists. Panikker viewed copying as a substandard practice in art. Generally, in the academic art world in India, copying was discouraged during that time. The prevailing focus was on "freehand drawing" instead of imitation. Under Panikker's rigorous training, Devan transitioned away from imitating. Apart from that, the school's syllabus, including "creative art," was diverging from the Ravi Varma style. This made Devan experiment with his own style. See. Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram*, 146.

renowned Malayali writer M. Govindan. Devan soon established himself as a significant icon in the Malayali literary public sphere, seamlessly bridging the realms of literature and visual art.[47] *Mathrubhumi Weekly* employed Devan with a monthly salary of 140 rupees.[48] In this role, Devan supervised the layout of the magazine's pages and designed spaces specifically for illustrations. He was also entrusted with creating a fitting font for the titles of literary texts.[49] Later, it marked a significant shift in the relationship between artists and the print media.

The establishment of the staff artist position at *Mathrubhumi Weekly* served as a gateway for introducing modern art to the Malayali literate public. On June 3, 1952, the magazine featured a short story titled "Anavariyum Ponkurishum" (The title is two names of the protagonists) by the acclaimed Malayali writer Vaikom Mohammad Basheer. Spanning two issues, these segments were complemented by Devan's illustrations (Figure 2.3).[50] The illustration depicted a male and a female elephant, serving as the main protagonists through which the story unfolds,

> "With the blessing of God, let me state: There are two elephants from Chanthankeri Mana. One is Kochuneelandan, and the other is Parukkutti, both of whom are beloved by the locals. Kochuneelandan is very naughty and also quite tall. It has long tusks that are as sharp as needles."[51]

Devan's illustrations translated the textual narrative into visual form, vividly portraying the two male protagonists, Anavari Raman Nair and Ponkurishu Thoma. Through the illustration, the essence and the context of the story were captured, particularly Raman Nair's affection for

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid, 147.

[49] Ibid, 161.

[50] Jayaraj, "Azchappathippinte Charithrapadhangal," 38.

[51] Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer, *Anavariyum Ponkurishum*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2008.

TH-3461_186141015

Kochuneelandan and his disdain for Parukkutti, which were depicted with striking clarity. Nair offered bananas and jaggery to Kochuneelandan while throwing mudballs at Parukkutti's stomach.

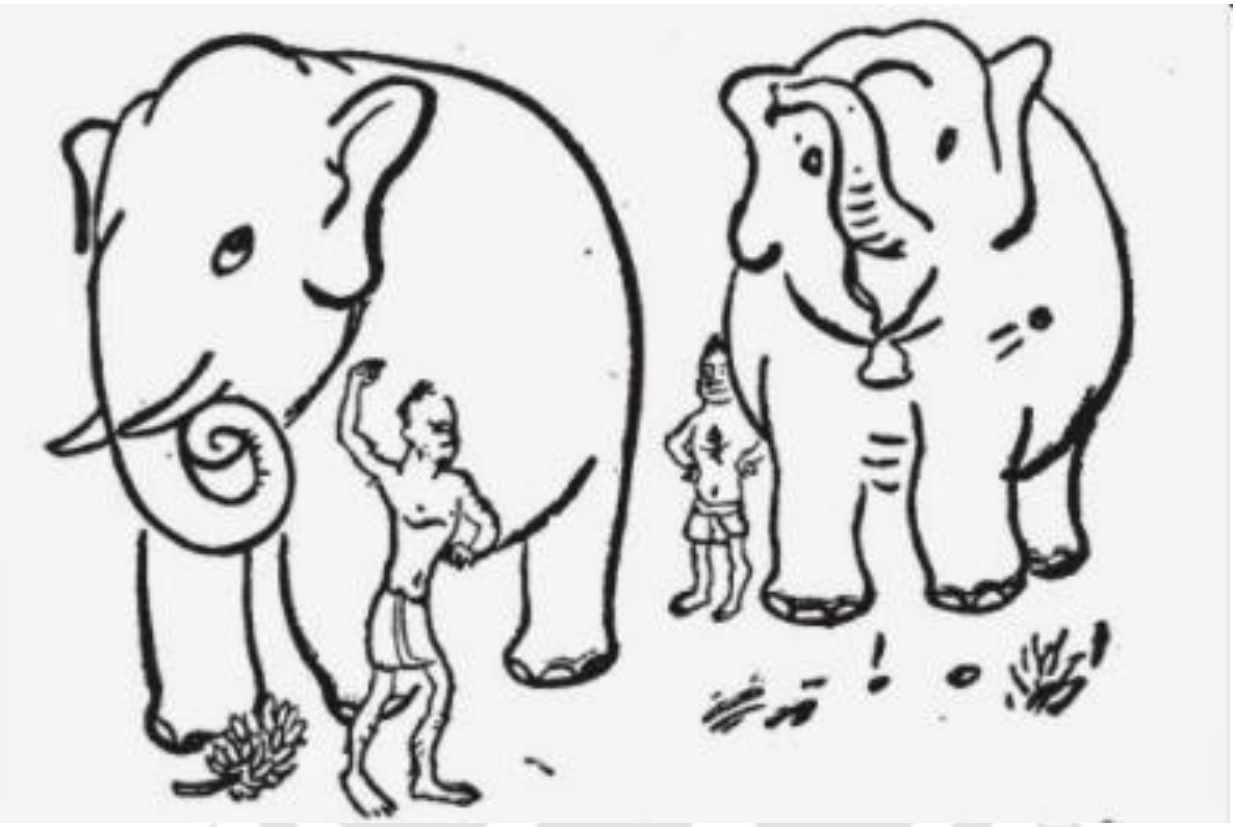


Figure 2.3. M. V. Devan, Illustration for the story "Anavariyum Ponkurishum" by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* June 3, 1952, Source: Personal Collection, Kavitha Balakrishnan

Devan's illustrations departed from the prevailing three-dimensional realistic style popularized by Raja Ravi Varma. Instead, they exhibited thick borders, evocative of the early Madras School artists influenced by K. C. S. Panikker. Additionally, the depiction of short human figures in Devan's illustrations also resembled the stylistic influence of the Madras School. After the academic naturalism popularized by Varma, Malayalis were then accustomed to the modernistic style from the Madras School. From the 1940s onwards, a new tendency in modernism

TH-3461_186141015

began to take shape in India, leading to the emergence of various progressive art groups, particularly within major art schools. Among these, the Madras School held a significant position.[52] Scholar Sunil P. Elayidom pointed out that the major characteristic of Madras School was that it recovered the mural art that once existed in India. It gives more importance to two-dimensional images and the volume and mass of an object was transferred to the contours of the image. Human figures in this style were drawn as if the figures were squeezed inward from head to toe with short necks.

Devan's artistic style aimed to provide a pictorial narration that would captivate the reader's eyes, while also imbuing the illustrations with the contextual essence of the institutional style associated with the Madras School. His work not only represented the Madras style but also introduced a new visual language for Malayalis, as evidenced by the frequent illustrations he produced thereafter. In the following month starting July 20, the weekly published another short story by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer which ran consecutively over four issues. The characters in the story became popular among the readers through Devan's illustrations.[53] On January 13, 1953, the weekly began publishing its first novel, "Ummachu" (The name of the character in the novel), by novelist P. C. Kuttikrishnan, popularly known by his pen name, Uroob, with Devan illustrating. Writer M. Jayaraj remarked on the captivating nature of Devan's artwork, reflecting on how readers found it hard to divert their gaze from the images even after reading the text.[54]

---

[52] Elayidom, *Damitam*, 171.

[53] Novelist Punathil Kunjabdulla, later recalled how the weekly had advertised his novel highlighting Devan's forthcoming illustrations. see. J. R. Prasad, *A. S: Varayum Kalavum,* (A. S: Art and Time), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2013, 70; Ibid.

[54] Jayaraj, "Mathrubhumiyum Namboothiriyum," 55.

TH-3461_186141015

In a short period, the magazine's circulation grew and the chief editor N. V. Krishna Warrier found it challenging to manage the responsibilities on his own.[55] To address this issue, in 1956, he appointed novelist M. T. Vasudevan Nair as the sub-editor trainee, a newly constituted position.[56] Vasudevan was specifically tasked with selecting the short stories and novels for publication. By 1958, each issue began featuring more than one novel.[57] This shift also heralded a transformation in the space allocated to illustrations for literary texts. Consequently, Devan's workload expanded. Whereas previously, a single illustration was sufficient for an individual text, by the end of the 1950s, the demand had burgeoned, often necessitating multiple illustrations for a single text.[58]

Given the increased demand for illustrations, attributed to the inclusion of an increasing number of short stories and novels, in 1959, V. M. Nair, the then Managing editor of Mathrubhumi, advocated hiring additional artists.[59] In response, artist K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri joined the weekly in 1960. Namboodiri was also trained at Madras School. He did his first illustration for the novel "Chuvanna Kadal" (Red Sea) which was published on January 22, 1961.[60] In 1961, M. V. Devan resigned from Mathrubhumi.[61] Upon the request of V. M Nair to fill that vacancy, Devan

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid, 56.

[57] On May 11, 1958, the weekly began serializing the novel, "Oru Vazhiyum Kure Nizhalukalum" (One Road and Many Shadows) by writer Rajalakshmi. Apart from this, from August 24, it started publishing the Malayalam translation of the Bengali novel "Pather Panjali" by Bibhuthi Bhushan Bandopadhyaya. See. Jayaraj, "Mathrubhumiyum Namboothiriyum," 56.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid, 56.

[60] "Chuvanna Kadal" was written by writer P. Kunjanandan Nair, who was more popularly known by his pen name, Thikkodian; Ibid, 57.

[61] Ibid, 59.

TH-3461_186141015

recommended another artist from Madras School, A. Sivaraman Nair.[62] Nair joined the weekly and his first illustration was done for "Kurachu Mannu" (Some Soil) by writer Madhavikkutti (also known as Kamala Das) on May 14, 1961.[63] From January 28, 1968 onwards, the weekly started to publish "Khasakkinte Ithihasam" (The Legend of Khasak) by writer O. V. Vijayan for which Sivaraman Nair did the illustrations.[64] On September 28, 1968, M. T. Vasudevan Nair was appointed as the chief editor of the weekly.[65] Vasudevan would assign the literary texts to either Sivaraman Nair or Namboodiri for illustration. At that time, its circulation stood at 30,000 copies.[66]

The female bodies in the illustrations until this period, remained an unexperimented field that satisfied the textual purpose only. In "Khasakkinte Ithihasam," Sivaraman Nair depicted two women and a man, in which the attire of both the woman and the man has a reference to his contemporary society (Figure 2.4). The women were topless and wore a *Mundu,* a practice that was common in the matrilineal houses in Kerala at that time.[67] Three characters are depicted with equal importance highlighting with contrasting darker shade in the background. The characters reflect the dwarf human figures imbued in Madras School studies with short necks. But it got rid of the bold lines as drawn by M. V. Devan.

---

[62] Jayaraj, "Mathrubhumiyum Namboothiriyum," 57.

[63] Prasad, *A S: Varayum Kalavum*, 217.

[64] Jayaraj, "Azchappathippinte Charithrapadhangal," 40.

[65] Ibid.

[66] M. T. Vasudevan Nair and N. P. Vijayakrishnan, "Bhavukathvangalude Navathi" (Nonagenarian of Imagination), *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 99, No. 45, January 23, 2022, 14.

[67] *Mundu* is a traditional garment worn by Malayali men and women during formal occasions or as everyday attire. It is a piece of cloth, usually made of cotton, that is wrapped around the waist and extends down to cover the legs. However, nowadays women seldom wear *Mundu*. A detailed discussion of women's clothing is provided in Chapter 3.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 2. 4. A. Sivaraman Nair, Illustration for "Khasakkinte Ithihasam" (The Legend of Khasak) by O. V. Vijayan, *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* 1968, Source: Personal collection, Kavitha Balakrishnan.

Since the 1970s, there has been a substantial transformation in the portrayal of women in illustrations, coinciding with the rise of numerous publishing houses and intensified competition for circulation. This period represented a notable shift where the visual depiction of women, influenced by the male gaze and shaped by the demands of the consumer market, played a pivotal role in the evolution of the public sphere into a gendered one.

TH-3461_186141015

4. Female Body in Illustrations and *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* 1970 to 1980

A major shift happened in the history of print media in Kerala when Mathrubhumi Publications, which was based in Kozhikode, opened a second publication center in Kochi in 1962.[68] *Malayala Manorama* another publishing house, responded to this transformation by introducing a Cochin edition in 1966, sparking a significant circulation competition that has been persisting till today.[69] *Malayala Manorama* is one of India's largest circulating dailies, which began publication in 1888 from Kottayam in the old Travancore state.[70] By 1960, it became the largest-selling Malayalam daily with 91,000 copies to the newspaper *Mathrubhumi*'s 78,000.[71] With Mathrubhumi's introduction of the center in Kochi, the daily recaptured circulation for the next five years.[72] The competition between the newspaper *Mathrubhumi* and *Malayala Manorama* grew intense, and in 1971, the former established a lead to 3,09,000 to *Mathrubhumi'*s 2,50,000 copies.[73] Corresponding to daily circulation, the periodicals also competed for the readership, prompting *Mathrubhumi Weekly* to experiment with its printed images.

During this time, Kerala's annual average income was lower than the national average.[74] There was no well-developed printing technology at the time. Robin Jeffrey argued that amidst the lower economic status and poor technological development in print, the role of mass politics in

[68] Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics: Kerala, India, 1800-2009," 479.

[69] Ibid, 480.

[70] Jeffrey, "Malayalam: "The Day-to-Day Social Life of the People," pp. 18-21.

[71] Ibid, 18.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Govindan Parayil, "The 'Kerala Model' of Development: Development and Sustainability in the Third World," *Third World Quarterly,* Vol. 17, No. 5, 1996, 941-957.

TH-3461_186141015

Kerala turned the print into a mass medium.[75] Jeffrey drew a parallel with the Habermasian concept of mass media intervention in the press and the subsequent development of private interest over the public sphere. In 2009, Jeffrey wrote,

> "[...] Habermas's suggestion of three episodes or stages in the role of print in the creation of a public sphere resonates in Kerala, where the experience of mass media in the past thirty years accords with ideas about "refeudalization." The proliferation of media, and of audiences that consume them, does not signal increased political activity. It may, indeed, signal its decline."[76]

Jeffrey's analysis explored spatial politics and public opinion where the potential for stranger sociability, as observed by Michael Warner, is absent. Contrary to Jeffrey's analysis of the decline of the public sphere based on political opinion, printed images have produced a gendered public sphere in Kerala through the dissemination of illustrations. With the intervention of mass media, the illustrations gradually developed an autonomous nature that does not adhere to the textual narratives as observed earlier. It is visible through the illustrations of A. Sivaraman Nair and K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri.

[75] Robin Jeffrey points to the relentless left politics that existed till the 1970s. By the 1950s, Kerala had emerged as India's most politically mobilized and literate region, owing to social and political movements dating back to the 1920s. The state elections of 1957 and 1960 in Kerala witnessed record-high voter turnouts, with 78 percent in 1957 and nearly 85 percent in 1960. Additionally, the "vimochana samaram" (liberation struggle) against the elected Communist government in 1959 marked one of the largest episodes of widespread political fervor in the history of India. See. Jeffrey, "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics."

[76] Ibid, 486.

TH-3461_186141015

4. 1. A. Sivaraman Nair and K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri

On January 30, 1972, writer K. L. Mohanavarma published his novel, "Rithusandi" (Joining of Season) in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. He explained that, in the novel, the most crucial moment was when the male protagonist Ram Mohan, being drunk, raped his daughter, mistaking her as his servant. He described the scene,

> "A woman lies asleep. A slender ray of light, filtering through the half-opened bathroom door, grazes her thigh before falling off the wall shelf. Ram Mohan gazes at her intently, then blinks, taking a moment to listen to his surroundings. All is silent. He then gently opens the storeroom door"[77]

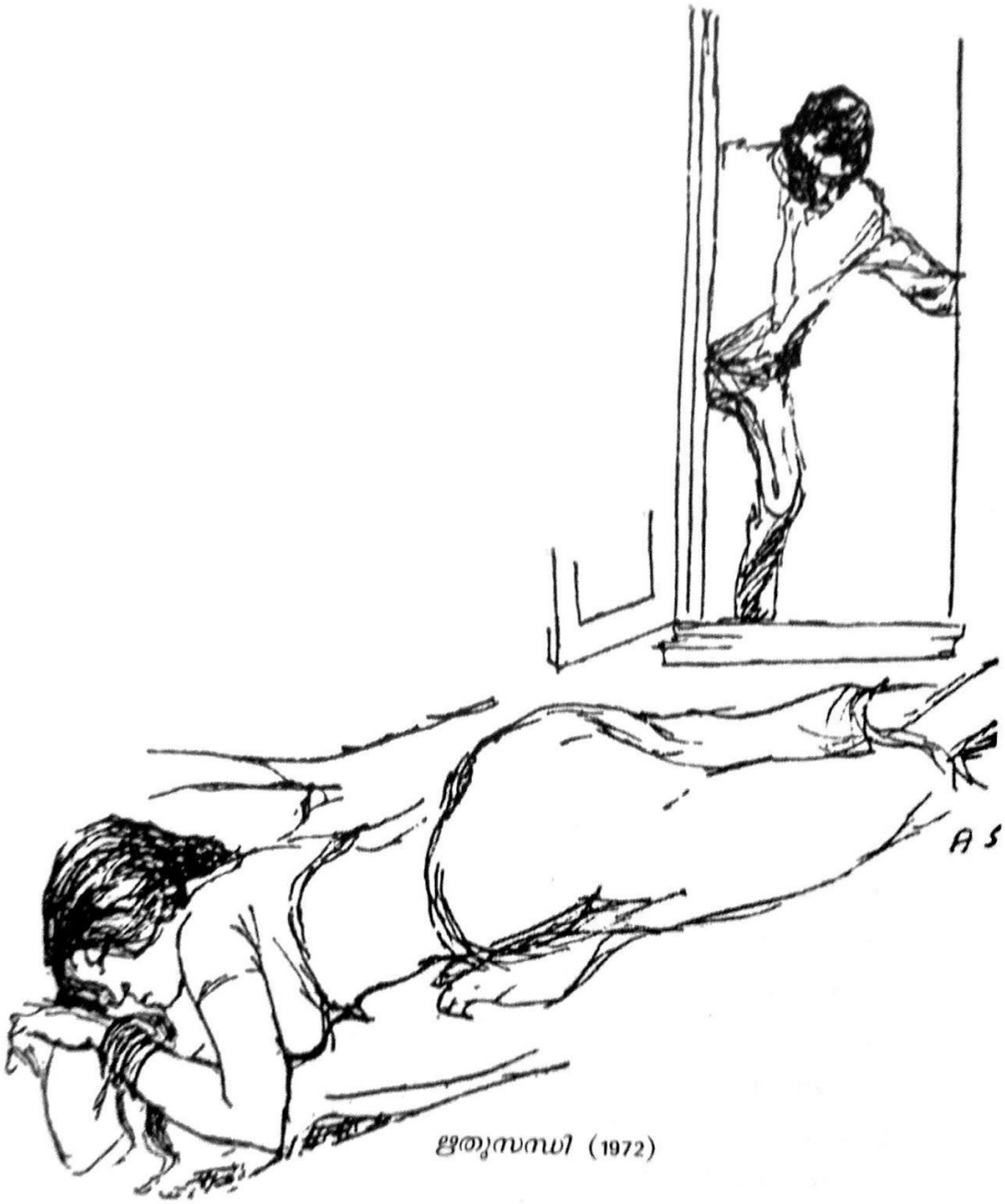
A. Sivaraman Nair illustrated this scene (Figure 2.5). Mohanavarma remarked on how Nair's visual interpretation filled in the descriptive gaps he might have missed in his written account. Elaborating on the illustration, he said,

> "The woman's form is central. The charm as she sleeps is visible. Her hair flows like a serpentine trail through her bangles. The hem of her saree has slid from her waist. Ram Mohan's figure is depicted partially slumped against the door; his face is obscured in shadow. Strands of hair fall across his forehead, and his eyes and facial features remain indistinct. It made me realize the significance of the female character, whom I initially perceived as less significant. With this illustration, my novel feels complete."[78]

[77] K. L. Mohanavarma, "A. S. Inte Drishyakalppana" (Visual Instruction of A. S), in *A.S: Varayum Kalavum* (A. S: Art and Time), ed. Prasad, J.R. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2013, 68, Translation mine.

[78] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015



.

Figure 2.5. Sivaraman's illustration for the novel, "Rithusandhi," was published on January 30, 1972. Source: Mohanavarma, *A. S: Varayum Kalavum* (A. S: Art and Time), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2013.

Nair's illustrations resonate with Laura Mulvey's concept of scopophilia, the pleasure of looking.[79] Muley argues that the movie screen functions as a narrative space where the female body is objectified and eroticized. She stated, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks of either side of the screen."[80] There is a parallel that can be drawn between Laura Mulvey's analysis of cinema and the way illustrations in literary texts similarly evoke scopophilic tendencies. In cinema, camera technology and its movement blur the limits of the screen space to enhance the spectator's engagement with the narrative. Similarly, in periodicals where space is limited, artists employ various techniques to maximize the impact of their illustrations within the confines of the page.

Sivaraman Nair's illustration depicts the woman as a prominent figure in the story due to her size compared to the male protagonist. It suggests a deliberate artistic choice to emphasize her significance within the narrative. Nair used additional lines and details to draw her larger than the male figure. As noted by the writer, Nair's illustration adds another dimension to the story, focusing on the woman overlooked in the textual narrative. By diverging from the textual narrative and focusing on the woman, Nair's illustration was moving towards a more autonomous realm, where the visual medium takes on a life independent of the written word. However, despite this divergence, the essence of the story remains intact. By manipulating light, shadow, and perspective, Nair creates a sense of volume and presence, drawing attention to the woman's character that he consistently followed until the 1990s.

[79] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

[80] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

Unlike Nair's focus on the light and shades, K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri focuses primarily on lines alone. The close-up depiction of women's bodily figures using lines in Namboodiri's illustrations is a significant aspect of the history of illustrations. Namboodiri's approach to representing the female body in illustrations is distinct from what can be achieved through a camera to produce the male gaze. For instance, Writer Chandrika wrote a short story, "Bhramanam" in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* in 1976, for which Namboodiri did the illustration. The illustration depicts Girijadevi, who is the main protagonist of the story (Figure 2.6). Namboodiri's technique draws the viewer's attention to the woman's body adorned in modern attire, with less emphasis on the details of the face, fingers, and limbs. The facial features appear compressed, while the hands and feet are depicted with overlapping lines to adjust their positioning.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 2.6. K. M. Vasudevan Namboodiri's illustration for the short story "Bhramaram," *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* Vol. 56, No. 29, 1978. Source: Personal Collection, Padmanabhan Manathana.

TH-3461_186141015

Despite these imperfections, Namboodiri skillfully renders the saree, using decorative elements to accentuate the body's posture. The borders of the saree delineate the boundary between fabric and flesh, drawing focus to the woman's form. Remarkably, Namboodiri avoids drawing a visible surface for the woman to sit on, creating the illusion that she is seated without support. This intentional omission focuses on the woman's posture, heightening and exaggerating the volume of her torso compared to the face, hands, and feet. There is also a substantial shift from the Madras style in Namboodiri's woman as she is taller with a long neck, hand, and legs, which also happens in Sivaraman Nair's illustration. However, Namboodiri adhered to his mastery of freehand drawing, a colonial technique he acquired from the Madras School.

The divergence in the formal elements from Madras school, such as the deviation from thick lines and the depiction of taller figures from that of the dwarf one, contribute significantly to the overall visual landscape created by *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. As the decade witnessed the emergence of circulation competition, *Mathrubhumi Weekly* allocated a significant portion of its pages to advertisements for the company's profit.

4.2. Photographs in Advertisement

Mathrubhumi Weekly has always had a distinct public: the literate and intellectually inclined. Its content, which predominantly revolves around politics and literature, invites its readers into in-depth discussions, debates, and critical analysis, presupposing a foundational level of intellectual involvement and prior contextual knowledge. However, the printed images did not adhere to the literary discourse; instead, they produced their discourse, which is indirect, with the private gazes of the readers. When Vasudevan Nambooodiri and Sivaraman Nair experimented with the female body to satisfy the textual narrative and the literary public, the magazine

disseminated sensuous images of the female body through the photographs used for advertisement.[81] In 1970, an advertisement appeared in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* promoting Bombay Dyeing sarees (Figure 2.7).

The advertisement depicted three women wearing sarees, each draped in a different style. This portrayal displayed the diversity of Bombay Dyeing sarees and addressed to women consumers. The three women were positioned alongside three men in pairs. The first woman, gazing at the camera with a man pointing a gun at her, is categorized as the "rapable saree," romanticizing rape. The second instance is a woman using binoculars to view something in the distance while a man stands behind her. The accompanying text on the advertisement describes this as a "saree for viewing people at a distance," implying that this particular type of saree is suitable for women who appear to be interested in observing someone else despite being in the company of a man. The third saree is labelled as the "heartbeat saree." The woman, depicted with a sense of shyness, is positioned facing away from both the viewer and the man. This positioning and the caption suggest a scenario where the woman is in a romantic relationship with the man while also aware of the viewer's gaze.

[81] Art historian Lynda Nead argued that the term sensuality is a form of sexual content that is permissible in art and can be accommodated within the category of art since sexual desire is present but transformed or momentarily arrested. Need's argument and the presence of sensuousness in the art historical discourses are discussed in Chapter 3. See. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, 27.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 2.7. Photograph for an advertisement in *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* Vol. 48, No. 17, July 12, 1970.

Source: Appan Thampuran Library, Thrissur.

TH-3461_186141015

The description below the image, “We have all types of sarees for you to seduce any men,” suggests a commodification of women’s attire, framing sarees not only as garments but also as tools for seduction or attraction. This statement implies that the purpose of wearing sarees is not just practical or aesthetic but also to appeal to male desire. The image emphasizes the sensuality and allure of the female body, portraying the woman wearing the saree in a way that highlights her curves, posture, or suggestive gestures. The description and imagery in the advertisement contribute to a culture of objectification of women’s bodies and attire, reinforcing the male gaze.

The presence of sensuous photographs suggests that *Mathrubhumi Weekly* aimed to expand its readership beyond those solely interested in literary content. In these advertisements, women are portrayed as advisors, prompting viewers to gaze at their sensuous bodies. Incorporating sensuous photographs in the weekly was a strategic effort to engage with the non-literary public to remain competitive in print media. This contrasts with the earlier instances of altered photographs on the cover pages depicting Indira Gandhi and the working-class women where they look at the camera, but the sensuousness is lacking. The cover images representing women were thus addressed to a literary public, but its alteration reinforced the existence of another public to which the weekly addressed. The weekly was entangled in the tension between two public spheres: one shaped by images for literary content and the other for non-literary content. *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* being a literary magazine, had to negotiate between these two spheres to maintain its readership and relevance in the evolving media landscape of consumerism.

The artistic exploration of the female body through the illustrators Sivaraman Nair and Vasudevan Namboodiri occurred within the broader context of *Mathrubhumi Weekly*’s engagement with consumerist interests. The portrayal of women in illustrations needed to be more sensuous than the cover page photographs, yet less sensuous than the images found in advertising. This

approach allowed the artists to invite a male gaze while maintaining an artistic restraint, thus avoiding the realistic impact of sensuousness in photographic advertisements. Therefore, the illustrations moved away from the realistic representation popularized by Raja Ravi Varma. Instead, the artists gained more control over their freehand line drawing, a technique acquired from the Madras school, to invest in representing women.[82] The illustrations in the 1970s had to strike a balance between three factors: Firstly, they had to satisfy the literary public without explicitly portraying the sensuous female body. Secondly, they had to cater to the male gaze towards any representation of the female body to satisfy the consumer market. Finally, they had to satisfy the textual narration. The situation changed in the 1980s when sensuousness in depicting the female body became a necessary element of illustrations for literary texts in other periodicals.

5. Literary and Popular Magazines: Formation of Two Public Spheres

The representation of the female body in print media underwent another shift in 1978 with the release of the Malayalam film *Avalude Ravukal* (Her Nights). The film was directed by the renowned Malayalam filmmaker I. V. Sasi. It revolves around the life of a female sex worker, narrating her experiences, struggles, and relationships. *Avalude Ravukal* invited severe criticism for its portrayal of women in the poster.[83] The poster featured a South Indian actress, Seema (Santhakumari Nambiar), standing with her shirt lifted slightly, revealing a glimpse of her thigh (Figure 2.8).

[82] Balakrishnan, *Vayanamanushaynte Kalacharithram.*

[83] Saju Gangadharan, "'Avale' Vicharana Cheytha Sadhachara Committeeykk 45 Vayas" (45 Years of Moral Policing faced by 'Her'), *Samayam*, March 3, 2023, Accessed on February 28, 2024, https://malayalam.samayam.com/malayalam-cinema/movie-news/forty-five-years-of-avalude-ravukal-release/articleshow/98382251.cms.

Figure 2.8. Actress Seema in *Avalude Ravukal* in the poster released in 1978. Source: Screenshot, *Rakshrtadeepika,* December 2, 2022

The depiction diverges from the typical portrayal of women in film posters. Instead of directing her gaze towards the camera or away from it, as is common in many posters where women look at any objects or people, Seema's gaze is directed towards her semi-nude body. Film Critic M. R. Rajesh

argued that even though there were movie posters that represented sensuous women earlier, a woman who looks at her own semi-nude body was a declaration of the friendship between the female body and consumerism.[84] The film posters were pasted on the street wall, and their reproduced prints circulated through film magazines.[85] Rajesh observed that the poster of *Avalude Ravukal* became a strong point of reference for the illustrations in another category of magazine called "Ma" Magazines.[86]

5.1. "Ma" Magazines or Painkili Magazines

Unlike the professional artists working in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, another group of artists, popularly known as Kottayam artists, emerged in the late 1960s as non-professional illustrators.[87] These artists were commissioned to create illustrations for a group of periodicals collectively known as "Ma" magazine, also called *Painkili* magazines.[88] The publishing houses for these

[84] M. R. Rajesh, *Malayala Cinemaposter: Soundaryavum Rashtreeyavum* (Malayam Cinema Poster: Aesthetics and Politics), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2011.

[85] The poster raised discussions about the need for a committee to regulate the content of posters before they are accepted for screening in cinemas and to ensure adherence to cultural norms and sensitivities. As a result, the process of certification by the film chamber for posters before their display began. The newly formed committee noted that art becomes more democratic when it portrays the untold story of human lives. See. Rajesh, *Malayala Cinemaposter*; Gangadharan, "'Avale' Vicharana Cheytha Sadhachara Committeeykk 45 Vayas."

[86] Ibid, 81.

[87] As the name suggests, the artists were from Kottayam district in Kerala.

[88] The periodicals were called "Ma" magazines because all their names start with Ma, such as *Mangalam Weekly, Manorajyam Weekly, and Manorama Weekly*. The name, *Painkili* was attributed to them after the publication of "Padatha Painkili" (The Bird That Wont Sing) in the magazine, *Mangalam Weekly* by the renowned Malayali novelist Muttathu Varkey. The youth wing of CPIM, the Democratic Young Federation of India (DYFI), was the first organization to call these periodicals "Painkili." See. Baiju Chandran, "Painkiliyude Lokathe Nishkalankar," *India Today*, May 15, 2022, Accessed on February 17, 2023, https://malayalam.indiatoday.in/opinion/story/painkili-literature-malayalam-373923-2022-05-15.

periodicals were all located in the Kottayam district. The content spanned a range of genres, from family novels and detective thrillers to surrealist novels and murder mysteries.[89] These publications faced criticism within the Malayali literary publics due to their melodramatic narrative style. However, they gained substantial popularity among the Malayali readership, drawing diverse readers, including women. They dedicated sixty percent of the space for illustration for literary texts.[90]

The artists for the magazines were primarily untrained, and some trained from the art schools in Kerala.[91] During that time, Kerala's art pedagogy focused more on producing craftsmen for industrial purposes, resulting in a scarcity of emphasis on fine arts training within the state. Consequently, many aspiring artists from Kerala pursued education and training at Madras School. As a result, artists trained in any art schools within Kerala were often perceived as lacking formal training compared to their counterparts trained at the Madras School.[92] In the initial years until the 1960s, Kottayam artists followed the figurative drawing style of Madras School artists, particularly Vasudevan Namboodiri, to draw the female body.[93]

Towards the end of the 1970s, "Ma" magazines began incorporating realistic representations of women to complement literary texts (Figure 2.9). In 1978, K. S. Rajan illustrated two women for the novel "Kanan Pokunna Pooram" by novelist Muttathu Varkey in *Manorajyam*

[89] Chandran, Painkiliyude Lokathe Nishkalankar."

[90] Lazer Shine, "Kottayam Art," *Malayalanadu,* September 11, 2010, Accessed on November 4, 2022, https://malayalanatu.wordpress.com/2010/09/11/laser/.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Sudheesh, *Graduating Tensions*.

[93] Shine, "Kottayam Art."

TH-3461_186141015

Weekly.[94] The women in the image emphasize the intricate details of the saree, a practice reminiscent of Vasudevan Namboodiri's work. However, while the saree's details reflected Namboodiri's style, the posture of the female body adhered to the standard proportions of the human form, following principles of naturalism. The female figures were rendered using watercolor techniques to achieve a realistic appearance. Despite this, the lines depicting the posture were precise and clear, similar to the style seen in the work of Madras School artists. Kottayam artists studied the anatomy of actresses in Malayalam movies and improvised it with watercolor technology.[95] Towards the 1980s, the print media underwent a categorization of high art and low art in illustrations, particularly concerning the representation of female body in literary and popular magazines.

[94] The phrase "Kanan Pokunna Pooram" literally means "the festival that one wishes to see." The phrase is used as an idiom to denote anticipation about an upcoming event. *Manorajyam Weekly* was founded in 1967 under the managing editorialship of K. George Thomas.

[95] Shine, "Kottayam Art."

TH-3461_186141015

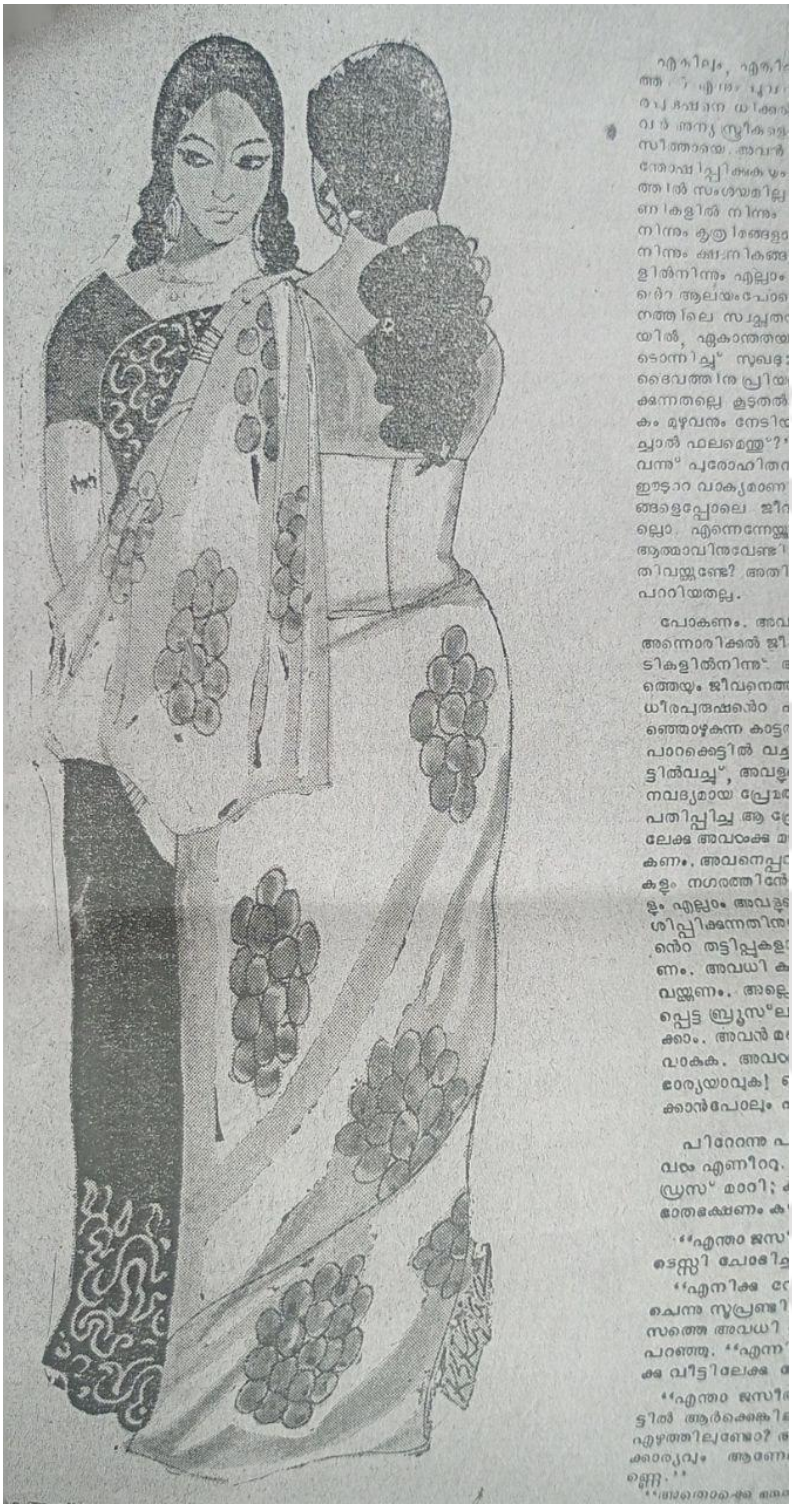


Figure 2.9. Representation of two women in *Manorajyam Weekly* by K. S. Rajan, Vol. 12, Issue. 2, 1978. Source: Appan Thampuran Library, Thrissur.

5. 2. High Art and Low Art: Illustrations in the 1980s

In the 1980s, there was a consensus that Vasudevan Namboodiri's style in representing women had a significant role in the circulation of literary magazines. With the establishment of Namboodiri's status as a visual artist among the literary publics, his representation of female body was seen as the epitome of sensuousness acceptable to them. Upon seeing illustrations of women for his two novels in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, the satirical writer Vadakke Koottala Narayanankutty Nair, popularly known as V. K. N, sent two letters to Namboodiri, indicating the strong impact of the artist's work. In a letter dated November 20, 1972, V. K. N humorously remarked about one of his female characters, Chinnammu illustrated by Namboodiri, "If Chinnammu is depicted as so attractive in the illustration, then as her creator, shouldn't I own that image? Could you send it to me?"[96] Similarly, in a letter dated April 26, 1982, the writer expressed his admiration for Namboodiri's artwork for his novel "Velipadu" (Revelation), writing, "The illustrations for "Velipadu" are truly captivating. The full-figured women are so tempting."[97] These letters highlight the intertwining of the male gaze, from within the novel and from the viewer, that establishes the voyeuristic and fetishistic element in the images.

Mathrubhumi Weekly created a literary public sphere who learned to look at the representation of women by imbuing the Madras School technique. When questioned about his distinctive approach to drawing women, Namboodiri explained, "Since most of the female models

[96] N. P. Vijayakrishnan, "Chithramezhuthile Penma" (Femininity in Drawing), *Mathrubhumi*, September 10, 2015, Accessed on November 16, 2022, http://sv1.mathrubhumi.com/specials/namboodiri_navathi/575141/index.html, Translation mine.

[97] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

came from a lower economic status, I didn't emphasize facial beauty but focused on their bodily anatomy."[98] Reflecting on this bodily representation by Namboodiri, art critic Uma Nair observed,

> "The attire of the women, including the kurta, *mundu*, and blouse, was crafted in a manner that was both concealed and revealed. This design imbued the women with a sensuous aura, presenting them with a voluptuous and zetzy appearance."[99]

This suggests that Namboodiri's artistic status provided an acceptance for the sensuous female images in the weekly. In 1982, Namboodiri left *Mathrubhumi Weekly* and joined another magazine, *Kala Kaumudi*.[100] In his absence, Sivaraman Nair became the chief artist of *Mathrubhumi Weekly.*[101] However, the absence of Namboodiri represented a significant setback for the company. Meanwhile, in 1984, Namboodiri began creating illustrations for the novel "Randamoozham" (Second Turn) by M. T. Vasudevan Nair, published in *Kala Kaumudi.*[102] The

---

[98] Vijayakrishnan, "Chithramezhuthile Penma."

[99] Uma Nair, "Living Lines: Kerala's Artist Namboodiri at 91", *Times of India,* September 12, 2016, Accessed on February 16, 2023, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/plumage/living-lines-keralas-artist-namboothiri-at-91/.

[100] In 1982, Mathrubhumi shifted its headquarters from Calicut to Trivandrum. Concurrently, the institution implemented stringent working hours, mandating attendance in the office from ten a.m. to five p.m. This change was inconvenient for Namboodiri, who resided in Calicut, prompting him to resign from Mathrubhumi. Later that year, he joined *Kala Kaumudi*, where he had the flexibility to create and send his illustrations from the comfort of his home. At that time, *Kala Kaumudi* was a relatively new magazine that had started in 1975. See. Subhash Chandran, *Varaprasadam,* (The Gift of Drawing). Kothamangalam: Saikatham Books, 2014, 63.

[101] Sivaraman Nair attempted to recruit artists to contribute to other contemporary periodicals for the weekly. As a part of that, Nair approached an artist, Madanmohan, popularly known as Madanan, who was also creating illustrations for left oriented magazine *Deshabhimani.* Madanan accepted the request and joined *Mathrubhumi Weekly* in 1984. See. Chandran, *Varaprasadam*, 63; Madanan and N. P. Vijayakrishnan, "Avasanikkatha Ananrgha Nimishangal" (The Unending Moment), *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, July 4-11, Vol. 98, No. 16, 2020, 33.

[102] Saraswathi Nagarajan, "Artist Namboodiri Leaves Behind a Legacy of Indelible Images," *The Hindu,* July 7, 2023, Accessed on October 31, 2023, https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/art/artist-namboothiri-illustrator-and-artist-par-excellence-leaves-behind-a-legacy-of-indelible-images/article67052975.ece.

novel depicts the epic story of the Mahabharata, highlighting one of its characters, Bhiman, and his longings for his wife, Draupadi. The illustrations of women in the novel followed a consistent and more precise free-hand drawing with a more sensuous style.[103]

However, when the sensuousness of women was highlighted in the "Ma" magazines, it invited criticism from the literary publics for their realistic representation.[104] Despite this, the magazines witnessed increased circulation with the realistic representation of female bodies. Kottayam artists considered realism to be a more democratic style. Therefore, it was necessary for them to distinguish their style from the Madras School artists. They argued that the illustrations in magazines like *Mathrubhumi Weekly* and *Kala Kaumudi* did not resonate aesthetically with the mass public.[105] Furthermore, the artists believed they had a keener sense of what their viewers, especially women, preferred visually.[106]

As Kottayam artists' style moved to realism, their referral point was Raja Ravi Varma's academic realistic representation of women. Ravi Varma's depictions of Indian women were filled with an erotic luminescent imagination and had a remarkable ability to celebrate the voluptuous corporeality of women.[107] In the late nineteenth century, German prints of erotic subjects had a notable circulation in India.[108] Influenced by this, Varma had already started circulating his paintings through oleographs in which his representations were mostly limited to semi-nude women while maintaining the sensual element intact. The figures are revealed by the semi-

[103] Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram.*

[104] Shine, "Kottayam Art."

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Arunima, "Ravi Varma's Many Publics: Circulation and the Status of Art-Work," 169.

[108] Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 209.

TH-3461_186141015

transparent sari. Partha Mitter acknowledges this type of representation of women as coy-eroticism.[109] Inspired by Ravi Varma's technique, Kottayam artists mastered expressing coy-eroticism.

During the mid-1980s, a strong circulation battle was underway between *Manorama Weekly* and *Mangalam Weekly* among the "Ma" magazines. *Mangalam Weekly* was founded by M. C. Varghese in 1969.[110] *Mangalam Weekly*'s rapid ascent in Malayalam publishing was remarkable. Starting its publication in 1969, within just over a decade and a half, it challenged and surpassed the dominant magazines. Varghese started the magazine with 250 copies, and in 1984, it reached a circulation of 7,70,000, surpassing *Manorama Weekly*, which lagged with a circulation of 6,37,000.[111] By 1985, *Mangalam Weekly*'s achievement of distributing over 1.7 million copies across India was a testament to its growing popularity and the resonance of its content with its readers.[112]

Kottayam artists in the 1980s developed their own style of depicting the female body, although they referred to Ravi Varma's oil paintings. Unlike Varma, who often resorted to nude or semi-nude depictions, Kottayam artists chose a different path. They emphasized the allure of the parts of the body that were visible through clothing rather than revealing the body itself.[113] The

[109] Ibid.

[110] Jeffrey, "The Day-to-Day Social Life of the People," 20.

[111] Ibid.

[112] K. Ayyappa Paniker, *A Short History of Malayalam Literature*, Information and Public Relation Department Kerala State, 1977, 111; Cris, "The 'Painkili' genre in Malayalam literature and how it captured the hearts of lakhs," *The News Minute*, September 11, 2020, Accessed on 17 February 2023, https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/painkili-genre-malayalam-literature-and-how-it-captured-hearts-lakhs-132849.

[113] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

efficacy lay in how the artists illustrated the movement and texture of clothing - the gentle sway of a garment caught in the breeze, the cling of the wet fabric against the skin in the rain, subtly accentuating the curves and form of the female body. Through these techniques, the artists offered viewers a hint of the concealed, stirring their imagination to perceive the hidden sensuality. The women portrayed are drawn as helpless and submissive, often demanding help or discipline from men (Figure 2.10).

The illustration, created by Artist Mohan Manimala for *Mangalam Weekly*, accompanies the story "Ini Marakkoo; Iniyurangoo" (Get Forget and Sleep) by Malayali writer Ignatius Kalayanthani from Kottayam. The narrative revolves around two women characters along with a man: one is his wife, and the other is his admirer. The depicted scene captures the wife's despair upon learning that the other woman is pregnant with the man's child, leading her to commit suicide. Manimala skillfully captures the emotional turmoil of the man in the illustration while also depicting the curves of the female body. Unlike Namboodiri's approach, which often relies on the absence of certain lines and selective emphasis on body parts to create illusion, Manimala employs the watercolor technique of transparency. This technique emphasizes curves of the woman depicted, through light and shade, resulting in a more evocative portrayal of the body's contours through the dominance of watercolor, which was printed in black and white.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 2.10. Representation of a woman by Mohan Manimala for the novel "Ini Marakkoo; Iniyurangoo" (Get Forget and Sleep), *Mangalam Weekly,* April 5, 1989. Source: Appan Thampuran Library, Thrissur.

In 1991, Kerala achieved the status of a fully literate state.[114] By the 1990s, *Manorama Weekly* and *Managalam Weekly* emerged as the largest circulating magazines in India. In 1995,

[114] Sasikumar and Kamalram Sajeev, "Valiya Media Pinnil Odukayanu" (A Big Media is Running Behind), *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* Vol. 91, No. 28, September 22, 2013, 8.

TH-3461_186141015

Manorama sold 1.2 million copies in a week, and *Mangalam Weekly* more than 9,00,000.[115] In 1992, Malayali entrepreneur Sasikumar launched the television channel *Asianet*, which began shaping the visual preferences of Malayalis. Influenced by this, literary magazines started to emulate the visual layouts of television, prioritizing page design and visual appeal. Sasikumar contended that the strategy of "grabbing eyeballs," commonly employed by television, also became essential for print media.[116] This increased the salary and developed the status of layout artists, who were generally getting the minimum salary from a publishing house. Along with this, the illustrations in literary magazines attained an autonomous status in the cultural sphere. Namboodiri's illustrations were taken out from the literary texts and printed for greeting cards at this time.[117] Kavitha Balakrishnan argued that, after a long silence, illustrations for literary texts became a subject for cultural analysis.[118] However, by the end of the 1990s, the realistic illustrations in popular magazines witnessed a decline due to the emergence of television serials as they began attracting the majority of Malayali households with a storyline and visuals that were earlier experimented with the "Ma" magazines.[119]

Kerala exhibited a unique trajectory where print media played a pivotal role in determining the distinction between high art and low art. The non-realistic style of the Madras School acquired considerable esteem and was regarded as high art. At the same time, the more realistic depictions found in popular magazines were often marginalized as low art. The transition observed as

[115] Jeffrey, "The Day-to-Day Social Life of the People," 20.

[116] Ibid, 15.

[117] Thaha Madayi, "Manushyar Parkkunna Kadalasu Karakal" (The Paper Land Where Humans Reside), *Samakalika Malayalam*, digital edition, July 17, 2023, 38.

[118] Balakrishnan, *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram*, 22.

[119] Shine, "Kottayam Art."

Namboodiri ascended to an individual artist emblematic of modernism stood in stark contrast to the collective identity ascribed to Kottayam artists. Unlike Namboodiri, who gained recognition as an individual artist, Kottayam artists were perceived as collective workers, often underpaid for their contributions.[120] Additionally, no designated staff artist positions were available to Kottayam artists in popular magazines, further highlighting the disparity. The disparity highlights that the notions of individuality and collective labor intersected with institutional training and the style and the intervention of consumer interests within the context of print media in Kerala. With the high art position in literary magazines, more artists were recruited with varying styles of art, making their pages similar to gallery space. Meanwhile, the realistic representation, confronted with the TV serials, comparatively lost their viewership, although they remained the most circulated among any Malayalam periodicals.

Kavitha Balakrishnan argued that the mass circulation of illustrations in the twentieth century led to the emergence of regional modernism. She wrote, "The illustrations were influenced by the institutional style of Madras School. However, Malayalis brought their preexisting regional experiences to the act of looking at these illustrations with the influence of language and literature. As a result, there were limitations to Madras School's influence to the regional elements."[121] In Balakrishnan's study, the influence of realism in constructing the gaze was absent. However, it's important to acknowledge that realism, as a modernistic style, did play a significant role in shaping the male gaze in Kerala. While Malayalam language and literary content contributed to the construction of regional elements in illustrations, the gaze was also constructed through an assimilation of institutional modernism influenced by the Madras School and academic realism.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Balakrishnan, *Vayanamanushyante Kalacharithram,* 244

TH-3461_186141015

Furthermore, the categorization of high art and low art in the print media exemplifies the penetration of contemporary trends in reinterpreting European modernism. In European modernism, the practice, which contrasts two-dimensional avant-garde art movements against realism, reflects a broader trend emerging in art institutions across Kerala in the 1980s. Therefore, even though regional elements were present in the illustrations, they leaned towards being assimilated into evolving modernism beyond Kerala.

6. Conclusion

Along with the accessibility to the visual arts, print media has played a major role in constructing a male gaze with the circulation of illustrations in the latter half of the twentieth century. The male gaze was produced through the fetishistic and voyeuristic representation of the female body that emerged in three stages. Firstly, from 1950 to 1970, it was characterized by the minimal portrayal and straightforward translation of text into images without significant artistic intervention. The second stage, from 1970 to 1980, was intertwined with the mass production of female images and consumer interest. In this transformative phase, the illustrations had to satisfy the literary publics, the non-literary publics, and the textual narrative. As a result, illustrations gained autonomy and depicted female bodies using freehand drawing techniques by artists A. Sivaraman Nair and K. M Vasudevan Namboodiri, who acquired their skills from the Madras School of Arts and Crafts. The third stage, from 1980 to 1990, saw the establishment of a sensuous female body as an inevitable element in illustrations. The representations marked a distinction in print between high art with Madras School artists in literary magazines and low art with the realistic illustrations of Kottayam artists in popular magazines. This suggests that the modernistic division between high art and low art functioned effectively through the representation of the

TH-3461_186141015

female body in printed images, producing the male gaze within two public spheres. Therefore, the printed images in Malayalam periodicals in the later twentieth century produced the public spheres with the tools and techniques of modern art by making the desirable female body more accessible to them. In this process, accessibility alone cannot be considered the hallmark of democracy, as the visual discourse through print media has created a gendered public sphere.

The concept of accessibility to printed images within the high art and low art transformed in the 1990s with the emergence of censorship in relation to the representation of the female body. The next chapter analyzes how Kerala's print media and state engage with the public sphere through representation of female nudity and the concept of sexuality.

TH-3461_186141015

Chapter 3

The Nude and Publics: Representing the Female Body since 1950

1. Introduction

On March 1, 2018, *Grihalakshmi*, the women's magazine of Mathrubhumi Publications, featured a photograph on its cover page of a woman breastfeeding a child as part of a campaign called "Breastfeed Freely".[1] The campaign was launched as a part of International Women's Day on March 8 of that year.[2] The cover page caption, "Mothers tell Kerala: please stop staring; we need to breastfeed," drew attention to the shameful treatment of women who breastfeed in public. Photographed by art director Jinson Abraham, the image showcased Gilu Joseph, a Malayali actress and model from Dubai.[3] Joseph was captured with a smile, gazing directly at the viewer while portraying a breastfeeding scene with a child that was not her own (Figure 3.1).[4] She was adorned with traditional Hindu upper-caste symbols, including a vermilion mark on her forehead, a bindi, a neck chain reminiscent of the *thali*, and a black bangle on her left arm.[5] She wore a grey-

[1] *Grihalakshmi* is a women's magazine published by Mathrubhumi printing and publishing house. See. *Grihalakshmi*, Vol. 39, No. 17, March, 1-5, 2018.

[2] The inspiration behind the campaign was a Facebook photo of a 23-year-old woman named Amrita, in which she was captured feeding her baby while looking directly at the camera. This photo, initially shared by her husband, A. B. Biju in January, ignited a significant and widespread discussion about the topic of breastfeeding in public. See. Sreedevi Jayarajan, "What's Shameful About Breast-feed in the Open? Kerala Magazine Launches Campaign." See. Ibid.

[3] Sowmya Rajendran, "Outrage Over the Grihalakshmi Cover is Misplaced: A Mother Who Breastfed Writes," *The News Minute*, March 1, 2018, Accessed on October 21, 2022, https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/outrage-over-grihalakshmi-cover-misplaced-mother-who-breastfed-writes-7722; Website of Jinson Abraham, Accessed on March 10, 2023, https://jinsonabraham.com/breastfeeding-campaign-for-mathrubhoomi

[4] Ibid.

[5] *Thali* refers to a sacred pendant in a chain that is worn by Indian women after getting married.

TH-3461_186141015

designed top that was partially open on the front side, deliberately exposing her left breast to the camera. She cradles the child, and her lap is covered with a white cloth, all while she maintains direct eye contact with the camera.

As the image began to circulate in the public sphere through both printed and digital media, it swiftly ignited a substantial controversy on social media platforms, particularly *Facebook* and *X* (formerly called Twitter), becoming the epicentre of debates.[6] The debates revealed three main categories of opinion. The majority of reactions by both Malaylis and non-Malayali users expressed the view that the image was considered obscene and perceived as a degradation of women and motherhood. This perspective was further fuelled by the revelation that Gilu Joseph was not the actual mother of the child in the image, leading many to question whether it was merely a marketing strategy.

[6] The cover image was initially released on social media platforms on February 28, 2018, before it made its way to its printed form. Some of the URLs of the social media posts and comments are listed here: Ardra Balachandran, *X*, February 28, 2018, Accessed on November 1, 2023, https://twitter.com/ardramaanasam/status/968745635359940610/photo/1; Yashi Marvaha, *X*, February 28, 2018, Accessed on November 1, 2023, https://twitter.com/spicyramen_soju/status/968817736590774273/photo/1; Grihalakshmi Magazine, *Facebook*, February 28, 2018, Accessed on November 1, 2023, https://www.facebook.com/grihalakshmimag/photos/a.417742871604640/1640171116028470/i

Figure 3.1. Cover Page of *Grihalakshmi*, Source: Screenshot, *Grihalakshmi*, Digital edition, February 28, 2018.

In direct opposition to this viewpoint, the second-largest group of opinions asserted that breastfeeding in public is a fundamental right, and there should be no sexualization or stigma attached to the image. This category included the editorial team of *Grihalakshmi*, known artists and writers from all over India. They saw the image as a symbol of empowerment and a means of normalizing breastfeeding in public spaces.[7] A third perspective that emerged called for a more inclusive representation. Some argued that the image should have adopted a neutral, non-savarna (caste-neutral) approach, acknowledging the need for diversity and cultural sensitivity in media portrayals. In addition to the social media uproar, online news portals within and outside Kerala immediately covered this issue.[8] They concentrated on the first and second categories of debates and emphasized the social relevance of the cover image and its role in promoting women's empowerment.

Amidst these debates and media coverage, Gilu Joseph became the target of several people, both in digital and physical space, who attempted to shame her for appearing on the magazine cover.[9] The controversy surrounding the image took a legal turn when an advocate

---

[7] The editor-in-chief of Grihalakshmi, Moncy Joseph, claimed that it was the first time an Indian magazine had put the image of a breastfeeding woman on the front cover page. She elaborated that "you don't need feeding rooms to feed your children. So we figured that having a discussion around this would be the most relevant thing to do this women's day". See. Malayalam Magazine Cover with Breastfeeding Model Sparks a Debate," *Scroll.in,* March 8, 2018, Accessed on October 16, 2023, https://scroll.in/article/870544/malayalam-magazine-cover-with-breastfeeding-model-sparks-a-debate'

[8] Jayarajan, "What's Shameful About Breast-feed in the Open?"; Rajendran, "Outrage Over the Grihalakshmi Cover is Misplaced"; Vivek Surendran, "Malayalam Magazine Cover Showing Breastfeeding Woman Goes Viral, Sparks Outrage," *India Today,* February 28, 2018; Michael Safi, "Kerala Magazine Challenges India's breastfeeding taboo," *The Guardian,* March 1, 2018, Accessed on November 1, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/01/kerala-magazine-challenges-indias-breastfeeding-taboo?fbclid=IwAR3 PCSHS6S7CiWm0ZdjlCPrqcdoXLeZaDBfHgpJFGnWmlBfRYYJulaGjyQ

[9] "Vivadangalkk Vyakthamaya Marupadiyumayi Gilu Joseph" (Gilu Joseph Responds to the Controversy), *YouTube,* CineMeals Live, March 2, 2018, Accessed on November 2, 2023,

named M. A. Felix from Ernakulam filed a petition against the image in the High Court of Kerala on March 8, 2018.[10] In response to the petition, the bench, consisting of former Chief Justice Antony Dominic and Dama Seshadri Naidu, dismissed the case. Their ruling was based on the constitutional interpretation of obscenity. The court stated,

> "We do not see, despite our best efforts, obscenity in the picture, nor do we find anything objectionable in the caption, for men. We looked at the picture with the same eyes we look at the paintings of artists like Raja Ravi Varma. As the beauty lies in the beholder's eye, so does obscenity, perhaps."[11]

The High Court judgment indicates three distinct developments. Primarily, it extends beyond the immediate context of the photograph in question, raising inquiries about the sensual element within the broader art world in India. The judgment referred to the historical significance of modern Indian artist Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, which feature nude and semi-nude female figures.[12] Additionally, it connects sensuous images with nude paintings and sculptures in Ajanta and Indian

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lSru_-tjW3A&t=1073s.

[10] According to M. A. Felix, the image offends Sections 3(c) and 5(j), III of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and Rules, as well as Section 45 of the Juvenile Justice Act. He has also incorporated Sections 3 and 4 of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, and Articles 39(e) and (f) of the Constitution of India. The respondents in the case included: P. V. Gangadharan, printer and publisher of Mathrubhumi; P. V. Chandran, Managing Editor of Mathrubhumi; M. P. Gopinath, Editor-in-Charge of Mathrubhumi; Gilu Joseph, the model of the cover photo; Commissioner of Police in Calicut and the state of Kerala represented by Chief Secretary. See. Case file, WP(C). No.7778 of 2018, presented to the Honourable Chief Justice Mr. Antony Dominic and the Honourable Mr. Justice Dama Seshadri Naidu, on March 8, 2018, *E-courts, High Court of India.*

[11] Ibid, 2.

[12] Despite the sensuality in Varma's art, his paintings have been widely circulated in the public sphere through print and exhibitions, contributing to the scholarly debates on sensuous female bodies in modern art and their public acceptability. See. Kalpana Sunder, "Raja Ravi Varma: Controversy of India's most iconic artist," *BBC*, July 18, 2022, Accessed on January 16, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220715-raja-ravi-varma-indias-most-influential-artist.

temples, arguing that Indian sensuous art signifies beauty and sacredness.[13] The judgment intends to position the photograph within the realm of such an art world where female nudity is appreciated. It emphasized an implicit distinction between sacred female nudity in the art world and the non-art world of pornography.

Secondly, despite *Grihalakshmi*'s targeted readers being women, the judgment emphasized a subjective viewpoint related to how men perceive the cover image as indicated by the statement, "We do not see, despite our best efforts, obscenity in the picture, nor do we find anything objectionable in the caption, for men." This suggests that the cover image becomes a subject of collective gaze by men in local public spaces, such as tea shops, bookstores, and stationery shops in Kerala, extending beyond the magazine's intended readership in private or domestic spaces. It implies an effort in the judgment to establish connections between two scenarios: the dissemination of female nude images in the modern art world and temple spaces and the presence of such images in public spaces. The aim was to justify the acceptance of female nudity for the collective gaze, where men are positioned as spectators.

Finally, the judgment legitimizes the nudity by drawing on analyses from former legal cases addressing the intersection of art and obscenity. By citing various past cases, the court concludes, "We may observe that, given the picture's particular posture and its background setting (mother feeding the baby), as depicted in the magazine, it is not prurient or obscene; nor even suggestive of it."[14] Therefore, the judgment provides legal backing to the acceptability of the nude

[13] Case file, WP(C). No.7778 of 2018.

[14] Ibid.

image for the collective gaze, emphasizing its context and social intention as key factors in its determination.

The judgment highlights three key implications that revolve around positioning female nudity on the verge of certain boundaries: the distinction between art and non-art, the demarcation between public and private gaze, and the contrast between legal and obscene depictions. Within this context, this chapter explores the relationship between the visual representation of female nudity situated on the boundaries and the publics it produces.[15]

The previous chapter specifically examined the representation of the female body in Malayalam periodicals. It argued that the images had created two public spheres, the literary and popular. However, the interconnectedness of consumerism, institutional art practice, and the representation of the female body had resulted in the construction of publics within both spheres as gendered one influenced by a male gaze unaffected by literacy rate. Extending the argument of the first chapter, the present chapter further analyzes the complexities involved in the production of the gendered public sphere with the intervention of the state.

The examination focuses on the established boundary surrounding female nudity, the evolved relation between public spaces and the female body, and the state's intervention in the representation of female nudity. The examination is facilitated by gathering information on the sensuous cover image of *Grihalakshmi* and its associated controversies from diverse sources, including *Facebook*, *X*, and *YouTube*. The chapter deployed a historical and iconographic analysis of selected representations of female nudity. Furthermore, various discussions around female nudity in Malayalam periodicals, legislative assembly proceedings of Kerala, and judgments from

[15] Hereafter, I categorize the semi-nudity as nudity as it is a subject of sensuality in the public sphere.

the high court and Supreme Court contribute legal perspectives to the examination of the subject related to art and obscenity.

The chapter is structured into four sections. The first section, "Theorising Female Nudity in Visual Art," gives an introduction to the chapter by outlining a theoretical analysis of female nudity in both Western and Indian art history. It included significant narratives on nudity in art history to distinguish it from nakedness and locate the significance of nudity in the visual art world.

The second section, "Locating Female Nudity and the Visual Arts in Kerala," positions the concept of female nudity in Kerala within the broader art historical discourse. Its primary intention is to understand female nudity in relation to the women's history of Kerala and the visual art world. It is explored through an analysis of the nude artworks by Malayali artists T. K. Padmini and Kanayi Kunhiraman. It is a significant focal point for contemporary discussions in Kerala regarding nudity and visual arts.

The third section, "*Grihalakshmi,* Female Nudity, and the Public Sphere," looks at the formation of the public sphere in Kerala through a critical analysis of the cover page of *Grihalakshmi.* This section explores the evolution of women's magazines, their targeted readers, the significance of visual images on a magazine's cover page, and the publics generated by such images. It analyses the redefinition of the boundary of female nudity between inside and outside the art world based on the publics shaped by the cover page.

The last section, "Art and Obscenity: Intervention of Judiciary," outlines the relationship between the representation of female nudity and its status as a subject for state intervention within the public sphere. The examination begins by exploring various judicial engagements concerning art and obscenity in India, providing a comprehensive review of legal cases and decisions that have significantly shaped the discourse around obscenity. Moreover, the section explores the broader

TH-3461_186141015

concept of censorship, examining how female nude representation, with the state's intervention, has created its publics.

2. Theorizing Female Nudity in Visual Art

Representation of female nudity has often been a recurring theme in visual art, with the potential to influence or establish aesthetic and artistic standards and boundaries. The extensive examination of the relationship between nudity and visual art has been a significant aspect of the discipline of European art history. Female nudity as a subject gained prominence through the writings of art historian Kenneth Clark, particularly in his book, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form,* first published in 1956. Clark's analysis introduces a crucial differentiation between being "naked" and being "nude." He wrote,

> "To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that tradition. The word "nude" on the other hand, carries in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtones. The vague image it projects into the mind is not a huddled and defenceless body but of a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body are-formed."[16]

According to Clark, the nude is not a subject of art, but a form of art that was invented by the Greeks in the fifth century.[17] In contrast to the naked, the nude is thus perceived by Clark as a representational form inside the cultural sphere.

In European art criticism, the discussion of nudity, irrespective of gender, became a central topic in the seventeenth century when painters asserted that their artwork was more than a

[16] Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form,* Washington: Princeton University Press, 1956, 3.

[17] Ibid, 4-5.

TH-3461_186141015

mechanical pursuit but rather an intellectual endeavor.[18] However, towards the nineteenth century, a shift occurred where the male nude lost its prominence and waning enthusiasm. In contrast, the female nude claimed a predominant position in nude studies that increasingly operated on the assumption that the subject would be a woman.[19]

Even though Clark critically examined the assumption of nude study as of women, the criteria he deployed to understand male and female nudity were different. By emphasizing the female nude, Clark argued that a nude is an idealized form of beauty and the human body rather than merely depicting a naked body outside the realm of art. In his view, the nude is the only culturally mediated entity, while nakedness remains unmediated. Clark distinguished the art world from the non-art world through the lens of female nudity, positioning the mediated art world in an elevated position.

Continuing from Clark's distinction of the art world through a study of female nudity, in 1972, art critic John Berger revisited and modified the differentiation between nakedness and nudity. Berger's perspective shifted away from the emphasis on clothing and focused on the psychological and social dimensions of being naked and nude. He expressed his view with the following statement,

> "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others yet not recognised for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object to become a nude. Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display."[20]

[18] Ibid, 351.

[19] This transformation was due to a declining interest in anatomy, and the intellectual analysis dissolved before a sensuous perception of totalities. See. Ibid, 356.

[20] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: The British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, 54.

TH-3461_186141015

Berger's interpretation introduced a relationship between the observer and the observed of an artwork. His perspective invites gaze on the power relation inherent in the act of looking and the role of the viewer in shaping the meaning of the human form in art. The shift from nakedness to nudity, in Berger's view, reflects a transformation from a private, personal state to a public, potentially scrutinized display. However, unlike Clark's distinction between the art world and the non-art world through nudity, Berger finds that even the art world can also accommodate nakedness. According to him, it can be naked in a visual representation if the male viewer shares an emotional connection with the women represented.[21] Here, again, the naked is understood as a culturally unmediated unclothed female form, in contrast to the emotionally detached nude women in artwork for men. Both Kenneth Clark's and Berger's views position the nudity of women in the art world as culturally mediated, distinguishing it from the unmarked nakedness outside.[22]

Challenging the dichotomy between nudity and nakedness, art historian Lynda Nead argued that the body is always produced through representation and there can be no naked other than the nude.[23] Nead proposed that in any form of representation, whether in the art world or non-art world, the boundary represented by a female body is porous. According to Nead, in terms of the female nude, non-art represents obscenity. This non-art is not a distinct realm outside Western art; instead, it is a realm that does not conform to the protocols of Western art in defining female nudity. Nead provided examples to illustrate how nude female bodies in European Renaissance oil paintings transcended mere artistry and were deemed obscene in various art criticisms. She identified an existence of excess in art concerning female nudity that the excess plays at the

[21] Ibid.

[22] Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992.

[23] Ibid, 16.

TH-3461_186141015

boundary between art and obscenity.[24] Furthermore, Nead argued that, in Western realistic high art, the transformation of the female body into the female nude serves as a form of containment that extends beyond the body to regulate the viewer.[25] This suggests that the viewer's gaze toward the nudity is controlled and disciplined through the established conventions and protocols of Western art.

In this chapter, building upon Lynda Nead's conceptualization of the containment of female nudity at the boundary of high art, the exploration focuses on how the boundary of nudity is redefined in the specific context of Kerala, aiming to understand the processes through which it shapes and produces its publics in the region.

2.1. Female Nudes in Forming National Identity

During the period of British colonial rule in India, depictions of female nudity were evident in two distinct domains. First, it was prevalent within the context of temple architecture, particularly emerging between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.[26] These depictions were part of a mixture of erotic and sacred contexts. The second domain, which is distinct from the former, involved the representation of nudity within the colonial art pedagogy, which was taught in various art schools in British India. Unlike the sacred context of temple architecture, the depictions within

[24] Ibid, 25.

[25] Ibid, 6.

[26] Temples such as Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh (900 to 1050), Bhubaneswar, Konark, and Puri in Orissa (750 to 1250), the Limbojimata temple at Delmel, Mehsana (10th century), the Nilakanta temple at Sunak near Baroda (11th century), Modhera in Gujarat (1200), the Bodoli temple (8th century), and the Bandhevra temple (10th century), near Ramgarh in Kotah, the Ambikamata temple (960) at Jagat in Udaipur, the Prasanna ChennaKesava Temple (1270) in Somanathapura and the Thirupuantakeswara temple (1070) at Belgami. See. Y. Krishnan, "The Erotic Sculptures of India," *Artibus Asaie,* Vol. 34, No. 4, 1972, 331-332.

TH-3461_186141015

this art pedagogy were shaped by colonial realistic practices and became part of the broader discourse of modern art.

One of the pioneers in experimenting with female nudity in modern art was Raja Ravi Varma. Varma innovatively blended Indian mythological characters with Western academic realism, creating a new form of Indian high art in the nineteenth century.[27] Most of his paintings on canvas were commissioned for the courts of Indian Kings and elite patrons.[28] In the 1930s, another artist, Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), who attained her formal art education in Paris, ventured into the exploration of the female nude, aligning herself with the modern Indian high art category.[29] Sher-Gil's portrayal of the female nude aimed at subverting the conventions associated with the modernist representation of women.[30] While her depictions reflected the subjective experiences of Indian women, the spectators were perceived as gallery viewers both in Europe and India, adhering to the disciplined tradition of modern high art and the portrayal of female nudity.[31] Both Varma and Sher-Gil pioneered as early modern artists experimented with the exhibition practices. Art historian Geeta Kapur wrote, "A professional exhibition circuit was sought to be set

[27] Tapati Guha-Thakurtha, "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India.", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 43, 1991, 93

[28] Simultaneously, Raja Ravi Varma, popularized his artworks through chromolithograph which targeted the mass publics. Within the realm of print media, female nudity in his artwork resonated with the sacred context inside the domestic and private spaces. See. Ibid; Ratan Parimoo, *Studies on the Art of Raja Ravi Varma*, Kochi: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2006.

[29] Kapur, *When Was Modernism.*

[30] Saloni Mathur, "A Retake of Sher-Gil's Self-Portrait as Tahitian," *Critical Inquiry*, vo. 37, No. 3, 2011; Ibid, 5.

[31] Amrita Sher-Gil was the first Indian to receive art training in Paris, where she attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from 1929 to 1932; Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

up on a pan-Indian basis at the turn of the century by 'Raja' Ravi Varma; and after him, Amrita Sher-Gil made beginnings in this direction."[32]

The two distinct domains, featuring sacred depictions of female nudity and the high art representation of nudity, remained separate until Independence when the portrayal of female nudity became a significant subject for art history and criticism in post-independence India.[33] Art historian Tapati Guha-Thakurtha in her extensive study of nudity and Indian art history, argued that the representation of nudity took a unique trajectory in Indian art history in the post-independence period compared to its portrayal as a form of high art in western art history.[34] Focusing on the erotic nude bodies depicted in Indian temple sculptures, she identified that nudity within the sacred aesthetics connotes sensuality.[35] During this period, there was an attempt for nudity to retreat from explicit eroticism, leading to a balance between the sexual and religious symbolism inherent in sculptures found in places like Khajuraho and other temples. Guha-Thakurtha argued that this shift aimed to reinstate the terms on which eroticism found preservation in the art heritage of the newly independent nation.[36]

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a cultural atmosphere that made erotic subject matter a primary focus of modern Indian art. This period witnessed a surge in publications featuring extensive illustrations of Khajuraho temple sculptures.[37] Along with this, photographic

---

[32] Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 6.

[33] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 237.

[34] Ibid.

[35] In the context of India, sensuality in art refers to the sacred realm of aesthetics.

[36] Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 254.

[37] Ratan Parimoo, "From Iconography Through Iconology to New Art History," In *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art*, eds. Panikkar, Shivaji K., Mukherji, Parul Dave., Achar, Deeptha., New Delhi: D.K. Print world, 2003, 25.

TH-3461_186141015

reproductions of erotic sculptures, particularly depicting the *Yakshi*, remained prominently featured in books and illustrated folios on Indian art.[38] An early example of the *Yakshi* figure was the "Didargunj Yakshi," which gained recognition as a celebrated representation of female sexuality and a travelling ambassador of Indian art and culture abroad, gaining its status as one of the nation's most canonized art objects (Figure 3.2).[39] This era witnessed a transformation in the interpretation of these erotic and nude icons of Yakshi. No longer confined to being perceived solely as objects of titillation, these representations came to be seen as symbols representing growth, abundance, and fertility.[40] As Guha-Thakurtha noted, the transition from viewing these sculptures as mere sources of sensual allure to recognizing them as symbolic embodiments of vital concepts like growth and fertility emphasizes a religious understanding of the role of nudity in visual art in post-independence India that conveniently reside in modern gallery and museums spaces to form a narrative of the modern nation.

[38] The figure of *Yakshi* was identified as a primordial goddess and associated with wealth, abundance and fertility and figures similar to *Yakshi* were sculptured in stone, either independently or paired with male figures and placed on exterior walls, gateways and railing of Buddhist monuments all over India. See. Thapati Guha- Thakurta, "The Engendered Yakshi: Careers of an Ancient Art Object in Modern India," in *History and the Present*, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh, Permanent Black: Delhi, 2002, 71.

[39] On October 18, 1917, a Moulavi (a Muslim religious preceptor) from the hamlet of Didarganj in Patna discovered the buried sculpture of the Yakshi on the banks of the river Ganga. The sculpture was named after the place of its discovery. After being unearthed, the statue was relocated to a different spot upstream and became an object of worship. As it gained attention from officials of the Archaeological Survey of India and the Patna Museum Committee, the sculpture was subsequently moved to the Patna Museum for the authorized protection of Indian antiquities. In its new location, it came to be recognized as the high watermark of Mauryan sculptural art. See. Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories*, 205-233.

[40] Guha- Thakurta, "The Engendered Yakshi," 255.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 3.2. ***Didarganj Yakshi,*** **Patna Museum. Source: Screenshot,** ***The Hindu,*** **September 26, 2022.**

In post-independence India, the depiction of female nudity in modern art drew influence from two main sources: European colonial pedagogy and the sacred eroticism present in Hindu religious traditions. The nude representations carefully maintained boundaries by aligning themselves with the sacred realm and catering specifically to the sensibilities of art connoisseurs within the established framework of colonial art disciplines.

3. Locating Female Nudity and Visual Arts in Kerala

Aligned with Lynda Nead's argument that the female body is constantly subjected to representation, blurring the boundaries between the art and non-art world, the history of women's clothing in Kerala emerges as a crucial factor in shaping the visual representation of the female body. The act of wearing clothes in this context holds substantial significance, particularly in demarcating hierarchical distinctions among various castes in premodern Kerala. Women positioned at the lowest strata in the caste hierarchy were restricted from wearing *Melmundu* (upper garment).[41] In contrast, among the upper castes, which constituted a minority, women were allowed to wear upper garments. This privilege was suspended in the presence of male family members and temple priests, indicating that even within the upper castes, caste regulations governed women's clothing choices.[42]

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, colonial authorities introduced practices that assigned qualities such as modesty, civilization, and decency to individuals based on their attire.[43]

---

[41] *Melmundu* is literally translated as an upper dhoti which is a thin cotton shawl worn across a woman's shoulder. See. Udaya Kumar, "Self, Body and Inner Sense: Some Reflections on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan," *Studies in History,* Vol. 13, No. 2, 1997.

[42] J. Devika, "The Aesthetic Women: Re-forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early- Twentieth Century Keralam," *Modern Asian Studies,* Vol. 39, No. 2, 2005.

[43] Ibid.

This shift in cultural norms intersected with caste-based social reform movements, leading to a profound transformation in the way the female body was perceived.[44] In this evolving context, the act of appearing publicly with bare breasts became stigmatised, carrying connotations of both eroticism and moral degradation. Feminist scholar J. Devika asserted that these emerging social changes culminated in a new aestheticization of the female body through the adoption of modern dress codes. She observed that, within this new aestheticization, covering of the female body underwent a significant transformation, evolving into a manifestation of new forms of male domination and the suppression of the female body.[45]

In the dominant historical narratives surrounding women and clothing in Kerala, the primary focus has centered on the female body in the context of resistance to caste rules and colonial aestheticization. However, a significant gap exists in major studies regarding how the female body is visualized and controlled within the framework of caste-based regulations and the male gaze.[46] The deliberate control over when and where women could wear upper garments was a conscious effort to shape the appearance of the female body. This act positioned the female body as an aesthetic subject intended to cater to the upper-caste male gaze. Thus, within the framework

[44] In the 1850s, lower caste women from the *Channar* category who were converted to Christianity in southern Travancore began wearing blouses and *Melmundu*. This change in attire was perceived by upper-caste Hindus as an insult to their caste status. The tension between both parties resulted in a revolt known as "Channar Lahala" (Channar revolt) that took place in 1859. This uprising prompted a royal proclamation that declared there was no objection to Channar women wearing the *Melmundu* in the manner of their choice. See. Kumar, "Self, Body and Inner Sense," 248-249.

[45] Devika, "The Aesthetic Women." 477.

[46] J. Devika and Udaya Kumar have extensively discussed how the female body in Kerala became an object of colonial modern sexual desire through the imposition of new sartorial codes. However, the sexual aspects associated with the depiction of women with bare breasts in public spaces seem to be overlooked in their analyses. See. Kumar, "Self, Body and Inner Sense."; Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

of caste-based clothing norms in Kerala, the female body devoid of clothes assumed the role of a subject for containment, existing outside yet running parallel to the nudity within the high art world. The lack of substantial studies on the intersection of caste and female body, colonial influences, and the male gaze creates a critical gap in understanding the interrelationship that collectively shaped the visual representation of the female body in the twentieth century. This gap becomes even more accentuated when considering the evolving representation of female nudity being increasingly used by both Malayali female and male artists in the institutional art world in post-independence Kerala.

3.1. Representation of Female Nudity in Post-Independence Kerala

In the 1950s, despite the adoption of a new dress code by women in public spaces, the transformation was less evident within Nair families in the domestic sphere. Devika emphazised that even during this period, matrilineal joint families among the Nairs did not provide women with blouses; instead, husbands were responsible for providing them if they desired their wives to wear such attire.[47] This transformational period in Kerala's history had a significant impact on visual art, particularly in the representation of female nudity, which became intertwined with changing caste-women bodies and the emerging imagery of new national sacred bodies that emphasised female fertility. Responding to this societal shift, two significant Malayali artists, T. K. Padmini (1940-1969) and Kanayi Kunhiraman (1937), who both trained at the Madras School of Arts and Crafts, played significant roles in redefining the portrayal of female nudity in the visual art world. Particularly remarkable is the incorporation of the iconic figure of *Yakshi* in their works, symbolising femininity, motherhood and fertility.

[47] Devika, "The Aesthetic Women."

T. K. Padmini, active from the 1950s to the 1960s, depicted figurative nude female figures using the medium of oil painting on canvas. Her artworks were mainly confined to the gallery-viewing publics all over India.[48] Her female figures represented the everyday life of women who wore sari, did not wear upper cloth, nude women, women with scarves and women with ornaments on their nude bodies. An iconographic analysis would identify women in the figure who have similarities with an icon of *Yakshi* (Figure 3.3). The concept of *Yakshi* in Kerala gained prevalence with the spread of Jainism in the seventh century.[49] Over time, the Yakshi cult extended its influence to other folk communities and Nair castes where worship of *Yakshi* in *Kavu* became common alongside serpent deities.[50] Padmini envisioned a world for Nair women, a caste to which she belonged, using the symbol of *Yakshi*. She sought to encapsulate a spirit of communal harmony, especially amid the disintegration of the matrilineal joint family structure.[51] In her

[48] Padmini has continuously taken part in exhibitions by the South Indian Society of Painters' Association, Young Painters and Sculptors' Association and Madras Lalithakala Akademi. Her paintings were included in the National Lalithakala Akademi exhibition, Delhi and the Exhibitions took place in Bombay and Delhi by the Young Painter's Association. In 1965, there was an exhibition of three women artists in Madras in which Padmini's paintings were also exhibited. In 1968, an exhibition of her artworks took place at Madras Sarala Arts Centre. Her last painting, *The Girl Who Flew a Kite* was included in the Creative Forum Exhibition conducted by the Madras British Council in 1969. After Padmini's death, her husband K. Damodaran collected and framed some of the works done by Padmini and conducted an exhibition in the National Museum of Madras. See. K. P. Ramesh, *T. K. Padmini: Kalayum Kaalavum*, Mathrubhumi Books: Kozhikode, 2012.

[49] Amrithesh. A. R, "Special Features, Deities and Rituals Associated with Sacred Groves," *Sahapedia,* April 20, 2018, Accessed on December 20, 2020, https://www.sahapedia.org/special-features-deities-and-rituals-associated-sacred-groves.

[50] The term *Kavu* generally denotes the sacred groves which are seen around many homes in Kerala. There are clusters of trees that are grown together over an area of land. There may be ponds and small water bodies associated with a *Kavu.* Sometimes, it provides space for worshipping the serpent deity (*Sarppakkavu*). See. Ibid.

[51] Matriliny refers to a family structure which is based on the mother's home and organized through the female inheritance of property. Starting from the early 19th century, British rule introduced new jurisprudence that interfered with the matrilineal system, gradually eroding property relations. While some societal progress introduced some gains

TH-3461_186141015

artworks, the nude female body served as a representation of Malayali Nair women, normalizing the practice of a bare-breasted body. By connecting the upper caste female nude body with the Indian art historical interpretation of nudity through Yakshi, Padmini infused a regional Malayali aspect into the representation of the female form that seamlessly integrated with the modern high art world.

for women, including increased opportunities for education and employment, the concurrent struggles for freedom and equality paradoxically pushed women into a position of subordination. This shift can be traced back to the introduction of private interests in land, which resulted in the fragmentation of joint families and the subsequent loss of the security and stability that women had previously enjoyed within that familial structure. Padmini's era witnessed the transformation of Nair joint families into nuclear families, diminishing the possibilities of women's association in the domestic sphere. See. K. Saradamoni, "Women's Status in Changing Agrarian Relations: A Kerala Experience," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 17, No. 5, 1982, 156 - 161; Robin Jeffrey, "Legacies of Matriliny: The Place of Women and the Kerala Model," *Pacific Affairs,* Vol. 77, No. 4, 2004, 659.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 3.3. ***Untitled,*** **T. K. Padmini, Oil on Canvas, Source: Screenshot, Gallery of Mahakavi Edassery Smaraka Trust Web Page.**

Contemporary to T. K. Padmini, sculptor Kanayi Kunhiraman, created an iconic sculpture of "Yakshi" that, much like Padmini's work, symbolised female fertility. However, unlike the *Yakshi* depicted on canvases by Padmini or in sculptures within temples and museums, Kunhiraman's *Yakshi* stood in a public space. "Yakshi" is a 30-foot-tall realistic sculpture made of Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) located in the Malampuzha Dam Garden in Palakkad district (Figure 3.4).[52] The Irrigation Department of Kerala decided to install the sculpture as a part

[52] During the post-independence era, dams were regarded as symbols of modernization for the newly independent nation. The associated dam gardens were envisioned as spaces where citizens could actively engage with the process of modernization. The Malampuzha project was the first large-scale irrigation system initiated in the Malabar district of the old Madras State. It was part of the modernization project undertaken by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. The project's works were started in 1949 which is the First Five-Year Plan, and completed in 1955

TH-3461_186141015

of beautifying the garden.[53] "Yakshi" depicts a sensationally erotic figure of a nude woman in a squatting position, identified by Kunhiraman as the mother goddess. Reflecting on the creation of "Yakshi," Kunhiraman recalled encountering both resistance and support from the local community, as well as some officers in the Irrigation Department, during the sculpture's construction.[54] The discontent from the officers in the Irrigation Department arose due to the fear of local outrage.[55]

under the Second Five-Year Plan. The dam was fully operational at the time of the formation of the state in 1956. See. Irrigation Department of Kerala, Website, Accessed on October 17, 2023, https://irrigation-kerala.org/malampuzha-project; Nandakumar, *Insight and*, 112; Johny, *Yakshiyanam*, 19.

[53] During the 1960s, Malayali artists trained at the Madras School of Arts and Crafts gained valuable artistic status in the state, leading to a demand that reached its principal, K. C. S. Panikker, to undertake the artwork project in the garden, Panikker instructed his disciple Kanayi Kunhiraman to create the necessary sculptures. It was the time when Kunhiraman returned to India in 1968 after completing his Commonwealth scholarship at the Slade School in London. Kunhiraman along with Jayapala Panikker, another artist from Madras School, created three sculptures at Malampuzha. Two of them were constructed by Kunhiraman, namely "Yakshi" and "Nandi." Another sculpture of a crocodile was created collaboratively by Kunhiraman and Panikker. See. Johny, *Yakshiyanam.*

[54] "In Conversation with Kanayi Kunhiraman," Straight Line, Kaumudi, *YouTube*, July 31, 2017, Accessed on March 12, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFqT9L6b8jw.

[55] Officers in the Irrigation Department informed Kunhiraman that if they allowed the construction of the image, there might be a strong reaction from the locals, potentially leading to the sculpture being manhandled and demolished. In Kunhiraman's words, the officials expressed concerns, cautioning that they could not endorse what they perceived as "vulgarity." See. Ibid.

Figure 3.4. Kanayi Kunhiraman, *Yakshi,* Concrete, Malampuzha Dam Garden, 1969; Source: Screenshot, Wiki Commons, photo taken by Kakkara, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=34920386

TH-3461_186141015

After prolonged negotiations between Kunhiraman and several officials in the Irrigation Department, he got permission to start the construction process.[56] However, upon learning that a sculpture of an undressed woman was being built in their locality, some locals raised objections, and this discontent escalated to the point where Kunhiraman was manhandled while waiting for a bus after work.[57] Despite the challenges and incidents, Kunhiraman remained determined to complete "Yakshi." He mentioned that, apart from the objections, Kunhiraman primarily received support from the youth among the locals and the tribal community near the dam.[58]

In the year of the construction of "Yakshi," a critic by the name of Appukkuttan wrote an article on November 2, 1969, about Kanayi Kunhiraman in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*. The primary objective of the article was to familiarize Malayali readers with Kunhiraman and his sculptures. At that point, "Yakshi" had not yet been completed. The final section of the article included a paragraph about the ongoing Malampuzha project.[59] Even though the article focused on the

---

[56] They appointed five construction workers from the department to assist Kunhiraman. Even after the construction began, challenges persisted as the Department officials, fearing local outrage, ceased providing materials for the sculpture's construction. See. "Malampuzhayile 'Yakshi'kk Modelaya Nafeesa Vidavangi: Kanayi Kunhiramante Vighyathashilpathinu Urjamaya Vanitha" (Nafeesa Who Modelled for 'Yakshi' in Malampuzha, Passed Away: A Women Who Inspired the Famous Sculpture of Kanayi Kunhiraman), *News 18 Malayalam*, October 8, 2020, Accessed on November 22, 2023, https://malayalam.news18.com/news/life/woman-who-posed-for-kanayi-kunhiramans-iconic-statue-yakshi-at-malampuzha-dead-rv-295889.html.

[57] "Kanayi's Enigmatic 'Yakshi' Continues to Kick up a Row, This Time on Instagram," *Onmanorama*, June 15, 2022, Accessed on November 27, 2023, https://www.onmanorama.com/travel/travel-news/2022/06/15/kanayis-yakshi-kicks-up-row-over-kerala-tourism-insta-post.html.

[58] Kanayi Kunhiraman, "Kanayi Kunhiraman Shilpagadha," Asianet News, *YouTube*, April 3, 2018, Accessed on October 23, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWLdatHkaTU.

[59] Appukkuttan, "Kanayi Kunhiraman," *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 33, November 2, 1969, 34, Translation mine.

exhibition of large sculptures in the garden, there was no explicit reference to "Yakshi." Additionally, despite the coverage in the weekly magazine, there was an absence of mentions regarding Kunhiraman and his artworks in other publications.[60]

After the successful installation of "Yakshi," Kunhiraman initiated the creation of public artworks for the state government's urban beautification projects, where he continued to experiment with the representation of female nudity both in realistic and abstract ways. Exploring various aspects of motherhood and fertility, one of his notable works from 1971, titled "Fertility," stands in front of the Fertilisers And Chemicals Travancore (FACT) building in Kochi (Figure 3.5).[61] In 1972, an article written by art critic Ramji for *Mathrubhumi Weekly* focused on the sculpture "Fertility" and its artistic relevance. While the article made a passive mention of Kunhiraman's sculptures in Malampuzha, there was no reference to "Yakshi."[62] The limited presence of discussions on nude representations in sculptures within periodicals suggests that the exhibition of female nudity in public spaces in Kerala did not draw significant attention within the public sphere produced by the print media until the 1970s.

[60]An examination of Malayalam periodicals at the Appan Thampuran Library in Thrissur revealed no discussions about "Yakshi" in any of the journals during the time of its construction.

[61] In this work, Kunhiraman expressed the interconnectedness between fertility, the ritual performance of *Theyyam*, and the concept of the mother goddess. *Theyyam* or *Theyyattam* is a popular performing folk art in Malabar region. See. R. Nandakumar, MFA Batch, Painting Department, *Adhunika Malayala Drishyakala* (Modern Malayalam Visual Arts), Kalady: Sree Sankaracharya Sanskrit University, 2017, 21.

[62] Ramji, "Ambalamedil Oradhunika Shilpam" (A Modern Sculpture at the Temple Premise), *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 50, No. 22, August 13, 1972, 16-17.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 3.5. Kanayi Kunhiraman, *Fertility*, 1971, Concrete, Ambalamedu, Kochi. Source: Screenshot, Kanayi Kunhiraman, Website.

TH-3461_186141015

Since the 1980s, debates have started to surface in the public sphere concerning the female body, sexuality, and obscenity. Women's modesty and the visibility of nudity in print and later on television media started to gain momentum during this time.[63] Amidst the emerging discussions on the female body, in 1990, the Kerala Tourism Department commissioned Kunhiraman to create another sculpture at Shanghumugham Beach in Trivandrum. In response, Kunhiraman constructed a sculpture of another realistic nude mermaid named "Sagarakanyaka," made of RCC, situated inside an open oyster (Figure 3.6). The sculpture stands at a height of 25 feet and has a length of 87 feet.[64]

As part of the broader discussions on obscenity and the female body, "Sagarakanyaka" and "Yakshi" began to attract attention in print media. In 1996, the magazine *Samskarakeralam* dedicated all of its articles to the history of sculptures in India.[65] In one of these articles, art critic P.V. Krishnan emphasized that Kunhiraman achieved global recognition primarily through his singular sculpture, "Yakshi."[66] This article was written on the 25th anniversary of "Yakshi"'s construction and highlighted the lasting impact and fame that this particular sculpture brought to

[63] K. K. Mani, "Parasyathile Nangnatha Pradarshanam" (Nudity in Advertisement), *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* Vo. 53, No, 43; R. C. Vaidyanathan, "Ashleelameth Akarshakameth?" (Which is Obscenity and Which is Attraction?), *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* Vol. 55, No. 47, 1978; J. Devika, "Gender in Contemporary Kerala", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 49, No. 17, 2014.

[64] Anish Nair, "Lokathe Ettavum Valiya Malsyakanyaka Shilpam Shanghumughath: Saganakanyaka Guinnes Bookil" (The Lergerst Sculpture of Mermaid in the World is in Shanghumugham: Sagarakanyaka is in Guinnes Book), *Manorama Online,* October 30, 2022, Accessed on November 22, 2023, https://www.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2022/10/30/guinness-world-record-for-kanayi-kunhiraman.html.

[65] *Samskarakeralam* is a Malayalam monthly magazine published by the cultural section of the Education Department of Kerala. Launched in 1984, the magazine considers original writings in Sanskrit. K. Kunjunni Raja, "The Sanskrit Scene: Sporadic, but Consistent," *Indian Literature,* Vol. 27, No. 6, 1984, 144.

[66] P. V. Krishnan, "Kanayiyude Shilpangal" (Sculptures of Kanayi), *Samskarakeralam,* Vol. 10, No. 2, April- June, 1996.

Kunhiraman. By this time, the concept of motherhood and fertility in Kunhiraman's other works had also been subjected to examination, as Krishnan did in his article.[67]

Figure 3.6. Kanayi Kunhiraman, *Sagarakanyaka* (Mermaid), 1991, Concrete, Shanghumugham Beach, Trivandrum. Source: Screenshot, *Samakalika Malayalam*, August 2, 2017.

By the twenty-first century, discussions on Kanayi Kunhiraman's nude sculptures have turned full circle. In 2005, the magazine *Granthalokam* featured its entire articles on Kunhiraman and his works.[68] In one of the articles, art historian Vijayakumar Menon discussed nudity, fertility,

[67] Ibid.

[68] *Grandhalokam*, a monthly literary magazine published by the Kerala State Library Council, has experienced noteworthy growth in its readership over the years since its launch in 1948 under the editorship of S. Gupthan Nair.

TH-3461_186141015

and Yakshi's primitive culture. He described nudity by saying that "female nudity in art history and philosophy has always been connected with fertility."[69] Menon's observation reflects an intervention of art history in Kerala to define nudity, backed by the Indian art historical discourse, and to position the public nude sculptures within the realm of high art tradition.

Since the 2010s, Kunhiraman and his sculptures have gained visibility in Malayalam television media.[70] In 2015, during an interview with the television news channel *Media One*, Kunhiraman legitimized the nude representation by recalling that he used to see bare-breasted women in public during his childhood, inspiring him to dedicate sculptures to motherhood and nudity.[71] Extending Kunhiraman's statement, art historian Johny M. L, during the celebration of the 50th year of "Yakshi"'s construction, argued,

---

In 2010, the magazine printed 6150 copies, and by 2011, this number increased to 11,125. In 2016, there were 7157 subscribers, and the printed copies counted 13,875. The magazine's popularity continued to increase, reaching an annual subscribership of 40,743 in 2021, which further increased to 63,464 in 2022. See. V. K. Madhu, "Ezhupathanjum Kadannu" (Crossing Seventy-Five), *Grandhalokam,* Vol. 67, No. 6, November 2023; *Granthalokam,* Vol. 57, No. 8, August, 2005.

[69] Vijayakumar Menon, "Kanayi Kunhiramanile Samskrithi Chihnangal" (The Cultural Symbolism in Kanayi Kunhiraman), *Granthalokam,* Vol. 57, No. 8, August, 2005, 13.

[70] Mangad Rathnakaran, "Kanayi Kunhiraman, Cheruvathur and Pilicode", Yathra, Asianet News, *YoutTube,* July 2012. Accessed on March 12, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvUmRaf82bY; "Sculpture Kanayi Kunhiraman in View Point" Media One Lite, *YouTube,* June 26. 2015, Accessed on 12 March 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNxKZPey4gY; "In Conversation with Kanayi Kunhiraman", Straight Line, Kaumudi, *YouTube,* 31 July 2017, Accessed on March 12, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFqT9L6b8jw; "Renowned Sculptor Kanayi Kunhiraman in Sudinam", DD Malayalam, *YouTube,* 2017, Accessed on March 11, 2023; "Anyonyathil Kanayi Kunhiraman", (Kanayi Kunhiraman in Anyonyam," Kairali News, *YouYube,* Accessed on March 11, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A8_RNeW4f4: Anuraj Rajendran and Muneba K.T., "Kanayi- Art, Life and the Ethics: Documentary Film," Running Studios, *YouTube,* March 18, 2019; "Yakshiyanam-2019 Artist Kanayi Kunhiraman," DD Thrissur, *YouTube,* Accessed on March 12, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3w_Ut4z4Rg.

[71] "Sculpture Kanayi Kunhiraman in View Point."

TH-3461_186141015

> "We view sculptures of bare-breasted women from an era when it was considered natural, contrasting with the contemporary perspective where covering breasts is the norm. In the past, these sculptures were not considered obscene but natural ones."[72]

Both arguments suggest that nudity in visual art should not be considered obscene because, during the time of its construction, it was considered natural to see bare-breasted women in public. The portrayal of female nudity, existing on the boundary between art and obscenity, found legitimacy through the lived experiences of caste-women bodies and the narratives of motherhood and sacredness embedded in Indian art history. This process of legitimation paralleled the acceptance of T. K. Padmini's paintings that were received in the art world.

However, Kunhiraman's sculptures are unique in that they demand a collective gaze in public spaces, extending beyond the confines of gallery viewers. The legitimacy of these artworks getting through the art historical narratives suggests that female nudity at its boundary could subsume the non-artistic parameters into it in order to claim their dominant position in high art practices. Therefore, female nudity continues to exist on the boundary of art and obscenity, contained within the protocols of high art, attempting to engage the public as spectators within the realm of the high art world.

The trajectory of female nudity in Kerala in gallery spaces and public spaces suggests that the visual representation of female nudity possesses the ability to delineate the boundary between art and non-art while simultaneously establishing connoisseurship within a specific convention. However, this boundary is far from static, as the female nude consistently challenges and unsettles it, contributing to an ongoing process of redefinition that transcends the limits of the artistic world. A significant instance in this discourse is the magazine *Grihalakshmi*'s cover image featuring

[72] Johny, *Yakshiyanam*, 19, Translation mine.

TH-3461_186141015

breastfeeding women, disrupting conventional expectations and triggering legal intervention - an occurrence not witnessed in the case of Kunhiraman's sculptures. This divergence urges a crucial inquiry into the parameters that were disrupted and redefined through the representation of breastfeeding women, necessitating an exploration of the public sphere created by the image.

4. *Grihalakshmi*, Female Nudity, and the Public Sphere

Grihalakshmi, one of the prominent publications of Mathrubhumi, is a widely circulated women's magazine among the Malayalis. According to the Indian Readership Survey (IRS) released by the Media Research Users Council (MRUC) on January 28, 2014, the readership of *Grihalakshmi* was 826000.[73] The magazine, which typically caters to a readership interested in conventional feminine practices without political connotations, unexpectedly sought to respond to the notions of femininity, domestic space, and public space through its cover page on March 8, 2018.[74] Cultural theorist Jenson Joseph while analyzing this particular edition of *Grihalakshmi* observed, "the brazen 'public-political' address in *Grihalakshmi*'s March 2018 cover is striking because it announces an intend to let go of its long-standing core marketing mantra, 'we are a home magazine; we don't do politics', as though the old marketing rationalization has lost its purchase."[75] Joseph identified that the gaze of the model, Gilu Joseph, on the cover page has disrupted normative associations between the public and the political by reversing its stance, situating it within the domestic sphere, and directing it towards the intruding, potentially perverse,

[73] "New IRS 2013: Dainik Jagran Tops Daily's List", *Exchange4media*, January 29, 2014, Accessed on October 2, 2023, https://www.exchange4media.com/media-print-news/new-irs-2013dainik-jagran-tops-dailies-list-54391.html.

[74] Jenson Joseph, "Mutations of the Interior: The Political in the New Media Regime," *South Asian Popular Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2022.

[75] Ibid, 120.

public eye. According to Jenson Joseph, the image unsettles the boundary between domestic and public and the politics associated with it.[76] His argument centres around how new media facilitated mutating such a boundary where politics accessed both domains. As significant as the media, other aspects such as the visual representation of semi-nude women, the debates within the media, and the legal verdict tell another side of the story, prompting a reassessment of the boundary between the domestic and private and the politics within it.

The image depicted on the cover page of *Grihalakshmi* has disturbed the high art connoisseurship around nudity in two specific ways. The first pertains to questioning the image's status as art within the medium of photography, and the second involves an explicit redefinition of the magazine's targeted readers and viewers.

4.1. Nudity and Photography

The woman depicted on the cover page of *Grihalakshmi*, Gilu Joseph, is not a fictional character but a real individual. Photography is imbued with an idea of realism, where the photographic image is believed to represent reality in a direct and unmediated way.[77] This notion becomes particularly evident when examining family photographs from early 20th-century Kerala, focusing on both Christian and upper-caste Hindu families. Historian Sujith Parayil, in his exploration of these historical photographs, noted the profound impact of photography as a medium for constructing emotions and memories by engaging with representations of actual individuals.[78] Despite the occasional inclusion of aesthetic elements such as posture, fashion, and

[76] Ibid.

[77] Nead, *The Female Nude*, 52.

[78] Sujithkumar Parayil, "Family Photograph: Visual Mediation of the Social," *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 3, 2014.

TH-3461_186141015

the arrangement of objects around the subjects, these visual elements primarily served to enhance the realistic impact of the photographs. The representation of real individuals and their lives through the medium of photography is distinctly separated from an artistic approach.

While photographs were initially employed in diverse settings such as domestic spaces, personal albums, educational institutions, and studios, their dissemination among the Malayalis gained widespread attention through the mass production and distribution facilitated by various print media, particularly periodicals. Photographs found a significant place within the inner pages of periodicals, a trend that persisted until the 1930s. As the print history of Kerala evolved, the increasing prevalence of illustrations in Malayalam periodicals set the stage for a competition between photography and illustration to showcase their aesthetic prowess. Illustrations, driven by their imaginative capabilities, frequently overshadowed photographs on the inner pages. However, despite this competition, the realistic quality inherent in photographs eventually secured their place as a prominent feature on the cover pages of periodicals, particularly highlighting the faces of women since the 1950s.

When periodicals began circulating to target the consumer market in the 1970s, there was a noticeable shift in focus towards women and nudity as central subjects for photography. From the inception of glamour photography on glossy printed pages, it occupied a lower position in the hierarchy of visual art, frequently perceived as existing beyond the confines of high art.[79] Labeled as consumer art, photography continued the challenge of asserting its credibility as a participant in the elevated realm of high art alongside oil paintings and museum sculptures. Within the increasing

[79] Nead, *The Female Nude*, 329

TH-3461_186141015

consumer culture, the medium of photography has consistently hovered on the edge between art and pornography, especially in its portrayal of nudity.[80]

Pornography, on the other hand, coincided with the colonial promotion of modesty of women in the 1950s, leading to a notable dissemination of middle-class sexual morality in Kerala.[81] This era witnessed the state's endeavor to redefine the concept of family, associating the covering of the female body with desexualization.[82] The significant implication of this shift was evident in the Communist government's 1957 birth-control campaign, referred to as a 'family planning program.'[83] J. Devika argued that this initiative "promoted self-discipline as the major mode of regulating desire and practice, patriarchy as the normative model of organizing relations between the sexes, and the ideal of the modern nuclear family."[84] According to Devika, the new morality surrounding sexuality revolved around the modern nuclear family, reducing sexual activity to the concept of procreation.[85] Any emphasis on pleasure or love in the context of sexual activity outside the family structure was disparaged, turning the pleasure element, when extending beyond the private sphere, into a focal point of tension and anxiety for society. In addressing

[80] Ibid, 52

[81] Concern related to the control and regulation of female sexuality has been an important agenda of social reform and related literature in the early years of the twentieth century. See. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, "The Gulf in the Imagination: Migration, Malayalam Cinema and Regional Identity", *Contributions to Indian Sociology,* Vol. 43, No. 2, 2009, 114; Devika, "The Aesthetic Women."

[82] Ibid, 465

[83] The communist government of 1957 appointed a full-time Family Planning Officer and an advisory Family Planning Board and emphasized contraception in a way that was unique in India in the time. See Robin Jeffrey, *Politics, Women and Well-Being: How Kerala Became a Model',* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992, 54-197; J. Devika, "The Malayali Sexual Revolution: Sex, 'Liberation', and Family Planning in Kerala", *Contributions to Indian Sociology,* Vol. 39, No. 3, 2005.

[84] Devika, "The Malayali Sexual Revolution," 348.

[85] Ibid.

pleasure and anxiety, feminist scholar Navaneetha Mokkil Maruthoor perceives it as an excess marked by pornography.[86] She stated, "By excess, I gesture toward a gamut of emotions characterized as pushing against established codes of bodily behaviour that can function as a pulsating force field of both anxiety and pleasure."[87]

The excess, Maruthoor identified, is best seen in the visual representation of the female body in photography. Photography, as it is imbued with realism, makes the medium transparent, giving direct access to its image for the excess of pornography to play on it.[88] In this medium, when both female nudity in art and the female body in domestic space surpasses its confines, both are perceived as excess. The boundary between the art space and the domestic space blurs, and it falls into the category of pornography. Making it more specific, Lynda Nead observed,

> "If the object in question is the female body, then the photograph is seen to absorb the viewer's direct access to the body, and sexual arousal within the minimum interference from the medium itself."[89]

Nead argued that within contemporary culture, the pornographic effect is believed to be produced through the unmediated visibility of photographic images.[90] This tension is particularly evident on *Grihalakshmi*'s cover page. On this page, female nudity is portrayed in a manner that deviates from the norms of conventional art as well as domestic spaces. When these two points of departure converge, it creates anxiety over the potential classification of the image as pornographic. Then,

---

[86] Navaneetha Mokkil Maruthur, "Visual Practices, Affect, and the Body: The Story of a Night-Vigil in Kerala, India", *WSQ: Women Studies Quarterly,* Volume 46, No. 3 and 4, Fall/ Winter, 2018, 158-174.

[87] Ibid, 167.

[88] Nead, *The Female Nude*, 97.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

the central question raised is: if the cover page does not fit within the established realms of art or domesticity, where does it truly belong? This question necessitates an exploration of the publics for whom the cover image was produced.

4. 2. *Grihalakshmi*: Redefining Reader-Viewer Relationship

Grihalakshmi is situated within the genre of Malayalam women's magazines, specifically catering to a readership composed predominantly of middle-class women who are interested in the ongoing cultural transformations within the realm of women's experiences in Kerala and beyond. Women's magazines emerged in Kerala during the social reformation in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century when the social status of women gained a central position.[91] The print media used this time to increase its circulation among women who were previously excluded from the public sphere shaped by the media. As the print media promoted significant circulation of women's magazines since the nineteenth century, the public sphere shaped by them retained gendered characteristics.[92] This aspect becomes apparent in the evolution of these publications.

The first women's magazine, *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini,* started in 1885 aiming at educated women in domestic spaces.[93] It remained the only women's magazine until 1904, when another magazine, *Sarada*, started from Thrippunithura. In contrast to *Keralayeeya Sugunabodhini*, *Sarada* saw active participation from numerous women who took on roles as editors and writers.[94]

---

[91] Swarna Kumari E. K., "Women's Magazine in Kerala and their Social Significance," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 62, 2001.

[92]Devika and Sukumar, "Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala."

[93] *Keraleeya Suginabodhini* run for 6 months. Again in 1892, it restarted. Its editors were K. Chidambara Vadhyar and M.C. Narayanappillai. See. Geetha Nazeer, "Malayala Pathrapravarthana Rangathe Sthree Charithram" (History of Women in Malayalam Journalism), *Sanghaditha*, Vol. 18, No. 28, 2022, 9.

[94] Ibid.

Its contents included the duty of women, domestic chores, pregnancy tips, women's education, chastity, motherhood, love for ornaments, and healthy family.[95] Women's magazines in the early twentieth century targeted women who had not, in their vision, integrated themselves into the newly constituted modern forms of life and attempted to indulge in a pedagogic enterprise through ideal forms of femininity.[96] The period witnessed several women's magazines coming up with women being part of the editors and circulation, which saw a maximum readership of 2000.[97] These periodicals targeted a specific class of women who could afford rupees 2 to 4.[98]

When the Indian national movement reached its peak with the activities of the Indian National Congress and the Communist activities in the 1930s, a political shift took place in the Malayalam women's magazines. They included content such as women's right to participate in the freedom struggle, employment, and property rights.[99] Since Indian independence, the themes of these magazines have shifted to subjects such as literature and scientific knowledge among women, as well as family planning. Over the period from its inception, even though the major subjects had changed corresponding to the social transformation, such as women's right to education, property rights, and right to appear in the public space as a part of the Indian national movement, some themes are particularly consistent in such magazines such as femininity, child care, sexual health, recipe, home management, and beauty tips.

---

[95] Ibid, 10.

[96] Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary*, 13

[97] Teena Antony, "An Introduction to the Early Malayalam Women's magazine," *Samyuktha: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2022.

[98] Ibid.

[99] K. A. Beena, "'Keralee Sugunabodhini' Muthal 'Sanghaditha' Vare" (From 'Keralee Sugunabodhini' to 'Sanghadita'), Sanghaditha, Vol. 18, No. 28, 2022, 30; Geetha Nazeer, "Malayala Pathrapravarthana Rangathe Sthree Charithram" (History of Women in Malayalam Journalism), *Sanghaditha*, Vol. 18, No. 28, 2022, 15.

TH-3461_186141015

In 1975, the leading publication Malayala Manorama began a women's magazine, *Vanitha,* claiming it embraced both tradition and modernity exclusively for women. It included articles on fashion, gardening, cinema, sport and fitness, pregnancy, and child-rearing.[100] As always perceived as a competitor in the circulation market dominated by Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi Publications introduced its women's magazine *Grihalakshmi* four years later, in 1979. Such women's magazines have confined the readerships to the private domestic space, which stands opposite to the dominant public sphere. Therefore, in the case of Mathrubhumi Publications, two kinds of magazines determined the public sphere and domestic space. One is *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, which targeted literary readers who are the dominant publics, but bracketed their identity within male-centric terms. The second was *Grihalakshmi,* which made a distinction from the literary readers, unbracketed public sphere dominated by men and redefined its space as domestic where ideal Malayali womanhood is embarrassed. Packed with the latest in fashion, trends, beauty, health, self-improvement, and recipes, it was oriented towards a middle-class Malayali reading women in domestic spaces.[101]

Unlike the content of the magazine, which is explicitly oriented toward women, the cover page is unique as it appears on the street, which constructs a masculine public sphere. They are displayed in places like tea shops, stationery shops, grocery shops in bus stands, streets, local towns, and railway stations. These spaces created a spatial-narrative public sphere that engaged

[100] Official Website, *Vanitha,* Accessed on January 22, 2024, https://www.vanitha.in/about-us.html.

[101] Though women's magazines claim to target women in particular as their readers, they have a wider circulation among the Malayali community regardless of gender. But generally, the visual content as well as the texts in the magazines stick to glorifying an ideal Malayali woman which depends on her sexuality, state of marriage and her duties within her family to attract women's readership. Mathrubhumi publications, Website, Accessed on January 22, 2024, https://media.mathrubhumi.com/static/Publications.html; Teena Antony, "Women's Education: A reading of Early Malayalam Magazines," *Artha J Soc Sci,* 12, 2013.

with print materials.[102] As a part of the early left movements, the establishment of Cooperative industries run by cooperative sectors formed by the employees highly encouraged reading newspapers as a daily practice. In a cooperative sector industry such as Dinesh Beedi, one of the employees was designed by his colleagues to read newspapers aloud the whole day, with the latter pooling in money from their income to pay his/her wages.[103] Ratheesh Radhakrishnan observed that the publics thus formed through the print media is a spatially and narratively constituted muscular one.[104] The cover pages of periodicals operated within this masculine public sphere, strategically positioned to capture the collective attention of men.

The dominant public sphere, in this context, does not indicate the absence of the female body; rather, it signifies that for women, the public sphere is defined as a contained body within the domestic realm. Women who express public opinions and actively participate in male-dominated discussions are derogatorily referred to as *Chanda pennungal* (Market women).[105] This term is primarily used to label women who sustain themselves through labor in the market and challenge the prevailing norms of female modesty. Therefore, the expression of public opinion by women outside the established domestic boundaries is often subjected to demeaning and derogatory treatment within public spaces.

Diverging from the modesty that often restricts women's appearance in public spaces, the depiction of women on the cover pages of periodicals presents a departure from these expectations. While real women may feel constrained by pressures to conform to certain standards of modesty,

---

[102] Radhakrishnan, *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala.*

[103] Ibid, 71.

[104] Ibid, 68

[105] Chapter 5 elaborates more on the meaning of *Chantha* in the historical context of Kerala. Devika and Sukumar, "Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala."

the portrayal of women on these cover pages has been notably different. simultaneously, popular periodicals and cinema with the emergence of television, paved the way for targeting a middle-class consumer public in which women's bodies were objectified more than ever.[106] Magazines, with their growing numbers, popularity and the growing visual representation of women on the cover pages targeted men as their consumers in public spaces, other than its content targeting the women readers in domestic spaces. The *Grihalakshmi* cover page, with its semi-nude representation of women, targeted such male reader-viewers and their collective gaze. However, in contrast to the usual images on the cover page, this edition in 2018 displayed a domestic woman's semi-nudity in public space through the medium of photography which sparked and intensified the controversy.

The cover page as a space to invite a collective gaze plays a critical role here. There were photographs of breastfeeding women occupied in the inside pages of the magazine. These internal photographs featured mothers breastfeeding their children and baring their breasts to the camera. These photographs were not subjected to controversy, unlike the cover page, as they were intended for individual women with a private gaze.[107] The representation of nudity on the cover page of *Grihalakshmi* occupies a space outside both the art world and the domestic sphere, targeting

[106] T. K. Ramachandran. "Notes on Making the Feminine Identity in Contemporary Kerala Society," *Social Scientist,* Vol. 23, No. 1 / 3, 1995.

[107] The chief- editor could not find a real mother to pose for the cover page, The decision to use a model on the cover was influenced by the challenge of finding a real breastfeeding mother willing to be photographed for the cover page, as explained by the editor Moncy Joseph. See. Gladwin Emmanuel, "Malayalam Magazine Grihalakshmi's Cover, Featuring Gilu Joseph Breastfeeding Baby, Creates Stir, Kerala Lawyer Lodges Case," *Mumbai Mirror,* March 2, 2018, Accessed on November 14, 2022, https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/holi-nightmare-man-pushed-off-running-train-as-thieves-try-to-snatch-his-mobile-phone/articleshow/63137212.cms; "Malayalam Magazine Cover with Breastfeeding Model Sparks a Debate," *Scroll,* March, 2, 2018, Accessed on November 14, 2022, https://scroll.in/article/870544/malayalam-magazine-cover-with-breastfeeding-model-sparks-a-debate.

consumer male reader-viewers and inviting their collective gaze. Therefore, the space occupied by the nude representation came from the containment in the art world and domestic space. The undefined nature of the space occupied by the *Grihalakshmi* cover image made it susceptible to being labeled as pornography and, at the same time, necessitated intervention of the state to redefine the boundary of art and nudity.

5. Art and Obscenity: Intervention of Judiciary

Jürgen Habermas envisioned a realm where citizens come together to engage in rational discourse and political opinions, influencing the state through their collective actions.[108] The idealized public sphere is often seen as an arena free from state interference, where diverse opinions contribute to democratic discourse. However, the representation of female nudity in art challenges this notion, as it introduces a complex and contested element that does not conform to the idealized, non-interfered public sphere described by Habermas. The inclusion of such representations raises questions about the nature and boundaries of public discourse and the role of the state in regulating the discourse in forming publics of nudity.

The High Court of Kerala had to step in to address the public controversy surrounding the *Grihalakshmi* cover image, where opinions were divided between those interpreting the image as a socially intended representation in the media and others categorizing it as obscene and akin to pornography. In its earlier period, explicit sexual representations, both in texts and visual forms in print media, openly claimed their status as pornographic. In the 1960s, under the ministry of both the CPI and the INC, severe measures were taken to regulate pornographic literature by

[108] Habermas, "The Public Sphere."

TH-3461_186141015

categorizing it as obscene in line with developments elsewhere in India.[109] The concept of obscenity, thus, began to define the boundary between artistic expression and pornography. However, in the state, there was a lack of a clear legal understanding of the term "obscenity."[110]

The legal history of India, particularly in the post-independence period, has seen interventions in the public sphere when significant controversies arise around media representation and obscenity.[111] This legal intervention has roots in the colonial era. The primary legislation addressing obscenity is Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code, enacted in 1925 and subsequently modified.[112] Its definition was built on and extended an earlier rule, the Hicklin Test, that determined the yardstick of obscenity in the post-independence period till 2014.[113]

---

[109] In 1960, cases were filed against publishers and 57 literatures some of them containing visual images were banned by categorizing them as obscene. By 1969, under the ministry of E.M.S. Namboodirippad, 13 more Malayalam journals were added to the category of obscene literature. See. *Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*, Second Session, Vol. 9, No. 15, July 13, 1960, 1574; *Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*, First Session, Vo. 24, No. 8, January 13, 1969, 578-579.

[110] *Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*, Second Session, Vol. 9, No. 5, June 28, 1960, 526

[111] William Mazzarella, "The Obscenity of Censorship: Rethinking a Middle-class Technology," In *The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar, and Raka Ray, New Delhi: Routledge, 2003.

[112] Ibid, 337.

[113] In 1868, a protestant Henry Scott was prosecuted over an anti-Catholic tract in his publication, *The Confessional Unmasked: Shewing the Depravity of the Romanish Priesthood, the Inquiry of the Confessional and the Questions Put to Females in Confession* (1867). However, the court ordered his publication as obscene by stating that a publication has to be judged for obscenity based on isolated passages of a work considered out of context and judged by their apparent influence on most susceptible readers, such as children or weak-minded adults. The Hicklin Test got its name from Benjamin Hickin, the magistrate who ordered to ban of Henry Scott's pamphlet. The Test remained operative in the United States until the 1930s, and in the United Kingdom until the 1950s. See. Pratyush Pandey, "Obscenity and the Law in India: Moving from Hicklin Test to Community Standards," *ipleaders*, 2 August 2014, Accessed on November 13, 2022, https://blog.ipleaders.in/obscenity-and-the-law-in-india-moving-from-hicklin-test-to-community-standards/; Mazzarella, "The Obscenity of Censorship," 338.

In the 1990s, challenges to the legal concept of obscenity arose, coinciding with the emergence of middle-class consumerism and the widespread proliferation of print and visual media. The state government of Kerala had already identified the difficulty of taking action against publishing houses on allegations of obscenity by 1979, fearing opposition from major publishers and renowned writers.[114] About this emerging middle-class consumer interest, anthropologist William Mazzarella noted that, in the 1990s, any undue restrictions on the erotics of consumption could only appear as fundamentally undemocratic.[115] Simultaneously, this period witnessed emerging discussions on the state's censorship policies, obscenity, and public culture.[116]

The Indian judiciary responded to these new challenges by reevaluating the laws surrounding obscenity with a verdict on *Aveek Sarkar Vs. State of West Bengal*, which laid the ground for the judgment on the *Grihalakshmi* cover page. In 1993, a German magazine, *Stern*, published an article with a picture of Boris Becker, a world-renowned tennis player, and his dark-skinned fiancée, German actress Barbera Feltus. Both Becker and Feltus were naked in the photograph, and he had wrapped his arms around her in such a way that his palms covered her breasts. The photograph aimed to emphasize love over hatred due to apartheid. The photograph was reproduced in an Indian magazine, *Sports World*, and a Kolkata-based newspaper, *Anandabazaar Patrika* (Figure 3.7). Upon that, Aveek Sarkar, a lawyer practicing at Alipur Judges

---

[114] One of the major debates in the state legislative assembly was centered around *Keralashabdam*, a political magazine that published an advertisement stating that the magazine was going to publish pornographic novels with realistic images. The publishing house could sell around two lakh copies by 1979. Pointing out the intervention of the market in the realm of art and literature, Home Minister K. M. Mani, under the ministry of K. Karunakaran, raised his concern that the market had a dangerous clutch on the publishers and even the renowned writers who were part of this literature, which made it difficult for the state to act against obscene literature. See. *Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly*, First Session, Vol. 47, No. 39, April 11, 1979, 5036-5038.

[115] Mazzarella, "The Obscenity of Censorship," 333.

[116] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

Court, Kolkata, filed a case against the editor, publisher, and printer of the newspaper and the editor of the magazine before the sub-divisional magistrate at Alipur.[117] He alleged that the photograph would corrupt and deprave the minds of the young and was against the cultural and moral values of society.[118] When the magistrate issued processes against the accused, an appeal was preferred before the Supreme Court.[119]

Ten years later, the court, in 2014, viewed that the Hicklin test was not the correct test to determine what obscenity is and replaced it with the "Community Standard Test." [120] According to the Test, if any sensual image conveys a message beneficial for the community of a nation, it is not obscene.[121] The judgment on *Grihalakshmi*, following the legal test applied, noted that the breastfeeding image was considered non-obscene due to its embedded social intention. The legitimation of female nudity through the judgment suggests that the legal intervention aimed to utilize the social intention embedded in nudity, emphasizing women's empowerment, that redefines the boundaries of the art in public space and the non-art world of pornography.

[117] Supreme Court judgement on 3 February 2014 on the petition filed at the Supreme Court of India, Criminal appeal No. 902 of 2004, 2.

[118] Pandey, "Obscenity and the Law in India," Petition No. 902 of 2004, 2.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Petition No. 902 of 2004.

[121] Pandey, "Obscenity and the Law in India"

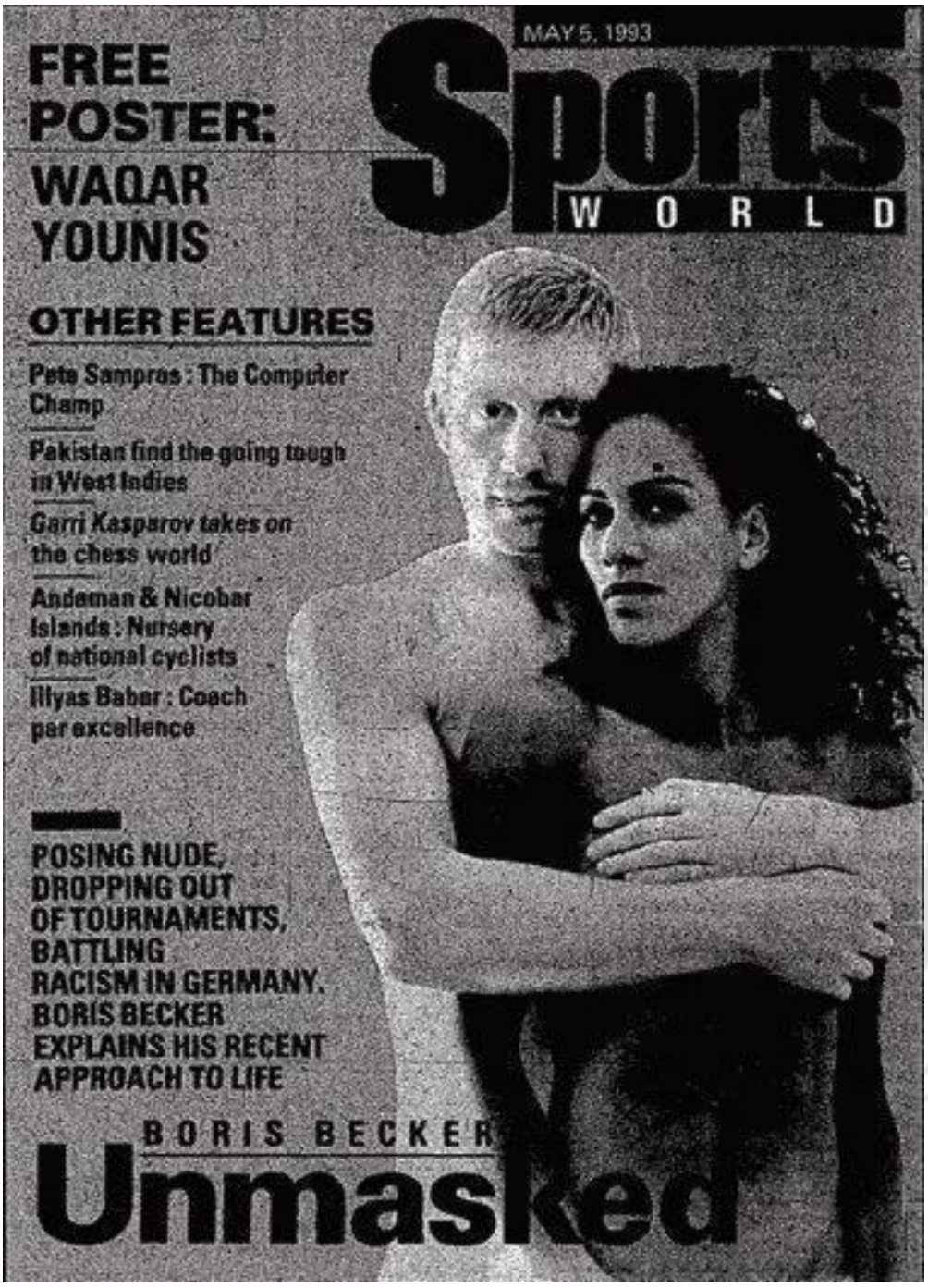


Figure 3.7. Reproduction of the photograph of Boris Becker and Barbera Feltus on the cover Page of the magazine *Sports World,* May 5, 1993. Source: Screenshot, *Indian Journalism Review,* "Nude Picture That Landed Sports World in Trouble," February 8, 2014.

TH-3461_186141015

The legal framing aimed to prevent discussions on the representation of female sexuality and the male gaze in that context. Consequently, the cover image, directed at the collective gaze of male consumers, contributed to the construction of a gendered public that did not fit within the category of non-art pornography. There is another instance that demonstrates the construction of gendered publics by the cover page of *Grihalakshmi*. While the printed magazine survived in the public spaces uncensored for the collective gaze in Kerala, the Persian Gulf countries which host a significant population of Malayalis, handled *Grihalakshmi* with a different approach.[122] In the book stalls in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, the provocative content on the cover page was addressed by obscuring a portion of the model's breast with black colour (Figure 3. 8).[123] This act was done with the intention, influenced by Islamic law, of preventing the public from seeing it, suggesting the cover image should not be exposed in this particular public space. The restriction aims to limit the collective gaze towards female nudity, even as content circulates freely and globally in social and digital media spaces without such constraints.

[122] Since the 1970s, there has been a flow of Malayalis to the Persian Gulf which includes the countries; Saudi Arabia, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. In the cultural identity of Kerala Guld played a major point of reference. See. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, "The Gulf in the Imagination: Migration, Malayalam Cinema and Regional Identity," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 43, No. 2, 2009.

[123] A reporting team from the online news portal *PGurus* claimed to have observed many book stalls in Gulf regions covering the breast part of the *Grihalakshmi* cover page. However, pointing to the Sharia rules, they expressed reluctance to disclose the identity of these shops, citing concerns about potential repercussions that might affect them.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 3.8. The printed edition of *Grihalakshmi,* March 8, 2018, circulating in the streets in Guld countries.

Source: Screenshot from the photo taken by the online news portal *PGurus*.

Nudity, as a religious sacred connotation in Kerala and nudity as an entity against the religion in Persian Gulf countries indicate that, even though their publics are differently produced by religion-based visual practices, both constructed their publics as a gendered by not opening a space for discourse on female sexuality and male gaze, fearing it would fall into the category of pornography. J. Devika points out that "the fear of sexuality has been evident in public life, especially prominent in the fear of the sexualization of the female bodies, it has deeply colored public debate on the condition of women here, surfacing even in many interventions made by avowed feminists."[124] The fear that Devika observed is evident in the discussions emerged around the magazine cover image. Considering both the supporting and criticizing arguments together from the controversy, the debates were trying to look away from the relationship between the representation of female nudity, sexuality and the male gaze in collective gaze. If the criticism was trying to say that semi-nude representation of women's bodies has a sexual element and thus is obscene, the supporting arguments deny the sexual element in the image at all by emphasizing motherhood and aesthetics as just the opposite element to sexual desire. Both these arguments tried "not to see" the aspects of the sexuality of women in the visual representation of nudity that ultimately shut discussions on the collective male gaze embedded in the female nude representation.

6. Conclusion

Grihalakshmi's cover page serves as a compelling case study, offering insights into the relationship between representations of the female nude and the publics. The analysis encompassed

[124] J. Devika, "Bodies Gone Awry: The Abjection of Sexuality in Development Discourse in Contemporary Kerala," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 16;21, 23. 2009.

three key factors- judicial intervention, art historical influences, and the collective gaze- to outline how these factors collectively shape boundaries of representing female nudity and its publics.

In post-independence Kerala, female nudity is represented in two realms; one is within the containment of high art, supported by caste-women bodies and national-sacred bodies, while the other exists on the boundary between art and pornography. Female nudity in the first realm produced its publics as the gallery-viewers who stuck to the protocols of high art. However, in the second realm, nudity always redefines its boundary between art and pornography to categorize its publics. At this moment state interferes in the public discourses to redefine its boundary where obscenity became a legal tool. During moments when the representation of the female nude seeks to surpass the traditional confines of high art, new parameters emerge and expand the boundary of art.

In the case of *Grihalakshmi,* the parameter is the social intention of the image, which has been serving the parameters of female nudity to claim its artistic nature with the emerging media and consumerism. The social intention played a crucial role in shaping *Grihalakshmi'*s cover image as an epitome of high art. With this parameter, despite scepticism towards arousing sexuality, the artwork is presumed to address a public devoid of pornographic connotations. Therefore, the publics produced by the representation of female nudes are gendered by strategically distancing themselves from discussions involving the representation of the female body, sexuality, and male gaze constructed by them. The relationship is becoming a complex realm as both are becoming a product shaped by new media, politics, and emerging discourses on the female body in representations. At the same time, it is an area where more discussions could arise about female sexuality in public, its representational logic, and the boundary where art ends and pornography starts.

Chapter 4

Art, Institutions, and the Public Sphere: 1947-2020

1. Introduction

From January 16 to 20, 2020, the local farmers' community in the rural village of Kelakam in the Kannur district unexpectedly witnessed a major art exhibition, *Let Me Come to Your Wounds; Heal Myself.*[1] Curated by C.F. John, a Malayali artist based in Bangalore, the exhibition featured ten installations that were made of everyday materials such as bamboo, cloths, mud, coconut leaves, palm leaves, screw pine leaves, timber and seeds (Figure 4.1).[2] The exhibition was the result of a collaborative effort between the organizers of "Seed Fest," an annual event organized by Fair Trade Alliance Kerala (FTAK).[3] The installations were spread out in a one-and-a-half-acre plot of land adjacent to the state hill highway. Surrounding the land are a three-star hotel, two wedding halls, a police station, a beverage outlet, and other small grocery shops. This location, densely packed with governmental and private buildings on both sides of the highway, is

[1] Kelakam is a village town located on the eastern side of Kannur district. Until the 1940s, the area was covered with dense forests. During World War II, which severely affected employment and food distribution in the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin, farmers from Syrian Christian and Ezhava communities migrated to the Malabar region in search of land for cultivation. In the Kannur district, many farmers settled in and around Kelakam, turning it into a local trade center. See. A manuscript of the biography of a farmer written by Dasan. P.P, 2010

[2] The ten installations included "Five Pillars," "Custodian of Life," "Martyrs' Wall," "Human-animal Conflict," "The Chair of Seed Keepers," "Torch Bearers," "The Trial of Silence," "Soil Beneath the Feet," "Whispering Seeds," and "The Seeds, Custodian, Foods and Art."

[3] Established in 2006, FTAK aims to enable farmers to access the global market and improve their income through fair trade. It mainly concentrates on the farmers in the Malabar districts. See. Website, Fair Trade Alliance Kerala. https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/farmers-and-workers/coffee/fair-trade-alliance-kerala-india/

TH-3461_186141015

the most congested area of Kelakam town.[4] The other sides of the exhibition plot are bordered by a wall belonging to the hotel and a natural mud wall. The plot was covered with galvanized roofing sheets to create partitions for the booths at the "Seed Fest." Viewing the installations directly from outside the site was impossible without entering the premises.

Figure 4. 1. The photo captures the exhibition space, representing three installations. The foremost installation is titled "Five Pillars," featuring cut stems of coconut and bamboo. Behind it is the "Custodian of Seed," characterized by a triangular structure draped in white cloth, partially open at the front. Further back is the "Martyrs Wall," consisting of a large mud wall. Source: Screenshot, C.F. John, website.

[4] Kelakam town serves as one of the final major towns along the route to the hill district of Wayanad. Situated approximately ten kilometers east of Kelakam begins the mountain pass leading to Wayanad. Field note, 10 August 2022.

At present, the village is predominantly inhabited by middle-class migrant farmers, primarily from Christianity. A significant portion of farming is done by the lower classes from the Ezhava communities within the Hindu religion and various tribes, with the Paniya and Kurichya tribes being the dominant groups. The communities' cultural engagements within the town premises are primarily occupied by exhibitions related to farming and horticulture. The village has not hosted any major art exhibitions and lacks art galleries. The nearest art gallery is the government art gallery of Lalithakala Akademi in Mananthavadi, located in another district, Wayanad, approximately 30 kilometres from Kelakam.[5] Therefore, the place stood as a "site" outside the formal exhibition venues and art institutions.

Art historian Miwon Kwon noted that until the early 1970s, the "site" with reference to artworks was considered to be the physical or architectural environment within which artworks were placed.[6] Kwon argued that this concept of "site" was closely tied to the concept of "space" in modernism but underwent significant alteration in the 1970s. She wrote,

> "[...] the uncontaminated and pure idealist space of dominant modernisms was radically displaced by the materiality of the natural landscape or the impure and ordinary space of the everyday."[7]

As Kwon noted, the term "site" came to refer to the social context of a place, a specific community, or a specific social or political issue.[8] Building upon Kwon's argument, art critic Eva Fotiadi

[5] Field note, September 7, 2022.

[6] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002, 11-31.

[7] Ibid, 11.

[8] Eva Fotiadi, *The Game of Participation in Art and the Public Sphere*, Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2011.

highlighted that the evolving understanding of sites beyond the traditional gallery space reflected broader shifts in perceptions and practices concerning the role of artists, art institutions, and audiences, as well as the production of art itself within the social and political context.[9]

Since the 1990s, there have been numerous scholarly attempts to classify artworks that exist beyond the confines of traditional gallery spaces. This classification encompasses public art, new genre public art, site-specific art, community art practices, participatory art, and art activism.[10] Scholars have aimed to emphasize the importance of democracy in these artistic forms as opposed to modern art institutions. Most of the literature on these artworks originated in the United States, drawing from frameworks proposed by art historians such as Rosalyn Deutsche, Suzanne Lacy, Mary Jane Jacob, and Miwon Kwon.[11] In the 1990s, Deutsche, Lacy, and Jacob focused on site-specific art practices in urban spaces outside galleries and examined the emancipatory potential of art for community development. Lacy termed such art practices as "New Genre Public Art" in her work *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art,* published in 1995.[12] According to Lazy, public art shifted from its former neutrality that pleased everyone to a specific audience with a social objective that she called "New Genre Public Art." This category of public art underlines its capacity to maintain the communication and emancipatory nature of art in public spaces where it is imagined that the main target of these artworks is not public spaces but to address public issues.[13]

---

[9] Ibid, 11.

[10] Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art,* Washington: Bay Press, 1995; Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998; Kwon, *One Place After Another*; Fotiadi, *The Game of Participation in Art and the Public Sphere.*

[11] Ibid.

[12] Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain.*

[13] Ibid, 54.

TH-3461_186141015

Lacy argued that the audience is created with reference to the proximity to the artwork based on their responsibility to the social issues an artwork attempts to address.[14]

Criticizing the concept of "New Genre Public Art" and its emancipatory role in communities, Miwon Kwon identified three trajectories of site-specific art in urban places since the 1960s. The first is the experiential understanding of the notion of the site; the second is the social and institutional understanding of the site; and finally, the discursive understanding, in which the issues related to site-specific art addressed could be reproduced anywhere.[15] Kwon examined the aspects of the transformation of a site from a physical location to a discursive virtual location and its relation to the artists and art institutions.[16] Her analysis deviated from focusing on communities and explored the relationship between artists, art institutions, and the art objects within the movement from the physical to virtual locations.

The present chapter expands upon Kwon's concept of the movement of art objects and broadens the notion of art objects as networks of historical processes. It explores the formation of the publics between art institutions and the "site" in the presence sense. The ephemeral site-specific exhibition curated by C. F. John at Kelakam serves as the primary case study for this chapter. The chapter employs a formal and historical analysis of the exhibition. John's exhibition reflected two intertwined trajectories of artistic representation that emerged in post-independence India. Firstly, his art activity suggested the role of artists as representatives of the people within the modern nation-state. Secondly, John's exhibition also reflected the political situation in Kerala during the post-emergency period, with which a Malayali artists' collective, "Indian Radical Painters' and

[14] Ibid, 178.

[15] Kwon, *One Place After Another.*

[16] Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October,* Vol. 80, 1997, 85-110.

TH-3461_186141015

Sculptors' Association" grappled with the implications of neoliberal policies and globalization in the art world. The artworks in John's exhibitions are considered networks of these historical trajectories while analyzing the publics created by them. The specific focus of the study is the participatory aspect of the installations in the location and their reproduction in print and in another gallery-oriented exhibition in Alappuzha, *Lokame Tharavadu* (World is One Family). The time frame for this chapter encompasses the years 1947 to 2020, a period during which the art practices evolved outside art institutional spaces in India by claiming its political role. The chapter argues that artworks transcend their physical sites and contribute to the formation of the public sphere by operating within the space in-between art and politics. In this space, artworks create publics who engage with them as modern gallery viewers.

The primary archives for this study include interviews with C. F. John and the exhibition organizers. They offer information on the planning, execution, and objectives of the Kelakam exhibition. C. F. John's website serves as a repository for collecting photographs of artworks done at the exhibition site, their information, and John's earlier artistic career. Additionally, interviews with artists affiliated with the collective "Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association" and exhibition catalogues and brochures are important sources of information. Field notes gathered during the exhibition, *Lokame Taharavadu*, further contribute to the study. The secondary archives include articles about the exhibitions cited in the chapter, a documentary, "Let Me Come to Your Wound: Heal Myself," and interviews of artists available on *YouTube.*

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, "Art and People: The New Nation," explores the primary trajectory of the role of artists within the modern nation-state. It locates C. F. John's artworks within the relationship between nation, artists, and politics and the background of his exhibition in Kelakam. The chapter locates the exhibition within the larger

TH-3461_186141015

narratives on the artist as the representative of people. The objective of this section is to interrogate the ideal public sphere of Habermas which is devoid of the state's intervention.

The second section, "Art Institutions, Public Sphere, and the Civil Society," analyzes how the history of Kerala played a major role in making artists as political publics. It analyses the art movement, "Radical Painter's and Sculptors' Association," and their practice of dividing the art market and the people. It locates C. F. John's exhibition within the relationship between private intervention, art institutions, and people in the post-emergency and neoliberal periods.

The third section, "Art In-Between the Political and the Civic Public Sphere," is an exploration of the reproduction of C.F. John's exhibition within another exhibition in Alappuzha, *Lokame Tharavadu*, in the year 2021. It examines the different public spheres produced by artists' political motives and market-intervened art institutions. This section examines how community-oriented art practice could function in-between different public spheres produced by the art institutions.

2. Art and People: The New Nation

Upon inquiring about the exhibition at Kelakam, C. F. John replied, "Art should resonate with real-life. Kelakam, situated away from an urban art center like Kochi, can capture the essence of life that starts from the seeds and its stewards, the peasants."[17] John's statement suggests that he views real-life as distinct from the conventional perception of art as autonomous or detached from everyday experiences. The exhibition was informed by ethnographic field studies conducted

[17] Next chapter will analyze visual artworks and their relationship with the city of Kochi. See. C.F. John, Interview with the author, September 8, 2021, Translation mine.

TH-3461_186141015

by John since the 1990s. He was accompanied by four contemporary artists in various fields, including a visual artist, T. M. Aziz, two poets, M. P. Pratheesh and V. T. Jayadevan, and a theatre artist, Sivadas Poyikkavu.[18]

2.1. C.F. John's Artistic Career: Exhibition at Kelakam

C.F. John was born in 1960 in Thrissur, Kerala. He joined the College of Fine Arts Trivandrum for his formal art education in 1984.[19] During that time, the college experienced turmoil due to strikes organized by a collective of students, which later transformed into the "Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association."[20] Therefore, shortly after joining, John left the college to enrol in "Kalakendra," a private art institute in Thrissur. [21] After six months, John left for Bangalore to pursue an independent path in art. He began experimenting with installations in 1993 under artist and theologist Jyothi Sahi at Silvepura, Bangalore.[22]

---

[18] Ibid.

[19] Website of C. F. John, https://cfjohn.com/; Ibid.

[20] The next section analyzes the collective and the college in detail. See. Ibid.

[21] Due to the persisting issues in the college, Paulose, a faculty in the College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum, suggested John to leave the campus if John wanted an art career. In Thrissur, John studied the basic course in human anatomy under the artist Antony Devassy. Devassy was an Indian artist who attained his primary art education in Fine Arts College, Thrissur. See. T. C. Sreemol, "Artist Antony Devassy Passes Away," *Times of India*, August 18, 2012, Accessed on March 9, 2024, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/artist-antony-devassy-passes-away/articleshow/15543948.cms.

[22] Jyoti Sahi is a Bangalore-based artist who has been active for the past five decades as a painter and printmaker, developing the image of Jesus to open dialogue between Christianity, Hinduism, and tribal cultures. Sahi was brought up in Dehradun and was fond of the poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. He was influenced by the missionary and theologist Bede Griffiths and his hermitage in Kurishumala, Kerala. Sahi went to the hermitage in 1964 and practiced community-based arts and crafts. In 1972, Sahi, with his partner Jane, founded a Christian village near Silvepura, Bangalore, and started a school for local children in 1974 that developed into a learning centre. See. Victoria Emily Jones, "Jesus as a Dancer: Jyothi Sahi's "Lord of Creation"," *Sojourn Arts*, October 19, 2020, Accessed on March 2, 2024,

In the 1990s, installation art, as an artistic medium, was in its nascent stages, with only a handful of notable works done by Indian artists such as M. F. Hussain (1915-2011) and Vivan Sundaram (1943-2023).[23] John's first installation work, "Cultural Spiral," was a collaborative effort featured in a group exhibition at Ravindra Kalakshetra in Bangalore.[24] It was a cultural response to the global political issue, the Gulf War in 1990, and the vandalization of Babri Masjid and the communal riots that followed in 1992.[25] John was interested in knowing how the

https://www.sojourn-arts.com/blog/2020/10/7/jesus-as-dancer-jyoti-sahis-lord-of-creation; Terence Handley Macmath, "Interview: Jyoti Sahi, Artist," *Church Times*, June 17, 2022, Accessed on March 2, 2024, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/17-june/features/interviews/interview-jyoti-sahi-artist.

[23] M. F. Hussain was an Indian artist born into a working-class Muslim family in Pandharpur, Maharashtra. In his early days, he moved to Bombay to pursue an artistic career and work as a billboard painter and cinema poster designer. At the time, an artist, Francis Newton Souza, invited Hussain to be a part of the Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay. Although known as an Indian painter, Hussain used to do large-scale installations in and outside India. Vivan Sundaram, on the other hand, was born in Simla, Himachal Pradesh. He attained his art education from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. Sundaram started installations in the 1990s, especially in the context of communal violence in Bombay after the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. See. "Vivan Sundaram: 28 May 1943 – 29 March 2023", *Sher-Gil Sundaram Arts Foundation*, Accessed on March 9, 2024, Alessandra Consolaro, "MF Husain's Hindi Autobiography Em. Ef. Husen kī kahānī apnī zubānī. Sketches of a Performative Self, Surfing the World in Space and Time." *Annali di Ca' Foscari*. Vol. 56, 2020, 335-352; C.F. John, interview with the author, September 25, 2022; Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "The Last Decade", In *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, ed. Shaikh, Gulammuhammed., New Delhi: Tulika, 1997, 258.

[24] Other participating artists, including Sheila Gowda, Rasna Bushan, Raghavendra Rao, Om Prakash, Ravishankar Rao, P. C. Stephan, Surekha, Sudharsan, Somasekara, and Dhanaraj Keezhara. The installation used plastic, printing ink, mirrors, and bamboo poles. See. C. F. John, Website.

[25] The Gulf War was a political conflict that took place in the Middle East, specifically in the region of the Persian Gulf, from 1990 to 1991. The war involved Iraq and a coalition of countries led by the United States, to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. The conflict began when the President of Iraq Saddam Hussein occupied Kuwait in 1990. In January 1991, coalition forces launched a military campaign to drive Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The war resulted in severe loss of life, including civilians and military personnel. Meanwhile, in the next year, on December 6, 1992, a large number of Hindu fundamentalists led by Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) demolished Babri Masjid, a centuries-old mosque located in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, India. The demolition led to widespread communal violence across the country. See. Fred Halliday, "The Gulf War 1990-1991 and the Study of International Relations," *Review of*

contemporary political situations in India affected different communities in Bangalore. In 1995, his interest led to his second installation, "Silence Furies and Sorrows: Pages of a Burning City," inspired by ethnographic research on communities in Bangalore, affected by the 1992 riot. In 1998, in another installation titled "Territory", John collaborated with other artists to explore the connection between national identity and the location of labor. Malayali artist T. M. Aziz who would later collaborate with John for the exhibition in Kelakam, also participated in this project.[26] John and Aziz collaborated once again in Kerala in 1999, working with the fishermen community in Anjuthengu, Trivandrum. This project was conducted in collaboration with the National Fish Workers Federation. The artists spent one week connecting themselves with the lives and experiences of the fishermen.[27] Subsequently, in 2003, they participated in another exhibition titled "Walls of Memories" in Bangalore.[28]

Following their collaboration in "Walls of Memories," John became deeply contemplative about creating a large-scale installation work in India focused on farmers. He said,

> "I felt a strong desire to create artwork that deeply resonates with real-life. I believe that farmers would serve as an excellent subject for this purpose. They labor tirelessly daily, and an entire ecosystem surrounds them and their seeds. Unfortunately, the nation has often neglected farmers recently,"[29]

John expressed his desire to do artworks to his friend Tomy Mathew, an official in FTAK. When Mathew agreed, John began conducting an ethnographic study on the farming community in the

---

International Studies, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1994, 109- 130; K. N. Panikkar, "Religious Symbols and Political Mobilization: The Agitation for a Mandir at Ayodhya", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 21, No. ⅞, 1993, 63-78.

[26] John, Website.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] C.F. John, interview with the author, September 8, 2021, Translation Mine.

Malabar region, Kerala. In January 2016, John started attending the Seed Fest, observing the stalls, and inquiring about and studying the variety of seeds.[30] T. M. Aziz accompanied him during this study. Recognizing Kerala's high literary culture, John felt inspired to incorporate Malayalam literary works into his forthcoming project. As a result, he enlisted the participation of two poets, M. P. Pratheesh and V. T. Jayadevan, and a theatre artist, Sivadas Poyikkavu.[31]

Upon learning about the upcoming annual Seed Fest at Kelakam in 2020, the artists made intermittent visits to the village. During these visits, they explored the everyday lives of farmers in Kelakam. FTAK provided food and accommodation for the artists, as well as funding for the art materials.[32] Considering the topography, John and other artists visually planned the spatial distribution of the stalls for the Seed Fest and installations. They collaborated with the local farming community, who provided everyday materials and actively participated in the art-making process under the artists' guidance.[33]

Creating the ten installations concluded with the inauguration of the Seed Fest on January 16, 2020, lasting for five days. The entire process, from ethnographic research to art-making and exhibition, was digitally documented. The documentation was undertaken by C. F. John's son, Manush John, who is a sculptor and filmmaker.[34] The organizers arranged the exhibition as a

---

[30] John, interview with the author, September 8, 2021.

[31] Sudhakaran P, "When Art Meets Agriculture," *Times of India*, 19 January 2020; Ibid.

[32] One of the organizers, Thomas Kalappura documented the expenses of the exhibition. He explained that money was mostly spent on printing and the labor costs. The exhibition spent expenses amounting to Rs. 1,21,675. Thomas Kalappura, Interview with the author, August 16, 2022.

[33] John, interview with the author, September 8, 2021.

[34] Manush John also handled the editing process for the documentary. See. Manush John, "Let Me Come to Your Wounds; Heal Myself- 2020", *YouTube*, April 2, 2021, Accessed on September 9, 2021, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xMf_WLmWxfhuIKCY_UMiXCX3KgxJ8UN-KnSvFvA1erY/edit?pli=1; John, Interview with the author, September 8, 2021.

pedagogic program, including workshops, guidance, and interactive discussions. Thirty schoolchildren were arranged from nearby schools to facilitate interactions with the installations for the visitors.[35] The organizers invited other artists and artisans engaged in pottery making and craftwork. Children from an organization called *Kanavu* crafted the bamboo and coconut leaves.[36] Each of the installations was placed in such a way that the visitors could touch the art objects, a restricted act in art galleries. The pedagogical efforts aimed to raise visitors' awareness of the existing challenges faced by farming communities in the Malabar region and to empower them with knowledge about actions they could take as a citizen of the nation. Beginning with John's career in installation art from 1993 to 2020, his primary focus has been on advocating for the rights of minority communities within a nation. This concept gained popularity among artists in the 1950s with the Nehruvian modernization efforts.

2.2. Artists and the Nation in the Making

There was an installation, "Chair of Seed Keepers" in the exhibition at Kelakam.[37] The installation featured a wooden chair positioned on a podium that was covered with a red carpet (Figure 4.2). The artwork provided visitors with an interactive experience. Each visitor was prompted to contemplate what action they would take if granted the authority to make political decisions within the country. Visitors were invited to sit on the chair and publicly declare their

[35] Kalappura, Interview with the author, August 16, 2022; Ibid.

[36] *Kanavu* is an educational institution founded in 1991 by writer and filmmaker K. J. Baby and his wife Shirly as an alternative school for children from the tribal communities in the Wayanad district. It also works towards preserving the art and craft forms of the communities. See. Manisha Martin, "Kanavu: A Documentary on an Alternative School for Kerala's Tribal Children," *The News Minute*, 8 October 2021, Accessed on June 18, 2023, https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/kanavu-documentary-alternative-school-keralas-tribal-children-156264.

[37] John, Website.

decisions and recommendations to the nation in support of the farming community. The installation attracted a range of participants, including children, cultural activists, and film actors, who stepped forward to occupy the chair and express their viewpoints.

Those interested in speaking from the chairs were required to complete a form, providing their identification details, and specifying the topic they intended to address. Additionally, the installation was connected to an adjacent open booth where visitors could conveniently fill out these forms. The completed forms were displayed on a board adjacent to the podium, allowing visitors to read and engage with the thoughts and recommendations shared by others. This display facilitated transparency and openness within the exhibition, enabling visitors to learn from each other's perspectives and contribute to a collective dialogue on supporting the farming community. The two sides of the booth were covered with polyvinyl chloride flex banners, on which the maps of four districts; Kasargod, Kannur, Wayanad, and Kozhikode were displayed (Figure 4.3). The visitors were asked to mark the place they came from using a *bindi* on that map.[38]

[38] *Bindi* is a decorative mark worn on forehead mainly by women in South Asia.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 4.2. The south Indian actor Prakash Raj, renowned for his outspoken political speeches on matters of nationhood and citizenship under the rule of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), took a seat in the installation. Source. C. F. John, website.

Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati

Figure 4. 3. The booth, Source: C. F. John, website

Post-independence, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, embarked on a modernization project that involved centralized governance and focused on developing the nation-state.[39] Educational institutions are recognized as crucial spaces for forming modern public spheres and play a central role in shaping citizens.[40] They have been instrumental in India's endeavor to establish itself internationally.[41] There was a strong emphasis on education on arts and culture as key components.[42] The central Government took initiatives to establish national museums, which showcased the country's artistic heritage and history.[43]

[39] Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 291.

[40] Ritty Lukose, "Empty Citizenship: Protesting Politics in the Era of Globalization," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 2005, pp. 506-533.

[41] Kapila Vatsyayan, *Transmissions and Transformations*, Delhi: India International Center, 2011, 6.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Kavitha Sing, "The Museum is National," *India, International Center*, Vol. 29, No. ¾, Winter 2002- Spring 2003.

TH-3461_186141015

During the period of 1940 to 1960, the institutionally trained artists in India were engaged in redefining their profession and exploring their political role as anti-imperialists.[44] Towards Indian independence, artists such as Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee from Bengal offered a critique of the exclusive nature of the institutional high art.[45] They sought to establish an interconnected relationship between the artist and the nation, drawing inspiration from the idea of a village in India.[46] This inspiration was influenced by the leader of freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi's endorsement of village craft, and the artistic ethos of Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan, which emphasized a deep appreciation for folk aesthetics.[47] Initially, artists focused on folk art as a medium of expression to contribute to nation-building. Artists associated with groups such as Calcutta Group, Progressive Artists Group in Bombay, and Progressive Painters Association in Madras school actively worked towards representing the lives of folk and peasant communities. Moving away from the traditional notion of high art, the artists' activities witnessed a shift towards socially engaged craft practices.

[44] Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 365.

[45] Nandalal Bose was the first among Indian artists who tried to understand the methods and nuances of traditional art forms and explore the possibilities of their contemporary use. He attached the value of a village artisan to that of a literate urban artist. Benoddebehari Mukherjee joined with Bose, and together, they created a new pedagogy based on folk and village tradition in the school of Santhiniketan. See. "Interview With K. G. Subramanyan about Nandalal Bose" *Asia Art Archive*, 1982; Deeptha Achar and Shivaji K. Panikkar, Articulating *Resistance: Art and Activism*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012, xxi.

[46] Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 271; Achar and Panikkar, Articulating *Resistance*, xxi.

[47] Gandhi criticized art's function when disconnected from the common people. For Gandhi, the teleology of art represents the peasant and the poor in the village. Meanwhile, Santiniketan began to focus on folk art since the 1920s. It created a democratic urge in Nandalal Bose, and his pupil Ramkinkar Baij exemplified it. See. Avadhesh Kumar Singh, "Critiquing Mahatma Gandhi's Views on Art and Literature," *Indian Literature*, Vol. 53, No. 3, 2009, 147-162; Ibid.

The continuous engagement with folk and craft tradition was particularly exemplified in the works of artist, pedagogue, and writer K. G. Subramanyan in the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, in the 1960s. As a member of the school, Subramanyan went on a toy-making project every year during the Fine Arts Fair.[48] The purpose of the fair was to encourage art students to make objects using craft techniques that they would invent or learn, whereby they would also unlearn some of the cliches of studio lessons.[49] Following him, there were efforts from the artists to revitalize and modernize traditional craft practices, recognizing their significance as a part of India's artistic and cultural legacy.[50] Jawaharlal Nehru's government looked to the intelligentsia, including the artist community, to play a crucial role in the nation's transition from a colonial state to a modern, democratic, and secular one.[51] Art historian Geeta Kapur argued that artists, as members of the intelligentsia, aligned with the state's embodiment of an emancipatory agenda.[52] Therefore, the artists acquired their status as people's representatives.[53] C. F. John's exhibition reflected a similar tendency to represent the village people and raise awareness of their citizenship within the nation.

[48] Kapur, *When Was Modernism,* 89.

[49] Along with the entire supporting faculty, K.G. Subramanyan made terracotta objects, weavings, and hand-printed children's books. They designed masks, costumes, and decor for puppet shows and added every year to the repertoire of toys. See. Ibid.

[50] Achar and Panikkar, Articulating *Resistance*, xxiii.

[51] Geeta Kapur, "Secular Artist, Citizen Artist," In *Articulating Resistance: Art and Activism,* Deeptha Achar, and Shivaji K. Panikkar, eds, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012, 181-200, 29.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Kapur, *When Was Modernism,* 366.

TH-3461_186141015

In Habermas's account, the political public sphere is marked off from the material exercise of political power and economic interest.[54] However, sociologist Craig Calhoun offered a critical analysis of Habermas's public sphere in the context of the emergence of modern nation-states in the West. Calhoun's insights into the intersections of power, discourse, and the public sphere offer a lens through which the role of artists as agents of social and political transformation within the modern nation of India can be analyzed. Calhoun argued that along with the new nation-state, there emerged new communication media, rising literacy and education levels, the growth of the state, and the expansion of popular political participation.[55] According to him, these developments reconfigured the distinction between public and private. By analyzing how various actors, including governments, media institutions, and social movements, influencing and shaping public discourse, Calhoun identified that the public sphere became an extension of political power.

In the context of India's evolving political landscape, artists utilize their platforms to represent the interests of the people by addressing pressing social issues, highlighting marginalized voices, and contributing in shaping the collective identity of the nation. John was part of the political public sphere between the state and civil society.[56] In one of the notes in the installation, "Chair of Seed Keepers," it was written,

[54] Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.*

[55] Craig Calhoun, "The Public Sphere in the Field of Power," *Social Science History*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2010, 301- 335.

[56] According to Craig Calhoun, civil society is seen mainly in terms of the direct action of citizens, organized informally in communities or more formally in voluntary associations. However, Calhoun analyzed the emergence of civil society in relation to the urban city. The next chapter analyzes the city and the civil society by studying Kochi. Craig Calhoun, "Civil Society and the Public Sphere," In. *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*, Ed. Edward, Michael, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

TH-3461_186141015

> "Tell yourself, tell the nation from the edge of wound; Are you a farmer? Farmer's friend? Some one concerned about farmer's living reality in our country? [...] Often times or it has at least crossed your mind, you feel that there are things the nation could do to make farmers' lives better."[57]

In this context, civil society served as a facilitator of pedagogical communication that aimed at promoting the public good, potentially influencing the state. John, acting as a representative of civil society, was affected by the historical trajectory of the state's previous endeavours to influence artists as integral components of the political public sphere within a postcolonial nation. Within this political public sphere, government art institutions were considered public, and economic intervention in the institutions was considered private, thus leading to the subsequent section.

3. Art Institutions, Public Spheres, and Civil Society

While doing the installation at Kelakam, one of the main criticisms against the visual art world raised by C. F. John was the intervention of corporate interest in the art institutions.[58] He perceived institutional visual art as a realm separate from everyday life, characterized by a dichotomy between private interests and civil society. John's attempt to redefine such an art practice stands out as a characteristic of the expanding collaborative and participatory artistic practices of Malayalis since the latter 1970s.

Anthropologist and Feminist scholar Ritty Lukose observed that educational institutions are often regarded as crucial spaces for forming modern public spheres and are central to

[57] John, website.

[58] John, Interview with the author, September 8, 2021.

TH-3461_186141015

cultivating citizens within modern nation-states.[59] She argued that within Kerala's developing narrative of modernity, the public in educational institutional spaces has come to be understood as a political public driven by the political agency of revolutionizing young men.[60] Lukose identified the political public as a category dominated by masculinized political agency, particularly evident in institutional spaces where women and girls were extensively included in educational settings but significantly excluded from active participation in the political public sphere.[61]

Art institutions were not an exception. In the 1980s, art institutions worldwide were compelled to address the changing nature of artistic practice and the criteria for educating artists. Art historian Steven Henry Madoffe emphasized that art schools are no longer confined to traditional notions of research, and technological training. Instead, they have adapted to a changing political and economic situation that encompasses marketing and the production of artists as commodities.[62] Art schools and other art institutions, such as museums and galleries, have been shaped by the global currents in the cultural sector and political life. Parallel movements in other cultural sectors have promoted increased access to and increased recognition of the culture of working-class communities, migrant communities, women, and people with disabilities.[63] Within the global changing political scenario, the Fine Arts College, Trivandrum, found itself compelled to reconsider the boundaries of its institution.[64]

[59] Lukose, "Empty Citizenship: Protesting Politics in the Era of Globalization," 506.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid, 513.

[62] Steven Henry Madoff, *Art School: Propositions for the 21st Century,* Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2009, x.

[63] Jennifer Barret, *Museum and the Public Sphere,* West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, 5.

[64] Additional contextual information regarding this institution is provided in the introduction.

TH-3461_186141015

3.1. The Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptor's Association (IRPSA)

The Fine Arts College, Trivandrum stood as the earliest art school in Kerala, and it is distinguished by its relatively superior infrastructure and curriculum compared to other institutions in the state. Consequently, other fine arts colleges sought guidance from the syllabus established at the Fine Arts College in Trivandrum. In 1975, the institution underwent an upgrade from the School of Arts, Trivandrum, to the College of Fine Arts, Trivandrum. However, this transformation posed challenges, as the college, originally established as a technical school with an emphasis on colonial pedagogy focused on craft works, lacked the necessary institutional framework and infrastructure to support a studio art program.[65] In the year of the inauguration of the college itself, the students went on strike against the bureaucratic presence of technical education, which continued till the end of the 1980s.[66] The agitations against the college provided a fertile ground for the artists to contemplate the political possibilities of art. Within the institute, artists were formed into an informal collective under the leadership of artists K.P. Krishnakumar, Alex Mathew, Akkitham Vasudevan, N. N. Rimzon, K. Prabhakaran, and K. M. Madhusudhanan who would later become the collective, the radical collective, IRPSA.[67]

During the 1960s and 1970s, the political landscape of Kerala witnessed a significant shift, largely driven by ideological conflicts within the dominant left-wing politics. Artists played a crucial role during this period by engaging in struggles within institutional frameworks, using their creative endeavors to stage activities that presented an alternative to the established left-party

---

[65] Kathleen Lynne Wyma, *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art,* Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2007, 127.

[66] Alex Mathew, Interview with the Author, 14 October 2021; Rajadhyaksha, "The Last Decade," 241.

[67] K.P. Krishnakumar was already a student at the School of Art and was pursuing painting. See. Wyma, *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art*, 127; Rajadhyaksha, "The Last Decade"

structure. With the declaration of a national emergency in 1975, more cultural activities oriented towards politics arose among the youth in educational institutions.[68] The Russian Cultural Center and a film society called *Chithralekha,* in Thiruvananthapuram played influential roles in shaping the perspectives of fine art students.[69] The Russian Cultural Center screened the movies of Sergei Eisenstein, a renowned Soviet film director and film theorist. The fine arts students will go there to watch films. The center also provided a reading space for them. *Chithralekha* screened international films. Additionally, The Boys' Hostel for Fine Arts emerged as a vibrant hub offering ample space for collaboration and exchange of ideas among folk singers, poets, filmmakers, and Naxal activists who temporarily resided there.[70]

As an alternative to the existing left-party politics, artists from the Trivandrum College began participating in radical activities such as street protests, channeling their creative energy toward expressing political dissent against the state and art institutional structures.[71] Despite the artists' protests and demonstrations, there were no immediate changes in the pedagogy of the college. Instead, the authorities had delayed the progress of those who had enrolled during the mid-seventies, resulting in many artists graduating several years later, around 1981.[72] The bureaucratic resistance and lack of responsiveness to the artists' demands led to frustration and impatience among them. They sought a more open and flexible environment for a new artistic career. As a result, in the 1980s, many artists from the College of Fine Art, Trivandrum, decided to leave and

[68] K. Raghunathan, Interview with the author, 27 November 2021.

[69] *Chithralekha* was an initiative of the film director Adoor Gopalakrishnan, after his film *Swayamvaram.* See. K. Raghunathan, Interview with the author, November 27, 2021; Sasikumar, *Social Spaces and Public Sphere,* 117.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Wyma, *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art*, 130.

pursue their studies at other art schools in India. K. P. Krishnakumar left for Santiniketan, while Alex Mathew, N. N. Rimzon, Ashokan Pothuval, K. M. Madhusudhanan, Surendran Nair, and Prabhakaran chose to continue their studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.[73]

During the 1960s and the 1970s, the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, emerged as the leading art school that actively pursued the social relevance of art practice. By the mid-1980s, the school had established itself as India's premier art institution.[74] From Santiniketan, K. P. Krishnakumar initiated a practice of writing letters to his Malayali friends in Baroda and Kerala, fostering ongoing conversations that he would maintain throughout his life.[75] After finishing studies at Santiniketan, Krishnakumar joined his friends, first at an art center, Kanoria Centre for Arts in Ahmedabad and then in Baroda.[76] By 1987, Krishnakumar set up a studio in Baroda and planned an exhibition at the Gallery inside the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda.[77] In the year, Malayali artists, along with Krishnakumar, staged the exhibition *Questions and Dialogue* at the Fine Arts Gallery of the Baroda University.[78] Among the young Malayali men, there was one non-Malayali female artist

[73] Ibid.

[74] Rajadhyaksha, "The Last Decade," 241.

[75] Anita Dube, "Midnight Dreams: The Tragedy of a Lone Revolutionalsy," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 36, 2014, pp. 47.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid.

[78] In 1986, the Communist Party of India, Marxist (CPIM) conducted an All-India Conference in Baroda. The party planned a workshop of artists for the conference. But Krishnakumar resisted the move by asserting that artists were not to follow any organization but should have their own association. Therefore, the artists cancelled the plan for the workshop and instead, planned the exhibition in the Baroda School. K. Raghunathan, Interview with the author, 27 November 2021; Wyma, *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art*, 17.

TH-3461_186141015

present, Anita Dube.[79] The artists extended invitations to other Malayali artists in Kerala by sending telegrams and letters inviting them to participate in the exhibition.[80] The exhibition operated without a curator, and the catalog was written by Anita Dube (Figure 4.4).

The artists in the exhibition focused on examining the condition of Indian folk and village art, challenging the nationalist celebration of art and craft practices in the village. In the exhibition catalog, Anita Dube criticized the ideology of K. G. Subramanyan, which she described as a fetishistic form of earlier nationalism.[81] According to Dube, Subramanyan's engagement with folk art represented a paternalistic false humanism of the feudal bourgeois, speaking on behalf of state capitalism and class society. However, Dube acknowledged the potential for institutions in modern nations to diverge from their former connection with the state and market to create spaces for artists to communicate with people. The catalog essay called for a comprehensive reevaluation of the relationship between the artist and the people, urging a critical examination of the political implications of visual language and artistic content. It stated,

---

[79] Since the official formation of the collective, Anita Dube has actively participated in art activities taking place in Kerala. In 2018, She became the first woman curator of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale. Wyma, *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art*, 144; Anita Dube, *Questions and Dialogue*, Exhibition catalogue, Calicut, 1987.

[80] They invited the younger artists from Trivandrum Fine Arts College, C. Pradeep, V. N. Jyothi Basu, C. K. Rajan, T. K. Hareendran, and D. Alexander. These new young artists had organized an artists' camp in a fishing village, culminating in the exhibition "Painters with Fisherman," at the Trivandrum Student Centre in 1985. Anita Dube explained that the political understanding, artistic ambition, and comradeship in the exhibition were something that Krishnakumar admired and envied. In order to translate the Malayalam notes to English for the exhibition, the artists sought help from another artist A. Soman from Calicut. However, at the time of the exhibition, the collective did not get the translated notes due to the poor technological communication to update the process. Therefore, the collective selected the writing of Anita Dube and made the essay as the catalog. K. Raghunathan, Interview with the author, 27 November 2021; Dube, "Midnight Dreams", 48.

[81] Dube, *Questions and Dialogue*

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 4.4. "Questions and Dialogue," Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, 1987. Source: Screenshot from the photo documentation of the exhibition, *Asia Art Archive*

> "We do not want to see the relationship between intellectuals (artists as special kinds of intellectuals) and the masses in mechanistic terms. In a theoretical leadership of intellectuals of the faceless masses (outside any real contact), we see distinct fascist tendencies. The only alternative to these existing modes of art practice appears to us in a collective organization of artists to recover lost pedagogic-didactic values of art. By organizing radical activities outside the dominant cultural itinerary we believe we may stand somewhere between mass consciousness and the pure intellectuals, directing in the process both towards a more meaningful and truthful engagement with reality."[82]

[82] Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

Dube used the term "mass," to refer primarily to the lower-class people. The Radical artists recognized that the earlier intelligentsia among the artists in the new nation did not address the relationship between the art market and institutions. They wanted to separate art institutions from the market to reach out to the lower class, especially the working class and peasants.

In 1989, the Radical Group organized an exhibition titled "Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association", at the Town Hall in Calicut, running from February 20 to February 23. During this exhibition, they circulated a manifesto in Malayalam, officially establishing the collective under the same name as the exhibition title.[83] In the manifesto, artists urged the Malayali artistic community to address several issues that contemporary art was facing. They wrote,

> "Nowadays, the field of Indian art and sculpture faces a significant issue. The news media and advertisements contribute to a degraded perception of visual images and symbols in the conscious and unconscious minds of people. It is crucial to recognize that the state's power indirectly reinforces its ideology through these generated images. Therefore, artists should take the initiative to emancipate the people from the influence of commercial movies and hoardings which create a sense of euphoria."[84]

The Radical artists firmly believed that visual art needed to connect with the people to reclaim its revolutionary potential. They emphasized that art should not be reduced to a commodity consumed by a privileged few.[85] Therefore, the artists aimed to create a visual language that would resonate with the imagined communities and challenge the elitist nature of visual art.

---

[83] The collective could collect the Malayalam notes that were produced for the former exhibition and edit them into the manifesto. Raghunathan, Interview with the author, November 27, 2021

[84] Manifesto, *Prathiloma Drishyabodhathinethire Kalakaranmar Sankhadikkunnu* (Artists Organize Against the Conservative Visual Consciousness), Calicut, January 27, 1989, Translation mine.

[85] Wyma, *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art*, 115.

The Radical's resistance to commodification in India's art world culminated in a protest in 1989 against the British-founded American multinational corporation, Sotheby's, which made its early attempts to host an auction in Bombay. The auction, *Timeless Art,* was conducted at Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus railway station and showcased the works of thirty-five Indian artists, making them visible in the international arena.[86] However, this move was met with protest from the Radical group (Figure 4.5). The protesters expressed their opposition through placards with messages such as "Go Back Sotheby" and "Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association Against Imperial Exploitation of Art." They viewed the auction as a form of cultural imperialism, with Sotheby's exploiting Indian art for profit. Furthermore, the Radicals accused the participating Indian artists of succumbing to capitalism by taking part in the auction.[87]

In Radical movements, there is a concept wherein the state and its institutions are considered public, pitted against the market, which is understood to be private. They were against the overlapping of the private and public. They recognized that found materials, which symbolized a non-elitist nature, had the potential to challenge privatization and its influence on modernism in institutions.[88] Malayali artists in various art schools in India followed the ideas and artistic expressions perpetuated by the Radical groups in the 1990s.[89] C.F. John's journey as an installation

[86] Anto K.G, Interview with the author, December 11, 2022; Ibid, 10-11

[87] Alex Mathew, Interview with the Author, October 14, 2021; "Noted Painter T. K. Hanreendran on IRPSA Activist and Sculptor KP Krishnakumar", Vaikhari Collective, *YouTube*, January 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-rxL-GGYw8 Accessed on 12 June 2023; Ibid.

[88] With the demise of their leader K. P. Krishnakumar On 26 December 1989, the collective was disbanded. Sharmistha Ghosal, "Acclaimed Painter-Sculptor N. N. Rimzon Talks About Art and What Inspires his Life-Size Sculptors," *Indian Express,* February 4, 2022, Accessed on June 6, 2023, https://www.indulgexpress.com/culture/art/2022/feb/04/acclaimed-painter-sculptor-nn-rimzon-talks-about-art-and-what-inspires-his-life-size-sculptures-38806.html.

[89] Sudheesh, *Graduating Tensions*, 17.

artist was shaped by the larger emerging circumstances, although he was not directly connected with radical artists. John opposed the intervention of the market in institutions and aesthetics, viewing them as obstacles that needed to be overcome. He said,

> "I was badly affected by neoliberal policies in India in the early 1990s. However, I found myself unable to translate my ideas against it through conventional art forms such as sculpture and paintings. These art forms often represent marginalized communities as mere objects to be looked at in the consumer art market. Therefore, I shifted my focus to installations, where I could utilize everyday materials to interact with people beyond the realm of passive viewing."[90]

Figure 4.5. The Radical group was protesting against Sotheby's show. Source: Screenshot, "Noted Painter T. K. Hanreendran on IRPSA Activist and Sculptor KP Krishnakumar," Vaikhari Collective, *YouTube,* January 25, 2018.

[90] John, Interview with the author, September 8, 2021.

TH-3461_186141015

Therefore, John developed his artistic career using everyday materials to incorporate two key elements into his work: narrative techniques and a sense of tactility or physical engagement. John's exhibition at Kelakam emphasized the tactile property of everyday materials and the accompanying narrative forms. A note from his exhibition stated, "It is not the art that should assume the color, form, and fragrance but that which it tries to touch."[91]

3.2. Expanding Sensory Faculties: A Critique of Elite Art Forms

In the exhibition at Kelakam, each artwork invited active physical engagement from the visitors. Everyday objects within the exhibition space were transformed to the status of art objects through various means. The interconnection between materials, the tactile engagement with them, and the narratives presented in both textual and verbal forms unfolded each installation. One of the installations, "Human-Animal Conflict," described the issue of wild animal's encroachment into the farmlands in the Malabar region, particularly at the forest border in Kelakam village. The artists conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the border farmlands and peasant homes, where they collected information about everyday issues. They engaged in conversations with the residents and documented their experiences and challenges. Additionally, the artists communicated with the relevant authorities in the village to gather official information.

Through a combination of text, images, and sound, "Human-Animal Conflict" conveyed the concerns and challenges experienced by the farmers at the exhibition site. The textual component of the installation incorporates documents received from state institutions, oral narratives from farmers, and handwritten appeals from residents. The visual image portrays a

[91] John, website.

panoramic view of the landscape, specifically focusing on wild boars destroying crops (Figure 4.6). This image is depicted on a ninety-foot-long fence constructed from old sarees that the artists acquired from neighboring houses. The audio component played for fourteen minutes. It expresses the concerns and proposed solutions of the residents regarding a forest management policy that impacts their lives, farmlands, animals, and the forest itself. The installation provided a narrative space for visitors to participate and share their opinions. They are invited to write their thoughts on pieces of colored cloth. After that, they stitched it together on another saree to form a quilt (Figure 4.7).[92]

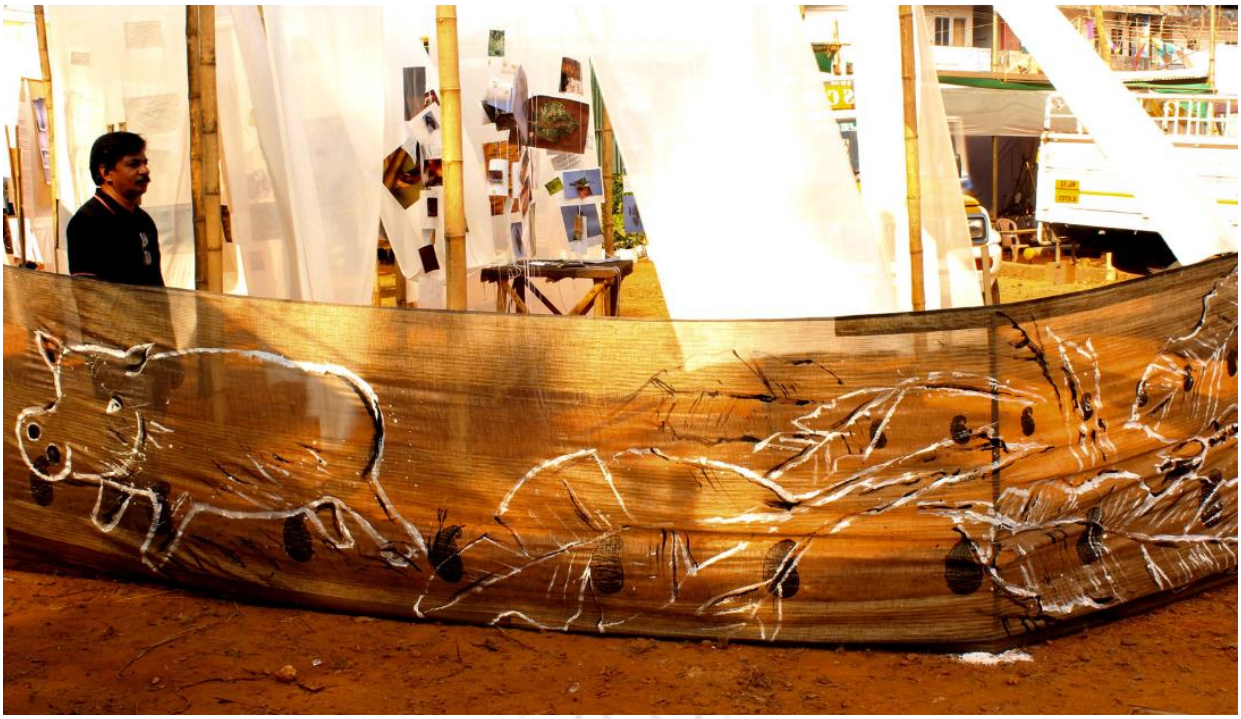


Figure 4.6. "Human-Animal Conflict," *Installation*, Paintings on a saree depicting a wild boar destroying crops. Source: Screenshot, C.F. John, Website

[92] Ibid

Figure 4.7. "Human-Animal Conflict," *Installation,* 2020. Source: Screenshot: C.F. John, Website

Another artwork that focused on the narrative form was "Martyres' Wall." The installation represented a temporary wall of thirty feet long and nine feet high, made of mud, seeds, and oil lamps (Figure 4.8). Above the wall, artists installed nine flags with a length of three feet and called them prayer flags. It contained printed copies of the First Information Reports (FIR) of farmers in Malabar districts who had shed their lives. The installations demanded visitors to torch the oil lamps as a tribute to the farmers' lives. C. F. John explained, "The farmers are the most vulnerable, and they are the least honored even in their death. We never erect any memorials in the name of these 'unknown citizens,' and that is why we erected this wall, which never divides a space or marks any border."[93] The wall transferred to an artwork when the visitors collectively torched the lamps.

[93] Sudhakaran P, "When Art Meets Agriculture," *Times of India,* January 19, 2020.

Figure 4.8. "Martyr's Wall," Kelakam, 2020, visitors were asked to light the lamp as a tribute to the farmers who lost their lives due to debt and wild-life attacks in the Malabar region. Source: Screenshot, C. F John. Website.

The installations featuring everyday materials and interactive methods served as an alternative to the consumer-driven approach to art and aesthetics that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Similar dissent associated with globalization is observed in educational institutions in Kerala beyond the art world, characterized by the expansion of the market economy and the promotion of a consumerist ethos. However, it often occurs at the cost of state-centric approaches to politics and citizenship, where the role of the state in governing is shaped in favor

of the consumer market.[94] In this context, some people view privatization positively, believing that it serves as a catalyst for economic growth and can alleviate the burdens associated with large state bureaucracies and inefficiencies, benefiting both governments and citizens alike.[95] In contrast, those who oppose privatization argue that when the state withdraws from providing social services, and there is a simultaneous rise in consumption and the prevalence of market ideology, it leads to an increase in inequality.[96] John's exhibition aligned with the second perspective.

On the division between the state as public and the market as private, Ritty Lukose argued the publics in Kerala during the 1990s, with the impact of globalization and neoliberalism, was divided into political public and civic public in which the civic is tied to the discourse of consumption and free market.[97] She wrote, "In an era of neo-liberalization, contestations over whether education is a public good or a private commodity are transforming conceptions of the public, citizenship, and democracy.[98] The political and civic publics that Lukose identified play a critical role in the art world, where the public sphere is divided between market-intervened art practice for the civic public and site-specific art practice for the political public. However, this division seems flexible in the art world where site-specific artworks are transferable in the public sphere, which blurs the distinction between political and civic publics.

[94] Lukose, "Empty Citizenship," 507.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid, 518.

[98] Ibid, 519.

4. Art In-Between the Political and the Civic Public Sphere

Moving away from modernistic elements, the artworks in Kelakam relied on the concept of process-based narratives. This concept encompasses the entire journey from formulating a project proposal and envisioning future scenarios to involving various individuals and implementing selected events. Throughout this process, a narrative is constructed, unfolding through each stage of planning and execution.[99] This story defines the artwork and its public as they emerged from the exhibition site and played a crucial role in defining the space where the exhibition took place. The exhibition space became a platform for the ongoing exploration and reinterpretation of these narratives, ensuring that they remain alive even after their ephemeral displays. If the artworks presented a story for the local community, the textual and visual narrations could be incorporated into another story for a wider public, potentially adding additional layers of meaning beyond their original context.

Although the exhibition addressed a civil society with a political motive by criticizing the modern aesthetic practice, C.F. John depended on discourses in the academic field and art criticism in interviews, articles, personal email, and videos. It was evident from John's mail,

> "When we speak of pedagogy, I feel it is time to think of critical pedagogy. It is not to find effective ways to percolate the ideas from the top to all the sections of people but to learn from the wisdom of people who have been nurturing, preserving, and guarding all forms of life on earth. Like tribals and farmers."[100]

[99] Fotiadi, *The Game of Participation in Art and the Public Sphere*, 43

[100] C.F. John, personal email, September 9, 2021

TH-3461_186141015

John's pedagogical approach at Kelakam aimed to disrupt traditional power relations and promote a more inclusive and dialogical exchange of knowledge through the institutional language of art criticism, a dimension that was lacking during the exhibition. Significantly, after the ephemeral exhibition, articles, videos, and websites positioned John's exhibition within the broader discourse on art practice.[101] John preferred print media and online portals for communicating his exhibition. His website included the whole process of visual documentation about the exhibition, along with his other installations and oil paintings. Another main transformation regarding the artworks addressing the art world was its display in another exhibition in Alleppey, *Lokame Tharavadu*.

4.1. *Lokame Tharavad* (World is One Family)

The emergence of media discussions on C.F. John's work coincided with his display of the reproduction of the work in an exhibition titled *Lokame Tharavadu* the following year in 2021. *Lokame Tharavadu* is a visual art exhibition in the port city of Alappuzha, organized by the Kochi Biennale Foundation in collaboration with the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Culture, Kerala. The phrase "Lokame Tharavadu" translates to "World is One Family" and is derived from verses in a Malayalam poem by Vallathol Narayana Menon. The exhibition was curated by the president of the Kochi Biennale Foundation, Bose Krishnamanchari. It was originally planned to begin on April 18, 2021, but the COVID-19 pandemic led to intermittent lockdowns in Kerala, causing delays. As a result, the exhibition's inauguration took place on August 13, 2021, and lasted up to December 31, 2021.[102]

---

[101] Kalachandran, "Rakthasakshiyude Chumarile Prardhanayude Pathakakal" (The flags of Prayers on the Walls of Martiers), *Mathrubhumi,* 20 February 2020, 96-97; C. F. John, "Art and Agriculture: A Postscript for Installations", *Ezhuthu,* 11 May 2020; C.F. John, "An Aesthetic of Regeneration," *Leisa India,* Vol.22, No.4, December 2020.

[102] See. Komal Sharma, "'Lokame Tharavadu' is a Spectacular Encapsulation of Art Born of Malayali Culture", *Architectural Digest*, 26 December 2021, Accessed on 17 June 2023,

TH-3461_186141015

Alappuzha, a historical port city in Kerala, sought to redefine its cultural identity following the success of four editions of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which put the neighboring port city of Kochi firmly on the map of visual culture.[103] With *Lokame Tharavadu*, the organizers aimed to establish Alappuzha as a cultural destination akin to Kochi, inviting tourists and art enthusiasts to explore the urban space.[104] The organizers identified colonial buildings in Alappuzha that could potentially be repurposed into art galleries, following a practice previously employed by the Biennale Foundation in Kochi.[105] Out of seven venues, they set up six temporary galleries using dilapidated godowns and factories, and one venue being the Durbar Hall in Kochi.[106] Two godowns were privately owned by the local industrialist Betty Karunakaran.[107] The government of Kerala promised two crores for the renovation and construction of the gallery, with additional funding provided by the Biennale Foundation and private entrepreneurs.[108]

The exhibition featured 267 Malayali artists showcasing 3000 artworks.[109] C.F. John was one among them. John's work was displayed in the largest gallery, Go Down D, located at the

https://www.architecturaldigest.in/story/lokame-tharavadu-is-a-spectacular-encapsulation-of-art-born-of-malayali-culture/; *Malayala Manorama*, "Varoo, Tharavadu Vilikkunnu" (Welcome: The Ancestral Home is Calling), 1 December 2021, Accessed on 6 June 2023, https://www.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2021/12/01/lokame-tharavadu-alappuzha.html.

[103] I provide further elaboration on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Chapter 5.

[104] Their objective was firmly established with the fifth edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2022, where some artworks were extended to the city of Alappuzha.

[105] See. Sharma, "'Lokame Tharavadu' is a Spectacular Encapsulation of Art Born of Malayali Culture"; *Malayala Manorama,* "Varoo, Tharavadu Vilikkunnu."

[106] Benny Kuriakose, the architect for the Muziris Heritage Project, restored old historic buildings and created false walls. See. Sharma, "'Lokame Tharavadu' is a Spectacular Encapsulation of Art Born of Malayali Culture"

[107] Bose Krishnamachari, Interview with the author, September 22, 2021.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Field note, September 8, 2022.

TH-3461_186141015

Kerala State Coir Corporation (KSCC). His artwork titled "Segregated-Discarded" comprised an installation and oil paintings and a video installation of the documentary "Let Me Come to Your Wound; Heal Myself" (Figure 4.9).[110] The documentary presented a 29-minute video with the same title as the exhibition in Kelakam, narrating the processes involved in the exhibition. Most of the space allotted to John was occupied by his installation, which represented large sacks of coir stretched from one end of the hall to the other, along with a tender coconut plant and mud. The video installation was displayed in a corner of the hall behind the large installation. In the accompanying bio note, John explained, "Often what we disregard, what we push to the margin and throw away as waste, constitute to serve our survival. Though the materials used in this installation may be disregarded, a farmer will hold them tight to herself."[111] The bio note, installation, and video installation collectively narrated the story of the farming community by emphasizing the everyday materials associated with farming. As a result, the exhibition featured in the documentary became an integral part of the broader narrative that unfolded within the gallery space.

[110] C.F. John handed over some of his old oil paintings to Bose Krishnamachari, likely to utilize the gallery space allocated to him during the exhibition. However, John's bio note did not mention these paintings, indicating that they did not align with his intention for the exhibition. C.F. John, interview with the author, September 8, 2021.

[111] Field note, September 22, 2021.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 4.9. "Segregated-Discarded," C.F John, 2021. The video installation is located at the right corner behind the installation. Source: Pho taken by the author, November 24, 2021

Transforming an art exhibition originally situated in a rural setting into a video installation displayed in an urban gallery space, suggests the fluidity of boundary between two spheres: the political public sphere and the civic public sphere. In this context, C.F. John's political motive, which was against capital intervention and elitism in art institutions, became subsumed within the broader motive of art itself. Regardless of whoever else worked with him, John is returning to the domain where his practice originated - modern art in the new nation-state. The video installation, the other installation, and the oil paintings were incorporated into a modern gallery space, with the visitors being encouraged to move and look at the works ritualistically.[112] In accordance with standard practice observed in art galleries, visitors to the exhibition were given a map attached to

[112] The ritual behaviour observed in galleries is not inherently religious; instead, it is based on secular ideas. However, it has been influenced by certain religious ritualistic practices from its early days, and these influences continue to be present in galleries and museums. See. Carol Dunken, "The Art Museum as Ritual" In *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 424-435.

TH-3461_186141015

the brochure to locate the venues spread out in the city. A three-dimensional gallery floor plan was attached to each venue's entrance wall (Figure 4.10). The map and floor plan served as a guide to help visitors navigate through the artificial maze constructed by the organizers. Another feature was that the exhibition's mediator, artists, and volunteers instructed the visitors not to touch the artworks, contrasting the exhibition at Kelakam.[113] Here, the question arises whether C.F. John's initial political motive was diluted in the exhibition. This concern has to be addressed regarding the transformation of gallery culture in Kerala and its engagement with the notion of private and public.

Figure 4.10. Floor plan at the second entrance of gallery- Godown D, Kerala State Coir Corporation venue. The three-dimensional plan was made by artists Anto K.G and Krishnadas. Source: Photo, Anto K. G

[113] There was no "Do Not Touch" caution board kept near the artwork.

4.2. Art, Community, and Public Good

In the twenty-first century, there is a growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity that extends to aspects such as the representation of marginalized communities, accessibility of institutional spaces, and engagement with diverse audiences within the institutional spaces in Kerala.[114] Private galleries began emerging in Kochi that functioned as spaces such as cafés and restaurants, with their entrance doors directly opened to the street.[115] By blurring the lines between traditional gallery spaces and everyday social settings, these venues encouraged interaction between artists, art enthusiasts, and the residents. They played a role in the formation of "civic publics" who hold the belief that private ownership of art and galleries leads to increased efficiency and economic profit for artists and promotes tourism in a state. The formation of civic publics in relation to art was solidified with the emergence of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012.

Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012 started with funding from both private and government sources. As the Biennale's major supporter, the Kerala government has provided funding and exhibition space. LuLu Mall, the largest shopping mall in India and located in Kochi, operated by Lulu Group International, has also served as a venue for art exhibitions.[116] One of India's largest real estate developers, Delhi Land and Finance (DLF), provided the heritage site of Aspinwall House as the primary venue.[117] Tata Motors and Tata Trust, the charitable arm of Tata Sons, were

[114] The Next chapter explores more into the emergence of galleries in Kerala.

[115] Details are given in Chapter 5.

[116] Annamma Joy and Russel Belk, "India's Kochi Biennale: Sponsorship, Patronage and Art's Resistance", *Art and the Market*, 28 January 2019.

[117] DLF is India's largest commercial property developer whose enterprise includes shopping malls; and LuLu Group International, a retail company active throughout the Middle East. The widely diversified holdings of the latter also include shopping malls. See. Ibid.

TH-3461_186141015

other supporters of the Biennale that funded the Students' Biennale program and the video labs.[118] The German multinational motor company Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) also supported the Biennale financially.[119]

The main characteristic of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale was its expansion of institutional boundaries beyond physical buildings. Instead of confining art to gallery spaces, the event utilized street walls and open spaces throughout the city as primary sites for displaying art and hosting art activities. Moreover, a key focus of the Biennale was to represent the communities residing in the city, making it a primary objective of the event. Similarly, this objective was followed in the exhibition *Lokame Tharavad* in Alappuzha. The exhibition was structured in a manner that prioritized inclusivity, particularly for the local community and women's community. One of its objectives was "To catalyze community participation in the creation of an active cultural space in Alappuzha that involves diverse stakeholders."[120] Another objective was "To improve Kudumbashree for effective community mobilization, and management of the exhibition, and foster women's cultural and economic empowerment."[121] The exhibition utilized open spaces within the venue to conduct workshops and seminars, engaging workers and Kudumbashree members employed in the factory situated near the venues.[122]

---

[118] Tata Motors is a long-standing patron of the arts and education in India, giving between 8 and 14 percent of its profits to philanthropic activities. Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] *Brochure*, "Lokame Tharavadu."

[121] Kudumbashree is a poverty eradication and women empowerment program that was initiated and implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM) of the Government of Kerala in India. The program was launched in 1997 and operates at the grassroots level to empower women and eradicate poverty by organizing them into neighborhood groups known as "Kudumbashree units." See. The website of Kudumbashree, Accessed on March 7, 2024, https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/171; Ibid

[122] Field note, December 15-17, 2021.

TH-3461_186141015

If C.F. John's exhibition in the rural place, Kelakam, aimed to engage with the community and move artworks away from modern institutional settings, *Lokame Tharavadu* sought to relocate the art institution itself by actively involving the community. In this context, both exhibitions aimed to connect more authentically with the real world and articulate the concerns of the community by emphasizing art, pedagogy, and spaces outside the institutions. They functioned as integral parts of art institutions elsewhere, dedicated to working for the "public good" by considering communities as audiences. However, Craig Calhoun argued that many organizations in civil society take on what they regard as public purposes but remain "ingroups" of people knit together by personal relationships.[123] Publics, by contrast, are forged in sociability and communication among strangers.[124] Therefore, although both exhibitions worked for communities with a motive for the public good, the publics were constructed to remain within the distinct political public sphere and the civic public sphere respectively.

Nevertheless, John's artworks in the *Lokame Tharavadu* indicate that these two public spheres overlap. His artworks functioned as objects located within the bilateral movement between the political public sphere and the civic public sphere. Within this in-between space, John's work did not dilute the political motives; instead, it unearthed the potential that modern art institutions could presently offer. In this context, he stated, "I sought a possibility for change within the institutional space by criticizing the institution itself."[125] John's statement encapsulates the current

[123] Craig Calhoun, "Civil Society and the Public Sphere," In. *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*, Ed. Edward, Michael, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011

[124] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*

[125] C.F. John, interview with the author, September 8, 2021.

TH-3461_186141015

status of modern art as it navigates through globalization and neoliberalism, particularly since the 1990s.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, the examination focused on understanding the relationship between site-specific artworks and art institutions, aiming to discern the nature of the public sphere formed by these artworks. The study centered on an exhibition, *Let Me Come to Your Wound: Heal Myself*, curated by C. F. John in Kelakam, a rural village inhabited by a farming community. This exhibition encapsulated two significant historical processes in post-independence India: the production of the political public sphere within a nation-state and the relationship between the political public sphere and the commodification process of art in the neoliberal era. Within these historical trajectories, C. F. John and his exhibition became integral parts of the political public sphere, operating between the state and civil society.

The site-specific artworks in Kelakam, driven by their political purpose, transcended the modern representative concept of art and aesthetics. Instead, they functioned as narratives that facilitated easy interactions with the farming community, devoid of the burden of modern art's complex language. However, these narratives, comprising texts, images, and sound, had the potential to transcend the confines of their original location and facilitate discourse in the public sphere through print and digital media. This discourse situated the art objects within the dominant discourse of the art world, which possesses an institutional and academic character rooted in the discipline of modern art history.

In parallel to the political public sphere, a civic public sphere emerged, embracing the private intervention of the market in the art world. Simultaneously, modern art institutions began

TH-3461_186141015

shedding their elitist nature, emphasizing aspects of openness and democracy by expanding their institutional boundaries. The chapter explored the formation of the civic public sphere in relation to art in Kerala through an ethnographic study of the exhibition *Lokame Tharavadu* in Alappuzha. In this exhibition, C.F. John's rural art exhibition was reproduced in video documentary format. The chapter argued that when the discourse in the political public sphere produced by the rural exhibition *Let Me Come to Your Wound* intersects with that of the civic public sphere produced by *Lokame Tharavadu*, the site-specific art objects reside in a space between the two publics within the art institutional space.

TH-3461_186141015

Chapter 5

Art and Urban Space: Intimate and Strange Publics in Kochi, 1990-2020

1. Introduction

> "Mattacherry is complicated. Not just as a place, but the idea of it, the thought of it, the image of it. It rests the modernist dichotomy of dividing the place between an enlightened cultural destination and inferior peripheries, between mainstream attractions and stagnated margins. The *place-ness* of Mattancherry is not because of the spatial identity built through the convergence of physical place, historical conjunctures, and social relationships, but it stems from an identity formed through resistance, and through the enabling narratives because of the place."[1]

In 2017, an exhibition, *Mattancherry*, took place at the art gallery URU Art Harbour located in Kochangandi, Mattancherry. It was a project-based exhibition that coincided with the inauguration ceremony of Uru Art Harbour, founded by Indian artist and curator Riyas Komu.[2] As part of the exhibition, Komu distributed a 24-page tabloid-sized-printed brochure to the participants involved in the exhibition project.[3] The front cover of the brochure featured a photograph by the Malayali artist Ramu Aravindan, representing a female garbage collector near the Kochangadi harbour (Figure 5.1). Accompanying the photograph was the title of the exhibition, *Mattancherry*, written

[1] *Mattanchery* exhibition brochure, "Brick," Vol. IV, August, 2017.

[2] Riyas Komu is one of the co-founders and co-curators of India's first Biennale, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012. He established the art gallery URU Art Harbour in 2016. The gallery, overlooking Wellington Island, was formerly a 4000-square-foot cashew warehouse in Kochangadi, which had undergone conversion into an art space. See. Rajashree Balaram, "Mattancherry Makeover: URU Art Harbour's New Exhibition is a Wake Up Call for Kochi," *Architectural Digest*, August 12, 2017, Accessed on February 3, 2024, https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/mattancherry-makeover-uru-art-harbours-new-exhibition-wake-call-kochi/;. "A Permanent Art House to Come Up at Mattancherry," *Times of India*, November 11, 2016, Accessed on February 3, 2024; Riyas Komu, Interview with the Author, September 20, 2022.

[3] Riyas Komu, Interview with the Author, September 20, 2022.

TH-3461_186141015

in both English and Malayalam. The Malayalam letters were designed in an urban typographic style reminiscent of the streets and layout of the port city of Mattacherry. At the beginning of a review of the exhibition in the architectural magazine *Architectural Digest India,* art historian Rajashree Balaram characterized it as follows: "Mattancherry seeks to look at the place through the gaze of its people, and away from the confining gaze of the tourist."[4] Therefore, the exhibition was inspired by the objective to "reverse the gaze" in a city.[5]

Figure 5.1. "Jane and Boats," Kochangadi, archival pigment print, Photograph by Ramu Aravindan on the front cover of the brochure of *Mattancherry*. Source: photograph, "Brick."

[4] Balaram, "Mattancherry Makeover."

[5] The last section of this chapter elabores on this ideal more.

TH-3461_186141015

Mattancherry emerged against the backdrop of the evolving binary narratives prevalent in academics and popular culture regarding the city of Mattancherry and its neighboring area, Fort Kochi, collectively known as Kochi.[6] On the one hand, the narrative revolves around Kochi's history as a port city in ancient times and the coexistence of diverse communities within the city forged through trade.[7] The narrative also highlights the colonial memories embedded in Kochi's buildings and architecture, which serve as a significant attraction for tourists.[8] On the other hand, Kochi has been depicted in popular culture, especially Malayalam movies, as a focal point of socio-economic disadvantage, coupled with instances of violence and criminal behavior among its lower-class community residents.[9]

---

[6] Kochi is a peninsula situated at the mouth of backwaters where river Periyar opens to the Arabian Sea. The geographical designation of the city remains open to interpretation. Residents of Fort Kochi and Mattancherry assert that Kochi encompasses the area in and around these places. However, for some, Kochi may refer to the current mainland metropolis of Ernakulam, while for others, it harks back to the former Cochin state. See. Ashis Nandy, "Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 295-327, Interview with a resident of Fort Kochi, October 25, 2022.

[7] The history of the place is elaborated in the succeeding sections. See. Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India)*; Rachel A. Varghese, "What Constitute Muziris? Past and the Production of Heritage Destinations in the South Indian State of Kerala," *Journal of Tourism History*, December 18, 2017; Srinath Perur, "Muziris: Did Black Pepper Cause the Demise of India's Ancient Port?" *The Guardian*, August 10, 2016, Accessed on October 29, 2022, https://amp.theguardian.com/cities/2016/aug/10/lost-cities-3-muziris-india-kerala-ancient-port-black-pepper.

[8] The Tourism Development Board of Kerala declared Fort Kochi as a heritage zone in 1991, which led to extensive restoration works carried out by the Department of Tourism, Kerala State; Fort Cochin Heritage Zone Conservation Society; Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage; and the Revenue Divisional Office of Fort Kochi and the Corporation of Cochin (City Council). See. Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India)*, 37-38.

[9] Malayalam Movies, such as *Adiyozhukkukal* (Undercurrents) directed by I. V. Sasi, 1984; the 2007 thriller *Big B*, directed by Amal Neerad, *Annayum Rasoolum* (Anna and Rasool) in 2012; and *Kammattippadam* in 2016, directed by Rajeev Ravi and *Bheeshma Parvam* in 2022, also directed by Rajeev Ravi portray Kochi and its communities as

Beyond these two binary narratives, *Mattancherry* aimed to relocate the narrative from the place to its people, assigning them agency and expressing their real-life experiences and collective resilience. Therefore, the project consciously sought to avoid the voyeuristic tendencies prevalent in earlier visual art practices in Kochi, particularly presenting an alternative to the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB).[10] Despite being the co-founder and co-curator of the KMB in its 2012 edition, curator Riyas Comu's disenchantment with the Biennale's activities led him to engage in art activities simultaneously in Mattancherry. In my interviews with Komu, he emphasized his deviation from the ideas perpetuated by the Biennale about the place Kochi. He said,

> "Since the second Biennale, I have taken a step back to observe the event from a distance. While the Biennale has been emphasizing the terrestrial imagination of the city to establish it as an economic hub for institutional art practices, the *Mattancherry* project takes a different approach. It highlights the maritime and cultural history of the area, shifting its focus to the people rather than the spatial history."[11]

Parallel to the KMB, Komu, with a group of artists, developed a methodology to investigate cultural elements within urban development processes in Kochi. After the second edition of the Biennale in 2014, Komu expressed, "We also allowed parallel streams and narratives to grow,

lower-class people including different religion and caste involved in gang wars, drug mafias and murder. See. Pramod L. S and Ramyasree. S, "Kochi in Making: Polyphonic Articulations of Space and Subjectivities in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema," *Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture,* Vol. 8, No. 2, 2023.

[10] The working of Kochi-Muziris Biennale and its connection with the city of Kochi is provided in the succeeding sections.

[11] Riyas Komu, Interview with the author, September 20, 2022 and October 1, 2022, Translation Mine.

TH-3461_186141015

especially different discourses to happen parallel to the Biennale itself."[12] During this time, he explored the intersection of art with urban planning and community development in Kochi.[13]

With the transformation of the visual art world in Kochi, there has been a significant shift in the conceptualization of open space, emphasizing public life and offering an alternative perspective to Habermas's concept of the "bourgeois public sphere."[14] The Indian model, in contrast to the Habermasian model, emphasizes the significance of intimacy in tangible public spaces, such as busy markets and street corners, rather than the salons and coffee houses of the bourgeoisie. The subject of intimacy in public spaces in urban cities has attracted significant interest among scholars, with the urban sociologist Richard Sennett being among the earliest to explore this relationship. Sennett, in his seminal work, *The Fall of Public Men* in 1974, examined how urbanization and modernization have reshaped the concept of private and public.[15] He argued that in the modern era in European societies since the latter 19th century, private life has come to play a significant role in shaping the public sphere, often overshadowing the aspects of traditional

[12] After the second edition of KMB in 2014, art critics Robert E. D'Souza and Sunil Manghani conducted an interview with Riyas Komu in 2015 in which they noted a parallel idea evolving in Kochi with the art activities of Riyas Komu. See. Robert E. D'Souza and Sunil Manghani, *India's Biennale Effect: A Politics of Contemporary Art,* New York: Routledge, 2017, 76-96.

[13] In 2018, Riyas Komu faced allegations of misconduct as part of the #MeToo movement, originating from an anonymous Instagram account. In response, Komu apologized and resigned from his role as the Secretary of the Biennale. Following this, fifty artists, writers, and curators convened in Kochi, demanding transparency and open dialogue regarding the allegation. They also called for the prompt handling of the inquiry initiated by the Biennale Foundation's Internal Committee. Although no formal complaint was filed, an inquiry was initiated, chaired by Lizzy Jacob, a former Kerala Chief Secretary. However, despite efforts made over several weeks, the inquiry was ultimately discontinued due to the absence of a formal complaint. See. "Impact Of MeToo Allegations On Biennale: A Recap," *Outlook,* April 5, 2023, Accessed on March 13, 2024, https://www.outlookindia.com/national/impact-of-metoo-allegations-on-biennale-a-recap-news-276258.

[14] Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar, The Economies of Indian Calendar Art,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

[15] Richard Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man,* London: Penguin Books, 1976.

community life. While Sennett's work did not extensively analyze the Habermasian public sphere, his arguments resonated with some of Habermas's ideas. Both scholars highlighted the changing public life in modern capitalist society, emphasizing the growing influence of private life on public interactions. In his work, Sennett introduced the concept of "intimacy" to describe individuals sharing personal stories and experiences within the public sphere where strangers constitute the public. He wrote, "A city is a milieu in which strangers are likely to meet."[16]

Sennet identified two forms of strangers; one is synonymous with the outsider and appears in a landscape where people have enough sense of their own identities to form rules of who belongs and who does not. In the second case, the stranger is an unknown rather than an alien, but someone who does not have rules for his own identity.'[17] According to him, strangers exchange contact in urban spaces such as theater, coffee houses, pubs, and markets, and they develop cultural regulations such as dress codes, gestures, and language between them. However, for him, by the early decades of the twentieth century, there was an increased emphasis on selfhood that demanded self-disclosure when engaging with strangers in social activities. Sennet argued that this marked the advent of privacy and intimacy over the public.

In 1998, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant analyzed the concept of intimacy and argued that the inwardness of intimacy met with a corresponding publicness.[18] According to Berlant, intimacy is not a cause for the decline of the public sphere; rather, it is essential for fostering publicness. In her analysis of the rational debates within an ideal public sphere proposed by Habermas, Berlant highlights how the intimate experiences and discourses of minorities are often marginalized and

[16] Ibid, 48.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry,* Vol. 24, No. 2, 1998, 291-288.

TH-3461_186141015

perceived as non-rational.[19] Berlant expands the concept of intimacy beyond the private realm, emphasizing its connection to modern strangers' consumption of shared cultural artifacts. She coins the term "intimate publics" to emphasize this connection, suggesting that intimacy shapes interactions and engagements within the public sphere, which is as much political as private.

At this point, it is pertinent to examine the contributions of visual discourse to the discussion on intimacy, strangers, and publics in urban cities. Extending Berlan's theory to the contemporary cultural scenario in Scottish urban space, cultural theorist Gabriele Linke questioned what would happen if the public memory of working-class people's autobiographical statements were displayed in museums.[20] Linke argued that intimate stories would be read by people from the same groups; however, their mediation in a cultural space can create a public to communicate their stories through new media. Deviating from emphasizing the textual discourse by Berland and Linke, my objective in this chapter is to focus on how intimate stories are visually communicated within the postcolonial city of Kochi and how these discourses are negotiated within the institutional art world of the city.

The previous chapter focused on the role of art objects situated at the boundary between art and non-art, elucidating how they operated as a historical network that contributes to forming publics within modern institutions. Furthermore, the chapter explored how the movement of art functioned within the political publics and civic publics often necessitating compromises on the democratic principles typically associated with art outside institutional frameworks. Deviating from the movement of art objects in and outside institutions, the present chapter explores how visual arts emphasize the intimate stories of subaltern communities within the art institution itself

[19] Ibid.

[20] Gabriele Linke, "The Public, The Private, and The Intimate: Richard Sennett's and Lauren Berlant's Cultural Criticism in Dialogue," *Biography,* Vol. 34, No. 1, 2011, 11.

TH-3461_186141015

in a city. In order to do the examination, the chapter expands the argument from the previous chapter that the city of Kochi has been expanding its boundaries to facilitate accessibility to the local communities and functioning as an open gallery reminiscent of modern galleries. Within the open-gallery city, two publics of art emerge: the intimate publics, which constitutes the public sphere formed by intimate narratives in art, and the strange publics formed through art activities oriented at tourists and art consumers in the city. The chapter argues that when an artwork in the city brings the two publics together, it essentially perpetuates the modernistic practice of voyeuristic gaze towards intimate subjects.

In this chapter, the investigation centers on Riyas Komu's exhibition project, *Mattancherry,* with specific attention given to P. S. Jalaja's wall murals in the streets of Mattancherry and Fort Kochi. The chapter is structured into three sections. The first section, titled "People and Place," examines the contextual background of the *Mattancherry* exhibition project and its thematic emphasis on the people and the place itself. This section provides insights into the historical and cultural significance of Mattancherry. It explores how Riyas Komu's artistic career and personal interests intersected with the choice to work in Mattancherry, shedding light on his motivations and connections to the locale and the people.

The second section, "Emergence of Art in Kochi: A Closer Look," explains the emergence of Kochi as a vibrant space of art practices since the 1990s. It considers two main art institutions in Kochi, the Kashi Art Gallery and KMB. It examines how these two institutions selected Kochi out of other cities in Kerala as a site for art practices. It emphasizes the emergence of a relationship between modern art and strangers in Kochi.

The third section, "Reversing the Gaze," analyzes the production of intimate publics by focusing on the wall murals of P. S. Jalaja. It examines the confrontation between the gaze of locals

TH-3461_186141015

and strangers in Kochi through the study of the large portraits of working-class people in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry.

The chapter mainly conducted a content analysis of the primary archives, including *Mattancharry*'s brochure and field notes collected from Kochi. It also conducted a formal analysis of the wall murals titled "Working-class Heroes" by P. S Jalaja.

2. People and Place

> "While Matacherry's architecture and physicality provide interesting modes for departure from its contemporaneity, we are of the opinion that these reductionist "images" not only miss the point but also create obstacles in building deeper connections with Mattacherry-the place and its people."[21]

Mattancherry was inaugurated on August 12, 2020, and ran for two months, showcasing the artworks of thirteen Malayali artists across various disciplines, including painting, photography, poetry, and design. Visual artist Saju Kunhan and poet Anitha Thambi explored the history of exploration and conquest in Mattancherry, which is situated in the larger context of cultural cartography.[22] Poet and lyricist Anvar Ali searched for Mattancherry through the singer Mehboob Khan (1926-1981), popularly known as Mehboob Bhai by the locals in Fort Kochi, to invoke time and space through Khan's songs.[23] Visual artists T. R. Upendranath and P. S. Jalaja tried to capture

---

[21] *Mattanchery* exhibition brochure, "Brick," Vol. IV, August 2017.

[22] Anitha Thambi's verses painted the outer wall of URU Art Harbour.

[23] Mehboob Khan was a popular singer in Malayalam movies. Khan's contribution is indispensable to telling the story of Kochi. The political undertones in Mehboob's songs express a particular viewpoint and reflect his deep connection to his homeland. Director Rajeev Ravi incorporated two of Mehboob's songs into his debut film *Annayum Rasoolum* (2013), a love story that portrays the life and essence of Kochi. According to Ravi, Mehboob's songs encapsulate the history of Kochi, with tracks like "Kayalinarike" offering a depiction of the city during that era. See. Cris, "Kochi's

TH-3461_186141015

the working class's spirit of the place outside the confines of work-focused narratives. Photographers Vipin Dhanurdharan and Ramu Aravindan focused their lenses on the canals, waterways, and landscapes of Fort Kochi and Mattancherry, shedding light on their deteriorating state. Their work aimed to narrate a counter-story to the prevailing narratives of colonial history and urbanization by emphasizing the neglected condition of these vital elements of the places. Photographer K. R Sunil captured individuals, accentuating their self-made attributes, while visual artists Latheesh Lakshman, Zakker Hussain, and Sosa Joseph captured glimpses of change within the community. Their work explored the intimate lives of people residing in Mattancherry and Fort Kochi, aiming to narrate the realities of everyday life beyond the voyeuristic gaze of tourists.

In addition to the artworks, exhibitions were held in the gallery by urban research collectives such as Route Cochin and the Chennai-based Urban Design Collective.[24] Route Cochin focused on exploring memories, remnants of the past, and fragments of culinary culture.[25]

history is incomplete without Mehboob, the legendary singer who died 42 years ago," *The News Minute*, December 4, 2023, Accessed on March 14, 2024, https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/kochis-history-is-incomplete-without-mehboob-legendary-singer-who-died-42-years-ago.

[24] Route Cochin, an online magazine rooted in Kochi that explores the city's history and culture through a multifaceted research approach incorporating oral history, cultural artifacts, books, and academic sources. With a focus on intimate storytelling, its content creation process involves extensive travel within Kochi to engage with its people and uncover compelling narratives. While digital media serves as its primary storytelling platform, it also ventures into diverse mediums such as exhibitions, public installations, and projections. Urban Design Collective (UDC) serves as a collaborative platform uniting architects, urban designers, and planners in the pursuit of creating livable cities through participatory planning. Their approach blends storytelling, advocacy, and practical demonstrations, contributing to the advancement of urban development. See. Route Cochin, Website, Accessed on March 14, 2024, https://routecochin.com/about-us/; Urban Design Collective, Website, https://urbandesigncollective.org/whyudc/.

[25] Route Cochin's exhibition, "Breudher: The Bread of the Dead" explored the culinary history and cultural significance of a bread believed to have arrived in Cochin alongside Dutch colonialists. Known as breudher, this sweet

Meanwhile, Urban Design Collective delved into an examination of the State and Central government's development policies, highlighting Mattancherry's experiences of developmental discrimination. The organizers of the exhibition argue that the discrimination against Mattancherry is not only administrative but also touristic.[26] The brochure stated,

> "Perhaps a walk through Mattancherry could reveal one the culture of reading rooms, trade union waiting sheds, interconnected maze of narrow lanes that connect every community, historic monuments, mosques, temples, and churches peacefully encroaching into different belief-systems, lazing goats that have become a part of the geography of everyday life, a rich musical tradition, and an identity that's prior the constructs of modern Kochi, and possibly India. Much of these spaces in Mattancherry are personal and intimate."[27]

In the article in *Architectural Digest India,* Rajashree Balaram emphasized how the intimate stories among the communities became political with the project, particularly highlighting Riyas Komu's earlier art activities.[28] She highlighted how Komu felt that politics had become increasingly impossible to overlook, stating that one cannot continue creating art solely for its own sake.[29]

---

bread is integral to the Anglo-Indian cuisine of Cochin and holds a prominent place in the community's ceremonial traditions. Urban designer Vidhya Mohankumar embarks on a quest to explore the transformations Mattanchery has experienced over the past 150 years, focusing on developments since Independence. As a Chennai-based architect, Mohankumar perceives Mattanchery as a repository of rich stories and developments. Her research critically analyzes the advancements in housing, urban infrastructure, transportation, and livelihood within the region. See. Princy Alexander, "In Love With Mattanchery," *The New Indian Express,* July 31, 2017, Accessed on March 14, 2024, https://www.newindianexpress.com/kochi/2017/Jul/30/in-love-with-mattanchery-1635899.html; Ibid.

[26] *Mattanchery* exhibition brochure, "Brick," Vol. IV, August 2017,*"* 4

[27] Ibid, 5

[28] Rajashree Balaram emphasizes how Riyas Komu addressed themes of violence, marginalization, political authoritarianism, and religious fundamentalism in his earler artworks. See. Balaram, "Mattancherry Makeover."

[29] Ibid.

Originally from Kerala, Riyas Komu graduated in the 1990s Mumbai's oldest art institution, the Sir Jamsetjee Jeejebhoi School of Art.[30] Komu emerged as a painter and sculptor at the time of India's economic liberalization.[31] As outlined in Chapter 4, this period significantly impacted Malayali artists across India to be involved in institutional criticism. Komu was deeply moved by the 1992 communal riot, which inspired him to pursue a path that combined politics, community, and art.[32] Upon establishing the KMB in 2012, Komu, a co-founder alongside Bose Krishnamachari, fostered significant ties with the left government in Kerala. The inception of the Biennale itself was initiated by an invitation extended in 2010 to Komu and Krihnamachari by the then Minister of Culture, M. A. Baby, from the CPIM ministry.[33] Since then, the regional legacy of communism in Kochi and people's resistance further moved Komu to address the working-class issues in Kochi and critique the effect of global capitalism, with a particular focus on Mattancherry.[34]

2.1. Kochi: Fort Kochi and Mattancherry

Mattancherry is often closely associated with Fort Kochi, as both are island areas integral to the historical narratives of the city of Kochi. Fort Kochi served as a fortified European settlement during the colonial period, beginning in the 15th century. In contrast, Mattancherry was a trading hub for various foreign settlers, including Jews, Arabs, Armenians, and merchant communities from India, like Gujaratis and Jains. Although the urban landscape of both areas currently forms a

[30] D'souza and Manghani, *India's Biennale Effect.*

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid, 82.

[33] The emergence of Kochi-Muziris Biennale is detailed in the succeeding section. See. Bose Krishnamachari, "A Biennale in the Making," *Marg*, December 2016- March 2017, 45.

[34] *Mattanchery* exhibition brochure, "Brick," Vol. IV, August 2017

TH-3461_186141015

contiguous territory known as Kochi, in colonial times, they were separated by the Calvathy Canal.[35]

Kochi, historically one of the three prominent cities on the Malabar coast, alongside Kozhikode and Mangalapuram, holds significant importance in Kerala.[36] The historical narratives surrounding Kochi predominantly revolve around its identity as a bustling port city. Historian Dilip M. Menon observed that "Kochi being a port city, was always part of a universe that was much larger than the immediate geography within which it is located."[37] While the historical narrative of Kochi remained obscured until the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century, some contemporary writings and popular narratives connected Kochi with the port city of Muziris.[38] The ancient seaport and urban center known as Muziris flourished from the first century AD until the sixth century, enjoying significant prosperity during this period. However, after the sixth century, Muziris mysteriously disappeared from historical accounts, leaving behind only archaeological remnants and speculative theories about its decline.[39] A prevailing myth both in modern history and public memory suggests that Muziris met its demise in 1341 when a powerful flood submerged

[35] Field note, August 29, 2022, Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India).*

[36] Nandy, "Time Travel to a Possible Self," 2000.

[37] Arti Sethi, "Thinking Local Cosmopolitanism- The Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Interview with Dilip Menon by Riyas Komu and C. S. Venkiteswaran," English transcript of interview published in Malayalam in *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, October 17, 2017, *Kafila*, October 18, 2017, Accessed on December 1, 2023, https://kafila.online/2017/10/18/thinking-a-local-cosmopolitanism-the-kochi-muziris-biennale-interview-with-dilip-menon-by-riyas-komu-and-cs-venkiteswaran/.

[38] B. A. Trias, *Living at the Gates of History: Public Perception of Colonial Buildings in Kochi, Kerala, India,* Unpublished Masters' thesis submitted to Leiden University, January 2012, 20.

[39] Sandip K. Luis, "Disappearing Strands of Historicity: Critical Notes on Kochi- Muzirs Biennale," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 49, No. 20, May 17, 2014; Ibid.

the port town in the river Periyar.[40] According to this narrative, the catastrophic event altered Muziris' topography, paving the way for the subsequent development of Kochi as a significant port city.[41] Since then, Kochi attained prominence in sea trade with Romans and Arabs.[42] Social scientist Ashis Nandy observed that the Chinese seamen and fishermen lived in Kochi well into the fourteenth century, and then Arabs reportedly defeated the Chinese and settled down in the city.

Some historical narratives had envisioned Kochi as an integral part of the kingdom of Cochin in the periods preceding the fifteenth century.[43] Historian A. Sreedharamenon observed that Cochin had already established itself as a vibrant hub for the spice trade, with a particular emphasis on pepper, during the initial decades of the 15th century.[44] Cochin attracted diverse merchant groups, each contributing to its prosperous trade environment. Among those who relocated to Cochin for commerce were the Chettis, Kelings, Muslims, Saint Thomas Christians, and Jews.[45] In the year 1500, the Portuguese traveler Pedro Alvares Cabral arrived at the port of

---

[40] Ibid.

[41] A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, Kottayam: DC Books, 2007, 150; Sethi, "Thinking Local Cosmopolitanism."

[42] Bony Thomas, *Kochites: In Search of an Intangible Heritage of Fort Kochi-Mattancherry*, Kochi: Pranatha Books, 2017, 16.

[43] The kingdom of Cochin includes the main land and the island. B. V. K. Menon, *Cochin: Volume 19*, Eranakulam: Printed by the Superintendent, Cochin Government Press, 1944, 3.

[44] Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History.*

[45] There is a Jewish Copper Plate Grant of Emperor Bhaskara Ravi Varman which records the royal gift to the Jewish merchant Joseph Rabban providing several rights and privileges in Kodungalloor. It is said that the Jews continued to enjoy the privilege until the arrival of the Portuguese, who compelled them to leave Kodungalloor from Cochin in 1565. After that the Jews formed an important community in Cochin until the birth of the Jewish state in Israel 1948, when a large portion of the community migrated there. See. Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 2007; B. A. Trias, *Living at the Gates of History*, 2012, 21.

TH-3461_186141015

Cochin.[46] Upon his arrival, the Raja of Cochin, Unni Goda Varma Coil Thirumulppad, extended an invitation and granted Portuguese merchants permission to participate in trade within his domain.[47] The king went a step further by allocating a factory to the Portuguese merchants, laying the foundation for their gradual transformation of Cochin into a significant commercial center.[48] By embracing this opportunity, Portugues conducted trade and undertook significant construction projects, including forts, churches, and European-style houses, mainly in Fort Kochi. In 1503, they built a fort called Immanuel Fort that gave Fort Kochi its name.[49] These structures were erected with the explicit consent and approval of the Cochin Rajas.[50]

Fort Kochi had remained the seat of imperial power while Mattacherry was Raja's territory. When the Dutch East India Company took control of the Portuguese in 1663, they initiated substantial changes in the architectural landscape of Fort Kochi. The Portuguese fort saw a reduction in size, and many of its constructions were either demolished or repurposed. Under Dutch influence, Cochin underwent a transformation into a residential zone.[51] In 1795, the British took over Cochin from the Dutch, but unlike their predecessors, the Britishers did not make

[46] Ibid; Babu Isaac John, *Vismpayatheeram Kochi* (The Wonderland of Kochi), Cochin: Centre for Educational and Development and Socio-Culture, 2022; Menon, *Cochin,* 3.

[47] Ibid.

[48] The Portuguese in turn helped the Raja against the attack from Zamorins of Kozhikkode, who, for a very long time tried to annex Cochin. See. Menon, *Cochin,* 3.

[49] Aswin. V. N, "Why Fort Kochi and Mattancherry Became the Venue of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale," *The Hindu,* December 3, 2022.

[50] Ibid.

[51] The primary structures comprising the fortified township included the Governor's mansion, warehouses, a shipwright's office, soldiers' quarters and barracks, a Protestant church, a hospital, an orphanage, a school, and a prison. These facilities were designed to cater to the various perceived needs of company employees, ensuring their welfare and efficient functioning within the township. See. Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India)*; Trias, *Living at the Gates of History:* 22.

significant alterations to the architecture.[52] However, the trade gradually diverted to British-controlled harbors, declining Cochin's significance as a primary trade center. Following Indian Independence, the majority of the city's commercial activity was shifted to the mainland Ernakulam. In 1967, the municipality of Eranakulam merged with the cities of Fort Kochi, Mattancherry, and the Panchayats of Palluruthi, Edappalli, Vennala, and Vyttila, as well as the island of Willington.[53] Fort Kochi and Mattancherry became commercial, industrial, and port cities that witnessed rapid changes towards the end of the twentieth century.[54]

2.2 *Mattancherry:* Representing *Chantha* and its Everyday Life.[55]

At present, Fort Kochi predominantly attracts tourists due to its colonial-era architecture. Unlike Fort Kochi, Mattancherry attracts tourists to the *Chantha*, which is run by different communities. In the Malayalam dictionary, *Shabdatharavali,* the term *Chantha* is defined as a marketplace or a location where buying and selling takes place.[56] *Chanthas* in Kerala serve as significant markers in forming public life, contrasting with the Habermasian notion of the bourgeois public sphere. In the modern popular imagination, *Chantha* developed along with the modern cities, including port cities in Calicut, Cochin, Alappuzha, and Kollam, with an emphasis on the coexistence of different communities engaged in trade-related labor.[57]

---

[52] Menon, *Cochin,* 3; Nandy, "Time Travel to a Possible Self", 2000.

[53] Kochi Municipal Corporation, Website, Accessed on October 28, 2022, https://kochicorporation.lsgkerala.gov.in/en/history/8; Trias, *Living at the Gates of History,* 2012, 21.

[54] B. A. Prakash, "Urban Unemployment in Kerala: The Case of Kochi City," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 37, No. 39, September 28- October 4, 2002, 4074.

[55] The Malayalam word *Chantha* refers closely to the word "marketplace." It is detailed in this section.

[56] Sreekandeshwaram G. Padmanabhappilla, *Shabdatharavali,* Thiruvanathapuram: Bhaskara Press, 1924.

[57] In 1995, a Malayalam movie titled *Chantha*, directed by filmmaker Sunil, was released. The film revolves around a laborer named Sulthan, portrayed by the actor Babu Antony, who endeavors to protect his community from the

The notion of *Chantha* offers an intriguing lens through which to explore the relationship between intimacy and strangeness within the public sphere, particularly considering the significant role played by print media. Mattancherry's character has been shaped by its history as a center of trade in the *Chantha.*[58] In the post-independence era, the Mattacherry *Chantha* witnessed several conflicts in relation to trade and the working class. In 1953, a militant labor riot took place in the *Chantha,* popularly known as the *Chappa* strike.[59] *Chaappa* was a metal coin bearing the emblem of the respective stevedore contractor, intricately engraved onto it.[60] The *Mooppan* would present with the *Chaappa* in front of the workers involved in trade at the port.[61] Migrant workers from various regions of Kerala, as well as from other parts of the country, comprised the skilled labor force at the port.[62] He would then distribute these *Chaappas* to those workers whom he found impressive.

Since 1946, conflicts arose among workers from Fort Kochi and Mattancherry, demanding an end to the *Chaappa* system.[63] On September 14, 1953, the strike intensified at the *Chantha* in

---

detrimental influences of the bourgeois. *Chantha* offers a counternarrative to the term, which is often used derogatorily to denote the lower-class status of people. Through its storyline and characters, the movie challenges societal perceptions aim to provide a nuanced portrayal of the working class and their contributions to society, offering a fresh perspective on the term "Chantha."

[58] N. S. Madhavan, M*attanchery* exhibition brochure, "Brick," Vol. IV, August 2017, 20.

[59] Cris, "The barbaric chappa system and the history of Kochi's port labourers' mutiny," *The News Minute,* March 28, 2023, Accessed on March 14, 2024, https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/barbaric-chappa-system-and-history-kochi-s-port-labourers-mutiny-175177.

[60] Subin Dennis, "Remembering the Valiant Workers' Struggle of Mattancherry, Kochi" *Tricontinental,* September 15, 2023, https://thetricontinental.org/india/workers-struggle-of-mattancherry/.

[61] Translaton of *Mooppan* is elder male member in a tribe, or group in modern sense.

[62] Dennis, "Remembering the Valiant Workers."

[63] These demands were raised under the leadership of the Cochin Port Cargo Labour Union (CPCLU), founded on May 12, 1946, and affiliated with the communist-led All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The office-bearers were leaders of the Communist Party: George Chadayammuri served as the union's president, T. M. Abu was elected

Mattancherry and ended in a police fire that killed three workers.[64] The workers of Mattancherry received solidarity from around the globe. The World Federation of Trade Unions denounced the police firing, while labor organizations in France, Germany, and Spain held demonstrations in support of the workers of Mattancherry.[65] Finally, the workers won their demand in 1962.[66] Subsequently, the workers remained united in their resistance against exploitation in trade. The streets of Mattacherry unfolded the history of resistance through wall murals depicting communism and working-class legacy and sign boards commemorating the martyrs who suffered in the riot.

The *Mattancherry* exhibition project showed a leniency towards resisting the capital exploitation of the working class by captivating their history of resilience in *Chantha.* About the motive, the brochure stated,

> "The artists were encouraged to search beyond easily available representation [...] and delve into Mattancherry's "contemporary spacial, social, historical, and temporal shifts of the location by way of investigating the history of laboures and working class, internal migrants, traceable past, intangible cultures, stories, and memories."[67]

Of the thirteen artists whose central themes are the resilience of people, three artists, T. R. Upendranth, Anitha Thambi, and P. S. Jalaja, focused on the working-class community and their

---

as the secretary, P Gangadharan held the position of vice-president, CX Antony served as joint secretary, and Stalin Kunhumuhammad acted as treasurer. Although the strike initially focused on cargo-handling work on ships, it garnered support from various other sectors of workers and their unions, including the boat workers' union, the headload workers' union, small traders, beedi makers, coir workers, fish workers, and rickshaw workers. See. Ibid.

[64] Ibid

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] *Mattanchery* exhibition brochure, "Brick," Vol. IV, August 2017.

everyday life in Kochi. In his artwork, which is a black-and-white photo montage, Upendranath erased all the elements in the street while keeping the elements of *Chantha* and the people in the image. (Figure 5.2). In the image, the contrast between the two worlds of contemporary labor is emphasized through the depiction of people and their everyday interactions within the *Chantha*. On the left side, two people stand, wearing bell-bottom pants and full-sleeved shirts, resembling migrant laborers in Kerala during the contemporary period. They observe the scene across the road, where others are dressed differently, wearing *Mundu,* pants and half-sleeved shirts, suggesting their local identity. These people stand in a relaxed manner, and some engage in conversation with each other, suggesting a sense of camaraderie and familiarity. This contrast highlights the diversity within the labor force and emphasizes the diverse working-class community's coexistence within the *Chantha*.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 5.2. Photomontage, *untitled,* T. R. Upendranath. Source: Facebook page, URU Art Harbour.

The poems by Anitha Thambi, "Poetry of Personas," depicted on the wall of URU Art Harbour, narrated the everyday lives of five individuals engaged in various labor in Mattancherry (Figure 5.3). Among them, there was a poem on a fisherman, Maimunni Ali. She narrated Ali's story in the poem that can be summerised as, "Long ago, in Mattancherry, lived Alikka, bearing a wound. He made his living by selling sardines, and there was a time when he would rush for *Chaappa*, only to be injured in his leg. Despite the injury, he persevered, limping to the backwaters to sell fish. Clad in his Mundu, he would appear with a hearty laugh, leaving his mark on the junction during his lifetime."[68]

[68] Alikka means elder brother Ali

TH-3461_186141015

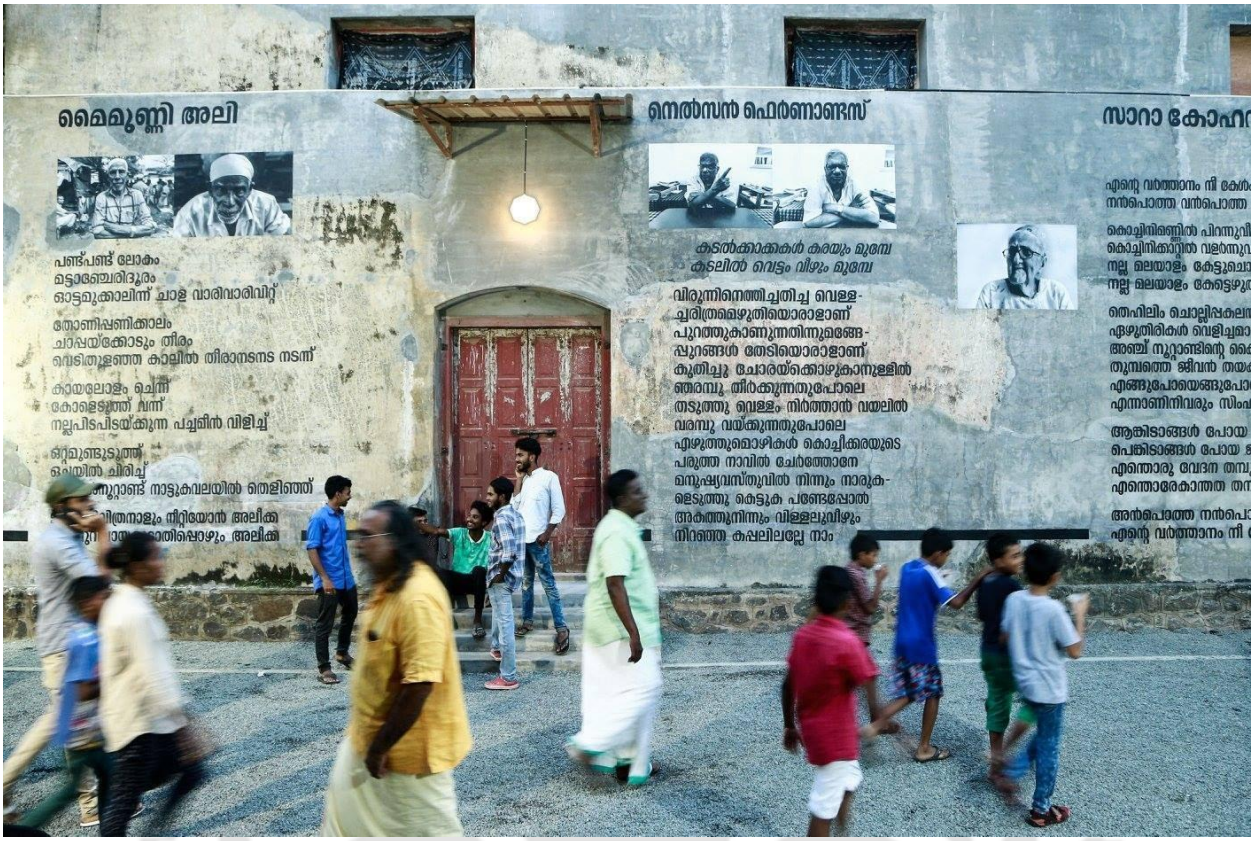


Figure 5.3. Anitha Thambi, *Poetry of Personas,* Source: Facebook page, Uru Art Harbour.

Representing the attire of the people, food, the house they live in, the *Chantha* they gather every day, the friendship, and the work they engage in were the main themes of the exhibition *Mattancherry*. The organizers believed the intimacy that is tied to the private sphere could be public, between the "uncanny outsider and the warmer, familiar space within it."[69]

The notion of intimate publicness, which exists beyond the purview of the tourist gaze of the strangers in Kochi, set this exhibition apart from previous art exhibitions held in Kochi. *Mattancherry*'s whole idea was to shift the location of the art production from the place that

[69] *Mattanchery* exhibition brochure, "Brick," Vol. IV, August 2017, 5.

addresses strangers who belong to the dominant public sphere to that of the intimates who stand at the border between private and public space. It was an attempt to resist the monotonous narrative of the art exhibition of the city of Kochi as a cosmopolitan post-colonial city bearing a history of trade.

3. Emergence of Art in Kochi: A Closer Look

The island comprising Mattancherry and Fort Kochi is commonly referred to as Kochi in contemporary visual discourses, reflecting a unified identity in the collective understanding of the region. The city presents a unique case where postcolonial cultural production can be observed and analyzed. Its heritage sites, colonial architecture, and the evident tensions arising from globalization offer a vivid backdrop against which the dynamics of both local and global narratives play out. This intertwining of history and culture positions Kochi as a crucial backdrop for comprehending visual arts in Kerala in producing its publics. This understanding culminated with the inauguration of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2012. Emerging scholarships began dedicating how the public memory and public discourses have developed in postcolonial Kochi through contemporary art practices.[70]

Contemporary art activities find Kochi to be an ideal place for their endeavors, drawn to the city by its rich historical background. One significant aspect is the invocation of the memory

[70] Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India).*

of a port city.[71] Another is the aspect of everyday life through the remnants of colonial powers embedded in the architecture and urban settlements.[72] The historical narratives and the public memory of both aspects collectively contribute to imagining Kochi as a cosmopolitan city. For this section, I focus on two shifts that happened in the art world in relation to Kochi. One is establishing a private art gallery, Kashi Art Cafe, in Fort Kochi and the other is KMB, which encompassed both places as venues for the event.

3.1. Kashi Art Cafe

Kochi's postcolonial identity creates social spaces where strangers can interact and engage with institutionalized art practices facilitated by narrative forms based on the city. It was early exemplified by the artist Anoop Scaria, who is also known for his environmental activism.[73] Scaria collaborated with his partner Dorrie Younger to establish an art gallery, Kashi Art Cafe, in 1997. The initiative introduced a new concept of mixing tourism with art in Kerala by creating a space to sell art. The building was the first art gallery and cafe in Kerala, located in a renovated Dutch

[71] Arti Sethi, "Thinking Local Cosmopolitanism- The Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Interview with Dilip Menon by Riyas Comu and C.S, Venkiteswaran," English transcript of interview published in Malayalam in *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* October 17, 2017, *Kafila*, October 18, 2017, Accessed on December 1, 2023, https://kafila.online/2017/10/18/thinking-a-local-cosmopolitanism-the-kochi-muziris-biennale-interview-with-dilip-menon-by-riyas-komu-and-cs-venkiteswaran/.

[72] Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India).*

[73] As part of Anoop Scaria's environmental activities, he created an organisation Flora and Founa in 1982 to protect nature. Scaria, his brother Anand Scaria and their friends, under the banner Green Kochi, promoted planting of tree saplings and protection of trees. They used to organise *Vriksholsavam* (Tree Fest) every year. He also started a Beach Festival along with Anand Scaria and artist George Augustine in 1984, which later became popular as Cochin Carnival in Fort Kochi. Scaria passed away in 2018 due to health-related issues. See. "Art Patron, Environmentalist Anoop Scaria Passes Away," *Onmanorama,* October 22, 2018, Accessed on February 7, 2024, https://www.onmanorama.com/content/mm/en/kerala/top-news/2018/10/22/kashi-art-cafe-founder-anoop-scaria-dies.html.

heritage house on Burger Street, close to the Fort Kochi seashore and other tourist destinations.[74] The space became locally known as both Kashi Art Cafe and Kashi Art Gallery, even though the former is its official name. Scaria encouraged artists from Kerala to exhibit their works in the area designated for sale, and he also invited numerous renowned artists from across the country and around the world to showcase their art there.[75]

Anoop Scaria traveled to Delhi and Mumbai in search of clients for those paintings and made an effort to assist Malayali artists in receiving payment for their creations.[76] An Udaipur-based artist Wiswo X Waswo, shared his memory about Scaria and the art cafe,

> "I remember how Anoop would always be at Kashi early in the morning, sitting with his family in the common area, eating his special Indian breakfast that was just the same food his staff ate. At night, Kashi Art Cafe turned into a coffee shop, and all kinds of people came to discuss art. Anoop would get quite passionate arguing about the meaning of art and the whos and hows of the then-fledgling contemporary scene. Anoop and Dorrie sold a lot of art because their enthusiasm was contagious. Their love and excitement radiated (outwards). Their passion got Kashi Art Cafe on the map as the place new talents were being discovered. The crowd in Delhi and Mumbai would call up to see what they were going to show next. Sometimes entire shows sold out just minutes after they opened. It was amazing. They both worked so hard and still found time to tell stories and share their love with family and strangers. Those were amazing times. I'll never forget them"[77]

---

[74] It initially sold coffee and cake before Scaria opened an art gallery to the customers. See. Field note, October 2, 2022; "Kashi Art Cafe Founder Anoop Scaria Passes Away" *The Indian Express,* October 22, 2018.

[75] Ibid.

[76] "Long Before Biennale, Anoop Envisioned Kochi as Art Capital," *The Times of India*, 22 October 2018.

[77] "Anoop Scaria Passes Away: Fraternity Remembers the Man who Established Kochi as a Hub for Contemporary Art," *Firstpost*, October 26, 2018, Accessed on February 7, 2024,

TH-3461_186141015

Kashi Art Cafe became a financial success as a result of the Indian art industry's growth in the 2000s. The early artist-led efforts in Kochi peaked around this point.[78] On August 8, 2003, an artist, Rajan M. Krishnan, and art critic and his partner, Renu Ramnath, called Dorrie Younger to inform her of Bhupen Khakhar's demise.[79] In order to organize an exhibition in his honor that was seen as a turning moment in the local art scene, Younger and Scaria got in touch with another artist who had met and collaborated with Khakhar.[80]

In the same year, curator Bose Krishnamachari exhibited his portrait series, *De-Curating: Indian Contemporary Artists,* at the Durbar Hall Gallery in Ernakulam.[81] Younger, Scaria, and Krishnamachari first discussed the possibility of organizing a collective exhibition of artists from Bombay in Fort Kochi at the exhibition's inauguration.[82] The conversation took shape as a show *Bombay X 17* in 2004, including 17 artists, which resulted in the opening of the second Kashi Art

https://www.firstpost.com/living/anoop-skaria-passes-away-fraternity-remembers-the-man-who-established-kochi-as-a-hub-for-contemporary-art-5428841.html.

[78] Abul Kalam Azad, "Remembering Anoop Skaria and Our Collective that Helped Make Kochi and International Hub for Art," *Firstpost,* 26 October 2018, Accessed on October 6, 2022, https://www.firstpost.com/living/remembering-anoop-skaria-and-our-collective-that-helped-make-kochi-an-international-hub-for-art-5445501.html.

[79] Bhupen Khakhar was a Bombay-based contemporary artist who belonged to the Baroda school.

[80] Twenty-three Malayali artists including participated in the exhibition. See. Shwetal A. Patel, "In the Beginning There was Kashi," *Marg,* December 2016- March 2017.

[81] Anto K. G, Interview with the Author, October 18, 2022, Uma Nair, "Art is Worthless if it Cannot Create a Response," *Economic Times,* February 7, 2009, Accessed on October 18, 2022, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/culture-cauldron/art-is-worthless-if-it-cannot-create-a-response/articleshow/4090526.cms?from=mdr; Patel, "In the Beginning There was Kashi."

[82] Patel, "In the Beginning There was Kashi."

Gallery in a former go-down in Mattancherry.[83] The show led to the first symposium on visual arts in Kochi, examining why visual artists were being sidelined in Kerala.[84]

The cafe in Fort Kochi is presently divided into two sections: a gallery space and then the cafeteria. The white walls of the gallery space, as well as the cafe, are adorned with artwork. The wooden benches polished to a high shine, a courtyard with sculptures and stone seats, an open seating space under a tiled roof, and delicious food make the space a compelling space for strangers in a community enthusiastic for art.[85] "Over a cup of coffee," the homogenized bourgeois public sphere was taking shape in Kochi through Kashi Art Cafe. Subsequently, there has been a proliferation of similar cafes and galleries in Kochi, utilizing colonial buildings that opened their doors to passersby and facilitated engagement with art and tourists.[86] The cafe has drawn a parallel with the coffee houses in London and Paris, where Richard Sennet argued that speech flourished in the 18th century.[87] The right to the cafe became a middle-class prerogative. Whereas, unlike coffee houses in Europe, art cafes in Kochi facilitate the free flow of speech that is directed toward strangers, mainly middle-class tourists in a postcolonial city.

Once the city transformed into a space where art and tourists who encompass the strange publics could intersect, particularly through the cafe-gallery structure housed within colonial

---

[83] Ibid, Uma Nair, "Kochi Biennale to Yin Chuan With Bose," *Times of India,* July 18, 2016, Accessed on October 18, 2022, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/plumage/kochi-biennale-to-yinchuan-with-bose.

[84] In 2012, the ownership of the cafe in Fort Kochi building was transferred into the hands of an entrepreneur Edward Pinto. See. "Anoop Scaria Passes Away: Fraternity Remembers the Man who Established Kochi as a Hub for Contemporary Art," *Firstpost,* October 26, 2018, Accessed on February 7, 2024, https://www.firstpost.com/living/anoop-skaria-passes-away-fraternity-remembers-the-man-who-established-kochi-as-a-hub-for-contemporary-art-5428841.html.

[85] Fieldnote, November 18, 2022

[86] Few such galleries are Budha Gallery, David Hall, and Open Eyed Dream (OED) and Pepper house.

[87] Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man,* 81.

buildings, artists and practitioners began to view Kochi as an ideal location for the flourishing of art, surpassing any other city in Kerala. The culmination of this transformation occurred with KMB, which began by encompassing the city's history as a port city and its colonial history. Both of these historical narratives have contributed to a popular narrative of cosmopolitanism, highlighting the coexistence of different communities in Kochi that is sufficient for art to flourish in a global age.

3.2. The Kochi- Muziris Biennale (KMB)

The KMB emerged with a strong emphasis on the narrative of cosmopolitanism, envisioning Kochi as a place where diverse communities coexist harmoniously in the precolonial and colonial times.[88] The idea of KMB was born at the Silver Coin Restaurant in Mumbai, Borivali's IC Colony, when M. A Baby paid a visit to Bose Krishnamachari. Krishnamachari recollected that,

> "At that time, I was unaware that he came with a problem hoping that I had the solution. I called the man closest to me, someone who had walked with me through my artistic journey in Mumbai: Riyas Komu. I also called other artists who were fellow travelers in IC colony. M. A. Baby, Riyas Komu, Jyothi Basu, M. G. Pillai and I met. This was Baby's question to us: how could we bring contemporary art practice to Kerala? Of course, we did not have complete answers, but we were unanimous in our initial response: a Biennale."[89]

They selected Kochi as the place by conducting extensive research and realized that before Kochi, there was Muziris on the banks of the river Periyar. Krishnamachari explained that there could not

[88] A cosmopolite, in the French usage recorded in 1738, is a man who moves comfortably in diversity; he is comfortable in situation which have no links or parallels to what is familiar to him. See. Ibid, 17.

[89] Bose Krishnamachari, "A Biennale In the Making", *Marg*, December 2016- March 2017, 45.

be a Kochi without the mention of Muziris.[90] Therefore, the proposed name of Kochi Biennale became Kochi- Muziris Biennale.[91] They primarily explored the cosmopolitanism in the city since ancient times, centering around the port. Dilip M. Menon argued that the maritime history of Kochi enabled the Biennale to happen at the place, and only Kochi could accommodate the event in India.[92] Menon elaborated,

> "It is not surprising that Kochi should be thought of as a place where you can create an event that speaks to the world at large. Kochi and Ernakulam are certainly the most cosmopolitan cities in Kerala. [...] Kochi belongs to everyone, and everyone can belong to Kochi, so there is this cosmopolitan port-city dimension which continues.[93]

The organizers of KMB materially established the emphasis on cosmopolitanism in ancient and colonial periods by selecting the dilapidated colonial buildings as major venues. They worked hard prior to KMB's inaugural edition in identifying such buildings with the help of entrepreneurs in Kochi.[94] Bose Krishnamachari explained that there was barely any infrastructure except for the Kashi Art Cafe in Fort Kochi and the Durbar Hall located across the backwaters in Ernakulam. Finally, they got access to Pepper House, a former warehouse for storing pepper, and to Aspinwall House. The head of the production of KMB, Shyam Patel, and his team carefully studied the unoccupied Aspinwall House that was built in 1867. They converted the building into a venue with great effort to become the inaugural site for KMB.[95] Later, the curators considered David Hall,

---

[90] Ibid, 46

[91] Ibid.

[92] Sethi, "Thinking a Local Cosmopolitanism."

[93] Ibid.

[94] Krishnamachari, "A Biennale in the Making," 46.

[95] Rajashree Balaram, "Behind the Scene at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016," *Architectural Digest*, December 7, 2017, Accessed on October 18, 2022, Ibid.

Dutch Palace, Anand Warehouse, Moidu Heritage Plaza, TKM Warehouse, and Cabral Yard, which became major architectural sites for the Biennale since its beginning.[96]

Art historian Carl Grodach observed that buildings provide an ideal site for an art space because they are typically adaptable to a wide range of visual and performance activities and attractive to the audience because of their similarity to an art studio or its historic qualities.[97] In Kochi, the historical qualities lie with the contemporary imagination of the buildings with its past vibrant economic prosperity. On selecting Aspinwall House as the main venue, Rajashree Balaram elaborated,

> "The Aspinwall House was once rich with the sounds and smells of a flourishing trade in pepper, timber, lemon grass, ginger, coconut oil, coffee and coir. Today, it is one of the main venue for Biennale- and all you hear through the days is the Arabian sea lapping at the perimeter wall."[98]

The main buildings selected for the venue functioned as a medium to recollect the history of the spice trade through sea routes. These buildings are lined up parallel to the street and facing their opposite side to the port. One might envision the movement of commodities through the building's entrances to the port and the street while standing inside the premises, and as a result, a golden economic past is recreated in that area. (Figure 5.4). Geeta Kapur noted that,

https://www.architecturaldigest.in/magazine-story/behind-scenes-kochi-muziris-biennale-2016/

[96] Easwaran Sreevally, "Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2019 at a Glance," *Onmanorama,* February 12, 2019, Accessed on , October 29.2022, https://www.onmanorama.com/travel/kerala/2019/02/12/kochi-muziris-biennale-at-a-glance.html; Balaram, "Behind the Scene at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016."

[97] Carl Grodach, "Art Space, Public Space and the Link to Community Development," *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 4, October 2010.

[98] Balaram, "Behind the Scene at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016."

Figure 5.4. Gallery in the venue Aspinwall House opens its door to the Arabian Sea, 5th edition of KMB, 2023. Source: Photo taken by the author, April 6, 2023.

TH-3461_186141015

> "The curators built into the exhibition extraordinary spaces and buildings: the stately Durbar Hall, capacious warehouses and trading stations with elegant woodworks, terracotta-tyle (occasionally thatched) roofs, and overgrown courtyards exhuming aromas of pepper from a celebrated history of ocean trade"[99]

Associating this distant prosperous economic history embedded in buildings with the narratives on the cosmopolitanism of Kochi, Kapur in another essay, argued that, "these buildings gave Kochi's precolonial, colonial and postcolonial cosmopolitanism a fresh narrative."[100]

Richard Sennett's exploration of the term "public" analyzed its etymology and its association with cosmopolitanism, particularly evident in 18th-century England. He delineates the public sphere as distinct from the private realm of family and close acquaintances, identifying the cosmopolitan as the quintessential public figure.[101] The cosmopolitan, in Sennett's view, embodies the idea of strangers in public spaces who possess the ability to embrace the diversities and discontinuities inherent in urban environments.[102] Applying Sennett's concept to the city of Kochi reveals the construction of a cosmopolitan strange public, where cosmopolitanism entails adopting the values of hospitality shared among different communities coexisting within the city.[103] Kochi, with its influx of tourists and vibrant streets surrounding KMB venues, has emerged as an axis of cultural exchange.[104] However, the presentation of images during the Biennale often evokes a

---

[99] Geeta Kapur, "Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Site Imaginaries," *Critical Collective*, Published in the Catalogue of Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2012.

[100] Geeta Kapur, "Kochi- Muziris Biennale and the Biennale Phenomenon *Marg*, December 3016- March 2017, 39.

[101] Sennet, *The Fall of Public Man*, 17.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Gayatri Sinha, "Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Site as Imaginary," *Post*, MoMA, July 5, 2018, Accessed on October 27, 2022, https://post.moma.org/kochi-muziris-biennale-site-as-imaginary/.

[104] Field note, April 6, 2023.

TH-3461_186141015

voyeuristic fascination with the city and its inhabitants, drawing attention to certain art practices that may commodify or exoticize the everyday lives of its communities. This aspect is further explored in the following section.

4. Reversing the Gaze

Traveling from the Fort Kochi Jetty to the city's tourist attractions or the main residential area, anyone with an observant eye would notice a sizable image of an elderly man on the exterior wall of the Coast Guard Office in Fort Kochi (Figure 5). Khalid Said, a headload worker residing in Fort Kochi, is the man portrayed in the artwork. Said, with a smile, is depicted in the colorful portrait, looking out at any passersby who happen to be walking or driving by the public artwork. A mound of man-made sand hides the part of him beneath his white beard. Moss and political party posters on either side partially conceal the blue-colored background of the image. The immediate front side is surrounded by tree branches, used bicycle tires, dry leaves, and scraps of paper.[105] Venturing further into the streets, one discovers several such ephemeral portraits on huge walls scattered throughout Fort Kochi and Mattancherry.

[105] Field note, September 1, 2022

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 5.5. ***Working Class Heroes,*** **P.S. Jalaja, Acrylic on wall, Coast Guard office, Fort Kochi, 2017. Source: Photo taken by the author, August 28, 2022.**

TH-3461_186141015

The wall murals in question were created by P. S. Jalaja, emerging from her ethnographic exploration of the working-class communities situated in Fort Kochi and Mattancherry. The murals, represented using acrylic paint, displayed seven portraits, encompassing six men and one woman, exhibited on the white walls of various private and governmental buildings. Her artwork is titled "Working Class Heroes" and is based on the objective of depicting the common lives of communities who worked as sweepers, laundry men, fishers, and head load employees.[106] She selected seven employees who she thought would reflect particular features to draw and recorded their stories as she produced the artwork. She mentioned that the main audience of her works was the local communities, and her works served as an honor to the communities.[107] They participated actively in the art production by posing for the images, visiting frequently, offering suggestions to the Jalaja, telling her about their own experiences, and interacting with the site. Her main objective was to capture the joyful moments in their lives and reflect them in the portraits, aligning with the dominant narratives of *Mattancherry*. Therefore, all seven portraits were represented with subtle smiles on their faces. The objective of "Working Class Heroes" was to challenge the notion of community as developed by the KMB.

From its inception, the KMB has actively fostered the integration of Kochi's local community into the realm of art practice, as evidenced by the name of inaugural KMB, "People's Biennale." Curator Bose Krishnamachari wrote,

[106] The title was inspired by a song of John Lennon titled *Working Class Hero* in 1970. See. Amalu and P. S Jalaja, "Ente Kala Athirthikalillatha Lokathe Swapnam Kanunnu" (My Art Dreams of a World Without Boundaries), *wtplive*, Issue 95, February 19, 2022, https://wtplive.in/Interview/interview-amalu-with-artist-ps-jalaja-3091?fbclid=IwAR29FpeUqHr7CUHBgDHRy0FhTv-WHa3rw0O0yjFu5AY8q3YJBHeOho_whZs.

[107] P. S. Jalaja, Interview with the author, October 2, 2022.

TH-3461_186141015

> "Since our project was premised on the rejection of elitism, we campaigned to connect with the local community directly. We printed brochures in Malayalam and distributed them to the public. Posters went up all around the city- on buses, auto rickshaws and taxis as well as in public squares- showing photographs of ordinary people such as drivers, hawkers, pedestrian, school children and so on, with the slogan "Its our Biennale.""[108]

Within the dominant visual discourse addressed to the strange publics in the city, the subjectivity of the local community found its place seamlessly reinforcing the notion of inclusive art. Rajashree Balaram recounts a response from a fisherman named Thomachan in Fort Kochi during the third edition of the KMB in 2016, "I live in Fort Kochi, how can I afford to miss the Biennale?"[109] She highlighted her enthusiasm to find out if Thomachan likes the works at KMB and highlighted his innocent reply, "Thomachan could not remember the name of the artist or the title of the work, but he had made time to an international art event nonetheless and allowed himself to be moved by it."[110]

In the fourth edition of the KMB titled "Possibilities for a Non-Alienated Life," curated by Anita Dube, there was a thematic endeavor to establish a connection between art and local communities. Dube elaborated on this aim, stating:

---

[108] Bose Krishnamachari, "Of the People, By the People and For the People," *Passjournal,* December 17, 2018, Accessed on October 30, 2022, https://passjournal.org/kochi-muziris-biennale-of-the-people-by-the-people-and-for-the-people/.

[109] Rajashree Balaram, "What makes Kochi-Muziris Biennale India's largest, most inclusive public art event", *Vogue,* January 3, 2020, Accessed on February 11, 2024, https://www.vogue.in/magazine-story/what-makes-kochi-muziris-biennale-indias-largest-most-inclusive-public-art-event/

[110] Ibid.

> "I wanted someone from the general public, say an auto driver to walk in and give vent to his feelings on the Biennale or about anything that he wished to talk about."[111]

The presence of local communities at the KMB sites got more attention in the same edition. Writer Vindu Goel emphasized the visit of a local fisherman, Bashir to the exhibition venue. He wrote,

> "Clad in a simple stripped shirt and the white *mundu* of the city's fish mongers Bashir stood out from the well-healed throng at the warehouse galleries and tree-filled courtyards on the first day of India's biggest contemporary art show, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale."[112]

According to Goel, Bashir's willingness to engage with the artwork was a victory for the organizers of the KMB.

Furthermore, several wall murals commissioned by the KMB sprang up in the street, representing local communities. The first KMB edition commissioned artists to draw murals on the building walls in the street. It was the first time in Kerala that commissioned wall murals had been used.[113] A Bangalore-based artist, Anpu Varkey, painted a mural, "Dragonfish," representing a huge image of a fish holding a cigarette and a beer glass in black and white color. The artwork occupied the sea-facing wall of the colonial building Pepper House.[114] In another case, in the first two editions of the KMB, Australian artist Danniel Connel was commissioned to work on the portrait of labor communities in Kochi. Connel spent time with the fishermen's community,

---

[111] Anita Dube, "A Sence of Satisfaction," *Scale,* March 16, 2019, Accessed on October 30, 2022, https://scalemag.online/art/in-focus/a-sense-of-satisfaction/

[112] Goel, "In India, Building Bridges Between Life and Art."

[113] Anto K. G, Interview with the Author, October 18, 2022.

[114] Robert E. D'Souza, "The Indian Biennale Effect: The Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2012," *Cultural Politics,* Vol. 9, Issue 3, 2013, 307.

TH-3461_186141015

selected a few of them, and did their portraits on the street walls.[115] As the inclusive processes expanded through various representational forms, it became widely believed that the sites of exhibitions of KMB provided alternative space for artists to show their work, free from at least some of the constraints imposed by profit-driven commercial galleries. Neelima Jeyachandran observed that subaltern histories and marginalized narratives may find expression as new discourses are generated and epistemologies are produced at these sites.[116]

Nevertheless, while critiquing the inclusive strategy of the KMB, *Mattancherry* aimed to refocus its attention on the community achieved through narrative forms rather than the representational forms used in the KMB. The project was intentional in its efforts to avoid voyeurism and sensationalism, instead aiming to narrate the diverse lives of the people of Kochi authentically. Rather than merely representing their lives, Riyas Komu emphasized the ideal of "celebrating the people."[117] When Komu talks about "celebrating the people," he is advocating for a shift in perspective among viewers from being mere observers based on voyeurism to actively engaging with the subjects, eliciting a response or shock as their gaze is reflected at them through passing down intimate stories.[118] Through this, he intended for a superimposition of the intimate

[115] Afrah Ali, "The People's Artist Celebrating Dignity of Labour," *Times of India*, February 7, 2017, Accessed on October 30, 2022, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/a-peoples-artist-celebrating-dignity-of-labour/articleshow/57011480.cms.

[116] Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India),* 139.

[117] Riyas Komu, Interview with the Author, September 20, 2022.

[118] Artist and art historian in Kerala has used the English word "voyeurism" to refer to the Malayalam word *Kauthukanottam* (Fascinating Gaze). It has been mentioned in Chapter 2, how the art historian Kavitha Balakrishnan used this word, which does not align with Laura Mulvey's idea of voyeurism. See. Riyas Komu, Interview with the Author, September 20, 2022.

publics with a locus on Mattancherry over the strange publics in Fort Kochi by taking both places into consideration. Such was the case with the artwork "Working Class Heroes," done by P. S. Jalaja.

In addition to emphasizing smiling faces, Jalaja's work incorporated the realities of communities through their attire. There was an image depicting the only female portrait of Mani *Chechi* (Figure).[119] Mani *Chechi* was a permanent government employee in the Kochi municipality, who was about to retire after 35 years of service to her job as a sweeper.[120] The portrait depicted a smiling Mani *Chechi* wearing a headscarf, a common practice among working women in Kerala to shield themselves from the scorching sunlight (Figure 5.6). She was also shown wearing a blue overcoat, typical attire for workers, with a portion of her saree visible underneath the coat. The portrait was done on a wall in River Road, Fort Kochi, adjacent to a ready-made store showcasing *Kasavu Mundu*, displayed on mannequins to attract tourists.[121] *Kasavu Mundu* is a traditional attire worn by the upper caste in the early days that became a symbol of Malayali identity with modernization. The streets of Fort Kochi are generally lined with such stores. The representation of Mani *Chechi* adjacent to such a "traditionally" attired mannequin potentially invited the gaze to the reality of the place and its people. Even though the selection of the wall was not intentional by Jalaja, she said that ultimately, her painting turned out to be an irony between the unreal and the real world of Kochi.[122]

[119] *Chechi* is Malayalam word for elder sister.

[120] P.S. Jalaja, Interview with the author, October 2, 2022.

[121] *Kasavu Mundu* consists of a white cotton *Mundu*, which is a type of lower garment similar to a dhoti, bordered with a golden line.

[122] P.S. Jalaja, Interview with the author, October 2, 2022.

TH-3461_186141015

Figure 5.6. Portrait of Mani *Chechi* (Sister Mani), by P.S. Jalaja, 2016, River Road, Fort Kochi Source: Jayashree Balaram, "Mattancherry Makeover: URU Art Harbour's new exhibition is a wake-up call for Kochi," August 12, 2017, *Architectural Digest,* 2017

Jalaja's portraits consciously aligned with the objective of *Mattanchery* and avoided the visual strategy of voyeurism as they sought to represent the everyday lives of the working class through their skin color, the dress they wore, and most importantly the smiling faces and gazes at the tourists. Jalaja narrated the intimate stories of the communities on various platforms that circulated in the public sphere.[123] Although the initial intention was to superimpose the intimate public over the strange public sphere, I argue that the artworks are influenced by the institutionalized and voyeuristic nature of art in Kochi. Neelima Jeyachandran observed that

[123] Amalu and Jalaja, "Ente Kala Athirthikalillatha Lokathe Swapnam Kanunnu;" Facebook page of P. S. Jalaja; "Ni Talks 23 – P. S. Jalaja, Kerala," *YouTube,* March 17, 2021, Accessed on September 2, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdLBD_2HXvw&t=5968s

Kochi exemplifies "the post-museum since the presentation of histories, memories, and cultural rituals is not restricted to the walled spaces of museums, but instead spills outside architectural frameworks."[124] Jeyachandran perceives this phenomenon as a diffused museum to refer to the concept of an open-air museum of Kochi. Within such a gallery space which bears the mark of institutions, public artworks on the street walls functioned the same as the artworks in gallery spaces, which demanded the gaze of the tourists without the immediate transfer of the intimate stories with the gaze. Therefore, I contend that the gazes of both intimate publics and strange publics do not entail an exclusionary process. Instead, in a city like Kochi, these gazes operate within the institutional framework of art, encompassing both its emancipatory elements and voyeuristic potential simultaneously.

Geeta Kapur elaborated on the influence of globalization on the cultural sphere and the infiltration of neoliberal ideologies into the concept of "art as an institution."[125] Kapur argued that with the increasing intervention of global capitalism, the distinction between art and institutions blurs, and both become increasingly aware of the need to expand their roles in the light of evolving trends in art practice.[126] As an institution, art objects adapt to ongoing interactions with contemporary contexts, particularly through their emphasis on the term "contemporary art," which acts as a mediating space between the state and civil society. It is here that the discourse on democracy is circulated, and the artists become part of the political public sphere. Geeta Kapur argued that, despite the function of art as an institution, artists communities assert their claim on sovereignty.[127] It signifies their commitment to maintaining contemporary artistic integrity as a

---

[124] Jeyachandran, *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India)*

[125] Parameshwaran and Dev, "To be Partisan, Unsettled and Alert: Conversation with Geeta Kapur."

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid

political activist and their autonomy even within the institutionalized framework. However, it is within the same realm that the representation of working-class bodies becomes subjects of vouyerstic and fetishistic gaze.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I specifically looked into the visual publics produced in the urban city of Kochi. Kochi stands out as a significant case study for exploring art activities in Kerala, given its role as a center for private galleries, public exhibitions, and, notably, the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB). By examining the relationship between art, the urban environment, and the public sphere, this chapter highlighted the emergence of narrative art practices within the city aimed at representing the local communities and intimate stories. The objective of this chapter was to examine how the publics of visual art engage with the intimate stories in the port city. In order to do that, the chapter analyzed a community-oriented exhibition project *Mattancherry* that produced intimate publics focusing on their history of reconciliation.

The institutionalized art activities in Kochi have been constructing a dominant public sphere of strangers consisting middle class tourists. As response to this construction, the *Mattancherry* exhibition emphasized the intimate publics intended to reverse the tourist gaze. To study the relation between the intimate and tourist gazes, the chapter focused wall murals created by P. S. Jalaja. Although her artworks instructing for a reversal of the dominant gaze, in this chapter, I argue that the portrayal of intimate stories in the city has contributed to a voyeuristic gaze perpetuated by art institutions in the city. The two publics formed in the city, the strange and intimate, are not exclusive category, instead they coexist within the modern institutional structure.

TH-3461_186141015

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the construction of publics in relation to visual arts in post-independence Kerala. The exploration begins with an examination of existing scholarship, revealing that the development of visual art in early twentieth-century Kerala diverged from modernist art practices in major colonial art institutions in India. While modernism developed in major art institutions, intertwined with debates of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism, existing scholarship indicates that similar developments did not occur within Kerala's art institutions. The absence of academic discussions on modernism within formal art institutions led to the emergence and development of modern art outside of these institutions, primarily through printed media. Building upon this historical context, scholarship on visual arts in post-independence Kerala primarily situates visual art at the boundary between what is considered art and non-art in the modern sense.

Deviating from imagining the audiences solely as connoisseurs within art institutions, the scholarship emphasizes that artworks situated at the boundary presume their audiences to consist of three types: literate Malayalis who engage with art through printed images, strangers who gaze at art in public spaces, and marginalized communities who interact with art through narrative art practices. In these scenarios, the audiences of modern art at the boundary are assumed to be common people who engage with visual arts within a democratic public sphere characterized by accessibility and inclusivity. This viewpoint advocates a binary framework that contrasts the democratic nature of art in non-institutional spaces with the exclusive nature of formal art institutions. This study interrogated the scholarly viewpoints and disagreed with the binary assumptions. In order to achieve this objective, the study examined the forms of publics

TH-3461_186141015

constructed by the artworks at the boundary with their claim of a democratic public sphere. This examination was conducted through a mixed-method approach.

The study employed a combination of archival research and ethnography to analyze a range of case studies. These case studies were carefully selected to represent visual art at the boundary and included printed images and narrative art exhibitions in public spaces. The archival research mainly involved analyzing the printed images, including illustrations and photographs, found in Malayalam periodicals. It explored the formation of discursive publics produced by the representation of the female body, which is an inevitable icon in printed images. The ethnographic analysis focused on narrative art practices in rural and urban sites, encompassing installations and wall murals. It specifically examined the formation of spatial publics through community-based art practices, which serve as socially intended art at the boundary.

Based on the archival and ethnographic research, the dissertation is mainly divided into two sections, each comprising two chapters. The first section, comprising Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 primarily utilized the archival sources. In Chapter 2, I analyzed how the representation of the female body in periodicals played a major role in constructing gendered publics. Art historians primarily argue that the printed images in Malayalam periodicals rendered modern art, as depicted in illustrations and photographs, more accessible to literate Malayali readers. In their writings, the feature of accessibility was understood as a main principle of the democratic public sphere produced by the print media, as opposed to the institutional spaces. Nevertheless, this chapter interrogated the binary understanding by analyzing how increasing accessibility to the representation of the female body has created two types of public spheres with the male gaze. First is the literary public sphere produced by literary magazines, and the second is the popular public sphere produced by *Painkili* magazines. In this chapter, I argued that both public spheres adhere

TH-3461_186141015

to the protocols of institutionalized modern art, particularly in their tendency to objectify the female body through the male gaze. Through this process, it became apparent that mere accessibility cannot be seen as the sole indicator of democracy as the visual discourse produced gendered publics by reinforcing the male gaze.

Building on the argument presented in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 explored the nuances of gendered publics facilitated by printed images in the contemporary period. In order to do that, the chapter examined the concept of female nudity in a photograph featured on the cover page of *Grihalakshmi*, a women's magazine. The representation of nudity on the cover page straddled the boundary between high art and pornography in major debates surrounding the image. Therefore, the chapter conducted an iconographic analysis of female nudity in Kerala as well as a discourse analysis of public debates surrounding it. The analysis explored three key factors- state intervention, art historical influences, and the collective gaze- to outline how these factors collectively related to the representation of female nudity in producing gendered publics. The chapter observed that female nudity at the boundary always redefines its boundary between art and pornography to categorize its publics. At this moment, the state interferes in the public discourses to redefine its boundary, where obscenity becomes a legal tool. During moments when the representation of the female nude seeks to surpass the traditional confines of modern art, new parameters emerge and expand the boundary of high art. Therefore, the publics produced by the representation of female nudes are gendered by strategically distancing themselves from discussions involving the representation of the female body, sexuality, and male gaze constructed by them. The relationship is becoming a complex realm as both are becoming a product shaped by new media, politics, and emerging discourses on the female body in representations. At the same time, it is an area where more discussions could arise about female sexuality in public, its representational logic, and the boundary where art ends and pornography starts.

Moving away from the representation of the female body, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 focused on narrative art practices in non-institutional public spaces in rural and urban regions of Kerala. In

chapter 4, the examination focused on understanding the relationship between site-specific artworks and art institutions, aiming to discern the nature of the public sphere formed by these artworks. The study centered on an exhibition, *Let Me Come to Your Wound: Heal Myself*, curated by C. F. John in Kelakam, a rural village inhabited by a farming community. This exhibition encapsulated two significant historical processes in post-independence India: the production of the political public sphere within a nation-state and the relationship between the political public sphere and the commodification process of art in the neoliberal era. The chapter observed that the site-specific artworks in Kelakam, driven by their political purpose, transcended the modern representative concept of art and aesthetics and functioned as narratives that was devoid of the burden of modern art's language. However, these narratives facilitate discourse in the public sphere through print and digital media that situated the art objects within the dominant discourse of the art world, which possesses an institutional and academic character rooted in the discipline of modern art history.

Chapter further argued that, in parallel to the political public sphere, a civic public sphere emerged, embracing the private intervention of the market in the art world. It explored the formation of the civic public sphere in relation to art in Kerala through an ethnographic study of the exhibition *Lokame Tharavadu* in Alappuzha. In this exhibition, C.F. John's rural art exhibition was reproduced in a video documentary format. The chapter argued that when the discourse in the political public sphere produced by the rural exhibition intersects with that of the civic public sphere produced by *Lokame Tharavadu*, the site-specific art objects reside in a space between the two publics within the art institutional space.

Moving on to Chapter 5, the study aimed to explore the formation of publics of the narrative art in the urban space of Kochi, shifting the focus away from the rural site. By examining the

relationship between art, the urban environment, and the public sphere, the chapter highlighted the emergence of narrative art practices within the city aimed at representing the local communities and intimate stories. The objective of this chapter was to examine how the publics of visual art engage with the intimate stories in the city. In order to do that, the chapter analyzed a community-oriented exhibition project *Mattancherry* that produced intimate publics focusing on their history of reconciliation.

The chapter observed that the institutionalized art activities in Kochi have been constructing a dominant public sphere of strangers consisting of middle-class tourists. In response to this construction, the *Mattancherry* exhibition emphasized the intimate publics intended to reverse the tourist gaze. The chapter explored this relation by studying the wall murals created by P. S. Jalaja. In conclusion, it argued that although Jalaja's artworks instruct for a reversal of the dominant gaze, the portrayal of intimate stories in the city has contributed to a voyeuristic gaze perpetuated by art institutions in the city. The two publics formed in the city, the strange and intimate, are not an exclusive category, instead, they coexist within the modern institutional structure.

The observations in all the chapters point towards the development of the visual discourse and circulation that continuously unsettle the static boundary of artworks and thereby produce various public spheres. These different public spheres are all shaped and produced by artworks characterized by modernistic trajectories, institutional influences of art, and the intervention of state and private institutions. Additionally, public spheres are interconnected with one another, forming networks of dominant publics of visual art, who are connoisseurs of high art, encompassing the specific regional history and modernism in India. These publics are formed in a space between art and non-art, but at the same time adhering to the protocols of modernism.

In conclusion, I conceptualize visual arts as an institution informed by the historical networks revealed through archival research and ethnographic observations in the study. By institution, I refer to the tangible and intangible nature of organizational principles that shape a

TH-3461_186141015

collective identity. Rather than rigidly adhering to traditional categorizations, regional art institutions with modernistic influences have demonstrated a willingness to expand their boundaries to accommodate social changes and engage with the dominant public discourses. In the context of globalization, art as an institution continuously undergoes cycles of advancement and transformation, where old art practices are dismantled to make way for new ones by demonstrating their ability to adapt to publics.

I began the study by analyzing three trajectories of visual art in Kerala that functioned at the boundary between art and non-art. The focus of the study primarily rests on printed images and narrative forms of visual art, with relatively less attention devoted to modern visual art within institutional frameworks. I focused more on the historicity of modern art, although the term "contemporary art" is frequently used to denote art practices in twenty-first-century Kerala. For the purpose of the dissertation, I haven't focused enough on the discourses around the concept of "contemporary art." The study revealed that the concepts of accessibility and inclusivity, which are believed to be the hallmarks of the democratic public sphere have to be redefined in terms of art as an institution. It argues that these democratic principles do not exclusively rest with art outside institutions. The dissertation concludes with the proposal that the concept of democracy, within this context, cannot be analyzed within the exclusive binary of the art institutions and the public sphere. Furthermore, it makes ground for the possibility of analyzing the concept of art and democracy with the boundaries that are already working on the ideal of art as an institution in the contemporary period.

TH-3461_186141015

Bibliography

1. Primary Archives

1.1. Institutional Archives

Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, Second Session, Vol. 9, No. 5, June 28, 1960.

Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, Second Session, Vol. 9, No. 15, July 13, 1960.

Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, First Session, Vo. 24, No. 8, January 13, 1969.

Proceedings of the Kerala Legislative Assembly, First Session, Vol. 47, No. 39, April, 11, 1979.

Program Structure and Syllabus, Master of Fine Arts: Painting, Sculpture and Applied Art, Mahatma Gandhi University PGCSS Regulations, 2019.

Report of University Committee Travancore: 1923-1924, Trivandrum: Superintendent, Government Press, 1925.

*Report of The Kerala Education Act of 1958 and The Kerala Education Rule, 195*9, General Education Department, 2010.

Supreme Court judgement, Criminal appeal No. 902 of 2004, February 3, 201.

1.2. Periodicals

Granthalokam (August, 2005)

Grihalakshmi (March 2, 2018)

Mangalam Weekly (1970-1990)

Manorama Weekly (!970-1990)

Mathrubhumi Weekly (1950- 1999)

Samskarakeralam, (April- June, 1996)

1.3. Catalogues, Brochure and Manifesto

Brochure, "Lokame Tharavadu."

Brochure, "Brick," Vo. 4, August 2017.

Catalogue, Ajayakumar, "Women Painters of Kerala," Thrissur: Kerala Lalit Kala Akademi, 2007.

Catalogue, Dube, Anita., "Questions and Dialogue," Faculty of Fine Arts Gallery, Baroda, 1987.

Manifesto, "Artists Organize Against the Conservative Visual Consciousness," Calicut, January 27, 1989.

2. Secondary Sources

2.1. Books

Ajayakumar., *Anukalika Kalachinthakal* (Thoughts on Contemporary Art), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2011.

Anderson, Benedict., *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* London: Verso, 1983.

Balakrishnan, Kavitha., *Keralathile Chithrakalayude Varthamanan* (Present Condition of Visual Art in Kerala), Chengannur: Rainbow Book Publishers, 2007.

_____., *Adhunika Keralathinte Chithrakala: Ashayam, Prayogam, Vyavaharam,* (Visual Art in Modern Kerala: Ideology, Practice and Discourse), Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Language, 2007.

_____., *Kalayude Navalokam,* (The New Art World), Kottayam: DC Books, 2017.

_____., *Vayana Manushyante Kala Charithram,* (Art History of the Reader-Viewer), Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 2020.

Balaram, N. E., *Keralathile Communist Prasthanam: Adyanalukal* (Communist Movement in Kerala: Early Days), Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House, 1990.

Banerji, Debashish., *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore,* London: Sage, 2009.

Basheer, Vaikkom Muhammad., *Anavariyum Ponkurishum* (Anavari and Ponkurishu), Kottayam: DC Books, 2008.

Berger, John., *Ways of Seeing,* London: The British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972.

Bhagat, Ashrafi S., *Framing the Regional Modern: K. C. S. Paniker and the Madras Art Movement,* Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2011.

Chandrakant, L. S., *Technical Education in India Today,* New Delhi: Ministry of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs, 1963.

Chandran, Baiju, "Painkiliyude Lokathe Nishkalankar," *India Today,* May 15, 2022, Accessed on February 17, 2023, https://malayalam.indiatoday.in/opinion/story/painkili-literature-malayalam-373923-2022-05-15.

Chandran, Subhash., *Varaprasadam* (Gift of Art), Kothamangalam: Saikatham Books, 2014.

Chandrashekharan, N. P., *Mathrubhumiyude Samskarika Parinamavum Mathrubhumi Azhchappathippum: Oru Prameyadhishtitha Vishakalanam,* (The Cultural Evolution of Mathrubhumi and the Mathrubhumi Weekly: A Conceptual Analysis), Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Calicut, 2017.

Chatterjee, Partha., *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories,* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Ciotti, Manuella., "Art Institutions as Global Forms in India and Beyond: Cultural Production, Temporality, and Place," In *Framing the Global: Entry Points for Research*, ed. Hilary. E. Kahn, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014.

Clark, Kenneth., *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form,* Washington: Princeton University Press, 1956.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda., *Introduction to Indian Art,* Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1956.

Deutsche, Rosalyn., *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

Dewan, Deepali., *Crafting Knowledge and Knowledge of Crafts: Art Education, Colonialism and the Madras School of Arts in Nineteenth-Century South Asia,* Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2001.

Elayidom, Sunil P., *Damitam: Adhunikathavadathinte Rashtreeya Abodham,* (*Resistance: Political Unconsciousness of Modernism*), Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Language, 2009.

_____., *Anubhoothikalude Charithrajeevitham,* (*Historical life of Sensations*), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2014.

_____., *Neethiyude Parppidangal*, (*Abodes of Justice*), Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2020.

Fotiadi, Eva., *The Game of Participation in Art and the Public Sphere,* Maastricht: Shaker Publishing, 2011.

Guha-Thakurtha, Tapati., *Monuments, Objects, Histories; Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India,* New York: Colombia University Press, 2004.

_____., *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920,* United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Habermas, Jürgen., *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,* Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1980.

Hacker, I. H., *A Hundred Years in Travancore: 1806-1906,* London: London Missionary Society, 1908.

Havell, E. B., *The Basis of Artistic and Industrial Revival in India,* Adayar: The Theosophist Office, 1912.

Jain, Kajri., *Gods in the Bazaar, The Economies of Indian Calendar Art,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

_____., *Gods in the Time of Democracy,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

Jayaraj, M., *Malayala Achadimadhyamam: Bhoothavum Varthamanavum* (Malayalam Print Media: Past and Present), Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Press, 2013.

Jeyachandran, Neelima., *Memory, Heritage, and Cultural Display in the Former Colonial Port Cities of Elmina (Ghana) and Fort Kochi (India),* Unpublished doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of California, Los Angeles, 2014.

Johny, M. L., *Yakshiyanam,* Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2019.

Jyothilal, T. G, *Adhunika Malayala Drishyakala,* (Modern Malayalam Visual Art: History and Discourse), Kalady: Sree Shankaracharya Sanskrit University, 2017.

Kapur, Geeta., *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India,* New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2000.

Kottembram, Sudheesh., *Thadankal Dinathile Kalachinthakal* (Quarantine Notes), Kottayam: Current Books, 2021.

Kwon, Miwon., *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity,* London: MIT Press, 2002.

Lacy, Suzanne., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art,* Washington: Bay Press, 1995.

Madoff, Steven Henry., *Art School: Propositions for the twenty-first Century,*" Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

Mansfield, Elizabeth., *Art History and Its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline,* London: Routledge, 2002.

Menon, A Sreedhara., *Gazetteer of India; Kerala; Alleppey,* Trivandrum: State Editor, Kerala Gazetteer, 1975.

Menon, Vijayakumar., *Bharatheeya Kalacharithram* (*Indian Art History*), Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2011.

_____., *Kerala Kalacharithram,* (History of Art in Kerala), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2021.

Michell, W. J. T., *Iconology: Image, Text and Ideology,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Mitter, Partha., *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Namboodirippad, E. M. S., *Kerala Charithram: Marxist Veekshanathil* (Kerala History: Marxian Perspective), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1990.

_____., *Marxisavum Sahithyasamvadavum* (Marxism and Literary Dialogues), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1995.

_____., *The Frontline Years: Selected Articles,* New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2010.

Nandakumar, R., *Insight and Outlook: Selected Essays on the Contemporary Art of Kerala,* Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2022.

Nead, Lynda., *The Female Nude: Art Obscenity and Sexuality,* London: Routledge, 1997.

Paniker, K. Ayyappa., *A Short History of Malayalam Literature*, Information and Public Relation Department Kerala State, 1977.

Panikkar, Shivaji K., Mukherjee, Parul Dave., and Achar, Deeptha., *Towards a New Art History: Studies in Indian Art,* New Delhi: D. K. Printworld Ltd, 2003.

Parayil, Govindan., "The 'Kerala Model' of Development: Development and Sustainability in Third World," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 5, 1996, 947- 957.

Parimoo, Ratan., *Studies on the Art of Raja Ravi Varma,* Kochi: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2006.

Pillai, Manu S., *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore*, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015.

Prasad, J. R., *A. S: Varayum Kalavum,* (A. S: Art and Time), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2013.

Preziosi, Donald., *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989.

_____., *Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh., *Masculinity and the Structuring of the Public Domain in Kerala: A History of the Contemporary*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, July 2006.

Raghavan, Puthuppalli., *Kerala Pathrapravarthana Charithram* (History of Journalism in Kerala), Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1985.

Rajeev, Sharat Sunder., *The King's Craftsmen: History of the Ivory Carvers of Thiruvananthapuram,* Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Council for Historical Research, 2016.

Rajesh, M. R., *Malayala Cinema Poster: Soundaryavum Rashtreeyavum* (Malayala Cinema Poster: Aesthetics and Politics), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2011.

Raveendran., *Kala Vimarsham: Marxist Manadandam* (Art Criticism: Marxist Framework), Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2012.

Sam, N., *Malayala Pathrapravarthanam: Pathonpatham Noottandil* (Malayalam Journalism in Nineteenth Century), Kottayam: DC Books, 2003.

Sarkar, Sumit., *Modern India,* New Delhi: Pearson, 2014.

Sasikumar, Harikrishnan., *Social Spaces and Public Sphere: A Spatial- History of Modernity in Kerala, India,* Unpublished PhD dissertation, Dublin City University, 2020.

Simon, Nina., *The Participatory Museum,* California: Museum, 2.0 Press, 2010.

Subramanyan, K. G., *The Living Tradition: Perspectives on Modern Indian Art.* Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1987.

Sudhakaran, P., *Kalavidhyabhyasam: Marunna Pariprekhyangal,* (Art Education: Changing Perspectives), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2021.

Sudheesh, A., *Graduating Tensions? Fine Arts Colleges in Modern and Contemporary Discourses in Kerala,* Unpublished MPhil dissertation, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University: New Delhi, 2017.

Thurston, Edgar., *Monograph on the Ivory Carving Industry of Southern India,* Madras: Government Press, 1901, *Internet Archive,* Accessed on 9 November 1901.

Travancore Almanac 1900., Government of Travancore, 1899, *Internet Archive,* contributed by Kerala State Library, Accessed on 9 November 2021.

Trias, B. A., *Living at the Gates of History: Public Perception of Colonial Buildings in Kochi, Kerala, India,* Unpublished Masters' thesis submitted to Leiden University, January 2012.

Vatsyayan, Kapila., *Transmissions and Transformations,* Delhi: India International Center, 2011.

Vijayan, M. N., *Naveena Chithrakala* (New Visual Art), Thrissur: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, 2016.

Warner, Michael., *Publics and Counterpublics,* Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002.

Wyma, Kathleen Lynne., *The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of British Colombia, 2007.

2.2. Articles

Achari, Premjish., "Aesthetic Education: Exhibition Practice and the Kochi- Muziris Students Biennale", *Art and Education,* April 2019, Accessed on January 27, 2021, https://www.artandeducation.net/schoolwatch/261860/aesthetic-educationexhibition-practice-and-the-kochi-muziris-students-biennale.

Amalu and Jalaja, P.S., "Ente Kala Athirthikalillatha Lokathe Swapnam Kanunnu" (My Art Dreams of a World Without Boundaries), *wtplive*, Issue 95, February 19, 2022, Accessed on March 15, 2025, https://wtplive.in/Interview/interview-amalu-with-artist-ps-jalaja-3091?fbclid=IwAR29FpeUqHr7CUHBgDHRy0FhTvWHa3rw0O0yjFu5AY8q3YJBHeOho_whZs.

Antony, Teena., "Women's Education: A reading of Early Malayalam Magazines," *Artha J Soc Sci*, 2013.

Arunima, G., "Ravi Varma's Many Publics: Circulation and the Status of Art-Work," In *The Public Sphere From Outside the West,* eds. Divya Dwivedi, and V. Sanil, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2015.

Asher, Katherine B., "Sub-Imperial Palaces: Power and Authority in Mughal India," *Arts Orientalis,* Vol. 23, 1993.

Balachandran, Bipin., "Thettidharikkappetta K. C. S. Paniker", (K. C. S Paniker was Misunderstood) *True Copy Think,* 29 July 2020, 2 March 2021, https://truecopythink.media/bipin-balachandran-article-about-kcs-panicker.

Balaram, Rajashree., "Mattancherry Makeover: Uru Art Harbour's New Exhibition is a Wake up Call for Kochi", *Architectural Digest,* 12 August 2017, https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/mattancherry-makeover-uru-art-harbours-new-exhibition-wake-call-kochi/.

Beena, K. A., "'Keralee Sugunabodhini' Muthal 'Sanghaditha' Vare" (From 'Keralee Sugunabodhini' to 'Sanghadita'), *Sanghaditha,* Vol. 18, No. 28, 2022.

Benjamin, Walter., *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* New York: Schocken Books, 1969.

Bhattacharya, Neeladri., "Notes Towards a Concept of the Colonial Public," In. *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, Eds. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmet Reifeld, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005, 130-156.

Ciotti, Manuella., "Post-Colonial Renaissance: 'Indianness,' contemporary art and the market in the age of neo-liberal capital," *Third World Quarterly,* Vol. 33, No. 4, 2012, 637-655.

Cody, Francis., "Publics and Politics," *Annual Review of Anthropology,* Vol. 20, 2011, 37-52.

Devika, J., and Sukumar, Mini., "Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 41, Issue. 42, October 21, 2006.

Deutsche, Rosalyn., *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

Dillard, Leigh G., Okker, Patricia, and West, Nancy M., "Teaching Illustrations and Periodicals: Three Scholars Share Their Ideas and Materials," *Victorian Periodicals Review,* Vol. 39, No. 4, 2006.

D'Souza, Robert E., "The Indian Biennale Effect: The Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2012", *Cultural Politics,* Vol. 9, No. 3, November 2013.

Dube, Anita., "Midnight Dreams: The Tragedy of a Lone Revolutionary", *Afterall,* Issue 36, 2014

Fisher, David H., "Public Art and Public Space," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal,* Vol. 79, No. ½, 1996.

Fraser, Nancy., "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text,* No. 25/26, 1990.

Freitag, Sandria B., "Visions of the Nation: theorizing the Nexus Between Creation, Consumption and Participation in the Public Sphere," In *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India,* ed. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Guha-Thakurtha, Tapati., "Women as 'Calendar Art' Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 43, 1991.

Guha-Thakurta, Tapati., "Why Statues Matter: The Changing Landscape of Calcutta's Colonial and Post Colonial Statuary", A note published on *Critical Collective* by the author in her lecture Victoria Memorial Hall, August, 3, 2018 Accessed on October 3, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Syye-bYFq0U.

Habermas, Jürgen., "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopaedia Article (1964)," Tran. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique,* No. 3, 1974, 49-55.

Hein, Hilde., "What is Public Art? Time, Place and Meaning," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,"* Vol. 54, No. 1, 1996.

Jayaraj, M., "Azchappathippinte Charithrapadhangal" (Historical Trajectory of the Weekly), *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 99, No. 45, January 23, 2022.

_____., "Mathrubhumiyum Namboothiriyum" (Mathrubhumi and Namboothiri), *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 101, No. 19, July 23, 2023.

Jeffrey, Robin., "The Day-to-Day Social Life of the People," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. ½, January 1997.

_____., "Testing Concepts About Print, Newspapers, and Politics: Kerala, India, 1800-2009," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 2, 2009.

Jhaveri, Shanay., "Mutable Bodies: K.P. Krishnakumar and the Radical Association," *Afterall*, 18 June, 2014, Accessed on 6 October 2022, https://www.afterall.org/article/mutable-bodies_k.p.krishnakumar-and-the-radical-association

John, C. F., "Art and Agriculture: A Postscript for Installations," *Ezhuthu*, 11 May 2020.

_____., "An Aesthetic of Regeneration," *Leisa India*, Vol.22, No.4, December 2020.

Joseph, Jenson., "Mutations of the Interior: The Political in the New Media Regime," *South Asian Popular Culture*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2022.

Joy Annamma and Belk Russel., "India's Kochi Biennale: Sponsorship, Patronage and Art's Resistance," *Art and the Market*, January 28, 2019.

Kalachandran., "Rakthasakshiyude Chumarile Prardhanayude Pathakakal" (The Flags of Prayers on the Walls of Martyrs), *Mathrubhumi*, February 20, 2020, 96-97.

Kantawala, Ami., "Art Education in Colonial India: Implementation and Imposition," *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, Vol. 53 (3), 2012.

Kerala Kaumudi, Edited by C.V. Kunjiraman, Vol. 28, No. 9, 1938, Internet Archive.

Komu, Riyas., "Riyas Komu on the Third Edition of Kochi-Muziris Biennale," *Architectural Digest,* December 6, 2016, Accessed on February 11, 2024, https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/riyas-komu-third-edition-kochi-muziris-biennale/.

Krishnan, Y., "The Erotic Sculptures of India," *Artibus Asaie,* Vol. 34, No. 4, 1972, 331-332.

Kumar, Siva R., "Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview," *Art Journal,* Vol. 58, No. 3, 1999.

Kunhikrishnan, K., "Sculpting Change in the Public Eye," *The Hindu,* October 11, 2009.

Kwon, Miwon., "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October,* Vol. 80, 1997.

Lieten, Georges Kristoffel., "Education, Ideology and Politics in Kerala 1957-59," *Social Scientist,* Vol. 6, No. 2, 1977, 3-21.

Linke, Gabriele., "The Public, The Private, and The Intimate: Richard Sennett's and Lauren Berlant's Cultural Criticism in Dialogue" *Biography,* Vol. 34, No. 1, 2011.

Luis, Sandip K., "Disappearing Strands of Historicity: Critical Notes on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 49, no. 20, May 17, 2014.

Malik, Suhail., "Critique as Alibi: Moral Differentiation in the Art Market," *Journal of Visual Art Practice,* Vol. 7, No. 3, 2008.

Malayala Manorama., Annual, edited by Mamammn Mappila, Kottayam: Malayala Manorama Press, 1935, Internet Archive.

Manghani, Sunil and D' Souza, Robert E., "Timely Provocations: The 3rd Kochi-Muziris Biennale," *Biennialgram,* 10 January 2017, https://biennialfoundation.org/2017/01/timely-provocations-the-3rd-kochi-muziris-biennale/

Maruthur, Navaneetha Mokkil., "Visual Practices, Affect, and the Body: The Story of a Night-Vigil in Kerala, India," *WSQ: Women Studies Quarterly,* Volume 46, No. 3 and 4, Fall/ Winter, 2018.

Mathur, Saloni., "A Retake of Sher-Gil's Self-Portrait as Tahitian," *Critical Inquiry,* vo. 37, No. 3, 2011.

Mazzarella, William., "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who is Afraid of the Crowd?", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2010.

Menon, M. Dilip., "Deep Time and Colonial Present: A Prologue to the History writing of Kesari Balakrishnappillai" in book *Clio and Her Descendance: Essays for Kesavan Veluthat,* Delhi: Premium Books, August 2019.

Menon, Vijayakumar., "Kanayi Kunhiramanile Samskrithi Chihnangal" (The Cultural Symbolism in Kanayi Kunhiraman), *Granthalokam,* Vol. 57, No. 8, 2005.

Mitchell, W. J. T., "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture,* 2002

Mitter, Partha., "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin,* Vol.90, No. 4, December 2008.

_____., "Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin in Calcutta: The Creation of a Regional Asian Avant-garde Art," In *Arrival Cities: Migrating Artists and New Metropolitan Topographies in the 20th Century*, eds. Burcu Dogramaci, Mareike Hetschold, Laura Karp Lugo, Rachel Lee, Helene Roth, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020.

Mukherji, Parul Dave., "Whither Art History in a Globalising World," *The Art Bulletin,* Vol. 96, No. 2, 2014.

Mulvey, Laura., "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," In *Visual and Other Pleasures,* New York: Palgrave, 1989.

Nair, M. T. Vasudevan., and Vijayakrishnan, N.P., "Bhavukathvangalude Navathi" (Newnes in Imagination), *Mathrubhumi Weekly*, Vol. 99, No. 45, January 23, 2022.

Nair, Tara S., "Jeffry's Reading of Malayalam Press: A Blindfold Stab?" *Economic and Political Weekly,* August 30, 1997.

Nandy, Ashis., "Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochin," *Japanese Journal of Political Science,* United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 295-327.

Nazeer, Geetha., "Malayala Pathrapravarthana Rangathe Sthree Charithram" (History of Women in Malayalam Journalism), *Sanghaditha,* Vol. 18, No. 28, 2022.

Parameshwaran, Ameet., and Dev, Rahul., "To be Partisan, Unsettled and Alert: Conversation with Geeta Kapur," *Artmargins,* November 3, 2015, Accessed on June 30, 2023.

Parayil, Sujithkumar., "Family Photograph: Visual Mediation of the Social," *Critical Quarterly,* Vol. 56, No. 3, 2014.

Prakash, B. A., "Urban Unemployment in Kerala: The Case of Kochi City," *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 37, No. 39, September 28- October 4, 2002.

Prashad, Vijay., "Emergency Assessments," *Social Scientist*, Vol. 24, No. 9/10, 1996, 36-68.

Phillips, Andrea., "Too Careful: Contemporary Art's Public Making," *Sternberg Press/SKOR,* 1 January 2011.

Phillips, Patricia C., "Out of Order: The Public Art Machine", *Art Forum,* December 1988, Accessed on April 26, 2022, https://www.artforum.com/print/198810/out-of-order-the-public-art-machine-34653

Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh., "The Gulf in the Imagination: Migration, Malayalam Cinema and Regional Identity," *Contributions to Indian Sociology,* Vol. 43, No. 2, 2009.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish., "The Last Decade," In *Contemporary art in Baroda*, ed. Gulammuhammed Shaikh, New Delhi: Tulika, 1997.

Ramachandran, T. K., "Notes on the Making of Feminine Identity in Contemporary Kerala Society," *Social Scientist,* Vol. 23, No. 1 / 3 1995.

Sen, Biman., "Development of Technical Education in India and State Policy- A Historical Perspective," *International Educational Consortium,* New Delhi, July 29, 1989.

Shine, Lazer., "Kottayam Art," *Malayalanadu,* September 11, 2010, Accessed on November 4, 2022, https://malayalanatu.wordpress.com/2010/09/11/laser/.

Shivadas, Vidya., "Mapping the field of Indian Art criticism: Post- Independence", *Asia Art Archive,* 2009-2010.

https://aaa.org.hk/en/resources/papers-presentations/mapping-the-field-of-indian-art-criticism-post-independence.

Singh, Kamaan., "Well-Spring of Truth," *Resurgence,* No. 232, October 2005, https://cfjohn.com/copy-of-contact, Accessed on 30 September 2022.

Sinha, Gayatri., "Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Site as Imaginary," *Post,* 5 July 2018, Accessed on 24 September 2022, https://post.moma.org/kochi-muziris-biennale-site-as-imaginary/ .

Sing, Kavitha., "The Museum is National," *India, International Center,* Vol. 29, No. ¾, 2003.

Subramanian, Hariharan., "Yakshiyanam," *Indian Express,* 9 March 2019.

The Hindu., "The Art Contemporaries," December 30, 2012.

_____., "Mattancherry in Focus in Maiden Show at Uru," 11 August 2017, Accessed on 20 September 2022.

The Malayala Manorama Annual., Edited by K.C. Mammen Mappilai, Kottayam: The Malayala Manorama Press, 1935, Internet Archive.

The New Indian Express., "An 'Excavation' of Art, 23 February 2013, https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/kochi/2013/feb/23/an-excavation-of-art-453025.html.

Thomas, Elizabeth., "Kanayi Kunhiraman's Yakshi is Secular," *Deccan Chronicle*,9 April 2019.

Varghese, Rachel A., "What Constitute Muziris? Past and the Production of Heritage Destinations in the South Indian State of Kerala," *Journal of Tourism History,* December 18, 2017.

Vasudevan Nair, M. T., and Vijayakrishnan, N. P., "Bhavukathvangalude Navathi," (Nonagenarian of Imagination), *Mathrubhumi Weekly,* Vol. 99, No. 45, January 23, 2022.

Vidhyabhivardhini., S.T. Reddyar and Sons, Quilon: V. V. Press, Vol. 2, No. 8, 1921.

List of Publications

Published

1. "Kalacharithrathile Pen Varakal: T. K. Padminiyude Kalalokam" (Feminist Art in Art History: Life and Works of T.K. Padmini)

   Author: Sreelakshmi S.B

   Publication date: May- June, 2021

   Journal: *Chithravartha*, (Art News)

   Volume: 3

   Issue: 21

   Publisher: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, Thrissur

2. "Kalakarikalil Ninnum Sthreevada Kala Charithrathilekkulla Dooram," (The Distance Between Women Artists and Feminist Art History)

   Author: Sreelakshmi S.B

   Publication date: September 2023

   Journal: *Chithravartha*, (Art News)

   Volume: 5

   Issue: 33

   Publisher: Kerala Lalithakala Akademi, Thrissur

Submitted/ Accepted:

1. The Nude and Publics: Representing Female Body in Art History of Kerala

TH-3461_186141015

Author: Sreelakshmi S.B

Submission Date: December 6, 2023

Journal: *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift/Journal of Art History*

Status: With the editor

TH-3461_186141015