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LIMINAL RESISTANCES: LOCAL SUBJECTIONS IN *MY STORY*, *VIDHEYAN*, AND *THE  
GOD OF SMALL THINGS*

by

PRIYA MENON

Under the Direction of Dr. Ian Almond and Dr. Calvin Thomas

ABSTRACT

This project investigates various ways in which resistance is explored by Kamala Das, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Arundhati Roy in *My Story*, *Vidheyam*, and *The God of Small Things* respectively. “Liminal Resistances: Local Subjections in *My Story*, *Vidheyam*, and *The God of Small Things*” aims to examine the workings and creative subversions of hegemonic discourses of caste, class, gender and color within the local milieu of Kerala, India. By exploring the theoretical apparatuses employed in three diverse texts set in Kerala, this project identifies: firstly, Das’s subversion of Nair Kerala’s sense of gendered and caste normativity in *My Story*; secondly, Adoor’s depiction of the notion of *home* that enables self-recognition between the exploited and tyrant ensuring both suppression and liberatory self-formation for classed subjects in *Vidheyam*;

and finally, Roy's portrayal of the conceptual category of whiteness within Kerala as being neither uniformly subservient nor stable as depicted in *The God of Small Things*. It is hoped that by identifying and exploring the theoretical nuances of resistances in these generically diverse texts—autobiography, film, and fiction-- all set within the local realms of Kerala, this project will contribute a new scholarship in postcolonial studies that will recognize and problematize local instances of subversions and their representations within the Indian subcontinent.

INDEX WORDS: Kamala Das, Nair, Caste, *My Story*, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, *Vidheyam*, Home, Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, Whiteness, Kerala, Resistance

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PRIYA MENON

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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LIMINAL RESISTANCES: LOCAL SUBJECTIONS IN *MY STORY*, *VIDHEYAN*, AND  
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## **DEDICATION**

For Mira and Govind

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Most people in the world are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female, Non-Christian and do not speak English.

- Audre Lorde, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (1991)

My problem is essentially the definition of the implicit systems in which we find ourselves prisoners; what I would like to grasp is the system of limits and exclusion which we practice without knowing it; I would like to make the cultural unconscious apparent.

- Michel Foucault, "Rituals of Exclusion" (1975)

*Nation*...A large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people... A group of people having a single ethnic, tribal, or religious affiliation, but without a separate or politically independent territory.

- *Oxford English Dictionary* (2010)

The concept of India as a nation inhabits the space of representation in the Western academy. A space over-determined primarily by postcolonial theories that can be characterized in two ways: one in which Indian subaltern subjectivities are constructed in part by the metropolitan power structure of European colonialism, and another that focuses on the discursive practices

involving resistance to colonialism, and colonialist ideologies and legacies. Contemporary scholarship on India in the West almost exclusively deals with international immigration and the way these diasporic groups and their descendents develop communities, identities, and political platforms in their adopted homes. Despite being the *jewel in the crown* of postcolonial literary studies, there is still not much evidence of scholarship on India in the West that attempts to problematize and make visible the local (also heterogeneous) power struggles that move beyond the cause and effects of European colonization<sup>1</sup>. Leela Gandhi, in *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, claims that when the postcolonial condition is generalized, it ignores not only cultures that were not colonized but also the differences within cultures that were colonized. While continuing to delineate the limits of postcolonial theory, Gandhi also claims that voices of the other groups (e.g. local/indigenous) get lost when academics concentrate only on the binary of imperial coercion and anticolonial retaliation. What, then, is the future of so-called postcolonial studies? Is it relevant to invest academic interest in a field that seems to reinforce what it has set out to destroy?

One solution to the totalizing and homogenizing tendency that postcolonial studies displays is to confront it by an abundance of inquiries that decenter the notion of a collective and monolithic group consciousness (e.g. a national consciousness) by making visible the differences *within* the respective group. Benedict Anderson's influential book, *Imagined Communities*, has revolutionized the idea of the nation as a unified whole based on the popular notion of sovereignty and self government "with defined boundaries" by critiquing the notion that the world falls "naturally into nation-states containing similar people with distinct and defining qualities" (Childs and Williams 207). Thus, the definition of a nation suggested by Paul Friedrich "as a

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<sup>1</sup> I appropriate Disraeli's phrase here to refer to the importance generally ascribed to India as whole in contemporary postcolonial studies.

bounded territory with shared values, language and customs” fits India rather imperfectly, because, India is composed of numerous “seminational states” each with its own ethnocentric prejudices, dialects and distinctive profiles (544). Let me elucidate the difficulty in pigeonholing all of India into a unified whole by examining, say for example, its linguistic diversity. It is common knowledge that India recognizes fourteen languages for its official purposes. Hindi is the national language but is hardly used in the southern states thereby challenging its significance as the national linguafranca. This is almost a unique situation because, for instance, Mexico’s forty odd Indian languages spoken mainly by tiny minorities “do not threaten” the status of Spanish because Spanish remains the common tongue among its entire people (Friedrich 544). However this is not the case in India because in addition to the fourteen languages recognized as official in India one tenth of India’s population speaks several other languages that are not considered official, such as Tulu, Nepali, Ho and Persian. *The Census of India* cites twenty four tribal languages spoken by 100,000 or more people and 720 minor languages and dialects with fewer than 100,000 people speaking it; and of the sixty three non-Indian languages, English has the most mother-tongue speakers, with 171,742. At least six non-official languages are spoken by over one million people and two of these, Marwari and Sindhi, by only a few hundred thousand less than Assamese (Ministry of Home Affairs). Just a cursory examination of the above statistics will sufficiently help discern the immense difficulty in classifying an *imaginary construction* under the general label of India based on its linguistic (un)commonality.

Thus, the direction academia needs to take in terms of postcolonial studies seems to be a conscious move away from what Chakrabarty describes as the “formation of a community consciousness” by focusing on the life situations and struggles of *individual* subaltern subjects and their day to day life experiences at all levels that shape their subjectivities; the processes of their

making as well as the historical and political situation in which it is formed (21). To a large extent, this is what the *Subaltern Studies Group* has set out to accomplish. However, critics who take the effort to highlight differences within imagined communities, such as the nation, also face challenges. Work done by the *Subaltern Studies Group*, for example, has recently received a lot of criticism for “deviating from its original intent to rewrite history” from the perspective of the *voiceless* as it seems to lack “a coherent theory of how subjectivity and agency are constructed within concrete historical contexts” (Bahal 1333). Certainly, these historians are significant in breaking new ground in historical research, particularly with respect to applying ideas of difference to give meaning to the past. Yet, the concept of difference as applied in *Subaltern Studies* seems to be a problematic one: For instance, how is the so called difference conceptualized within the chosen underprivileged group? As far as studies on India are concerned, do the South Indian cultures (often neglected in Indian studies) of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh get equal visibility in their work? How do we understand difference within subaltern groups? Under what circumstance does difference become the basis of asserting a collective identity within these regions? What qualities, characteristics and aspects should be compared in deciding differences within groups? Can there be subordination of one group classified as unprivileged by another also perceived as subaltern?<sup>2</sup>

James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta have argued for the need to “destabilize and denaturalize the fixity of place, identity and culture” in contemporary cultural studies (24). Vinay Bahl suggests that looking at specific smaller locales than the entire nation as a whole will help achieve further specificity. Gayatri Spivak advocates “strategic essentialism;” albeit a “theoreti-

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<sup>2</sup> For example, take the case of women from lower castes in India—Maharashtrian *dalit* (untouchable) women are often more educated than their Bihari counterparts.

cal fiction” that would use a group identity to disrupt discourse of exclusion while being aware of its internal contradictions to make visible local instances of resistance (Childs 164). The questions in the above paragraph provide an excellent opportunity for me to examine how the social order and social institutions of caste, color, class and gender articulate themselves in the formation of the subject within the localized contours of India’s southern most state, Kerala. By investigating oppressive tools such as caste, color, class and gender within the specificities of the Kerala (Malayalee) culture, I hope to achieve a critical understanding of the functioning of the local in the politics of oppression. By examining three diverse texts set in Kerala, *Vidheyam*, *The God of Small Things* and *My Story*, I critically study the ways in which assumed normativity, be it the privileges typically assigned to the upper caste, fairer skin tones or higher class gets subverted apropos to the politics of a specific local place. Before moving on to dedicating a chapter to each of the texts mentioned above in this introductory chapter, I begin with a brief description of Kerala that will help contextualize the three body chapters of this dissertation. Next, I look at notions of resistance in order to make sense of its place in this context before finally providing a chapter outline of this dissertation.

## **1.1 Why Kerala?**

While Kerala, one of India’s premier states, shares many characteristics with other metropolitan areas of the north, as an urban formation and place, it has a peculiar history and configuration that has shaped its economic, cultural, social and political loyalties. As discussed



above, the socioeconomic and political contexts of India vary from region to region as did practices of caste, feudalism and other oppressive apparatuses and therefore, to some extent, the practices of British colonialism. Kerala's unique geography, cocooned by the Vindhya Ranges and the Arabian Sea, provides for the state's enchanting stretch of backwaters, monsoons, and lush greenery that has rightly earned her the moniker of being *God's own Country*<sup>3</sup>. This geographical insulation also helped Kerala remain comparatively unscathed during the British Raj. Moreover, in the recent past Kerala has received national and international attention for its successful performance in key areas of human development, particularly education, health and social welfare measures. The Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has pointed out that the "developmental experience" and transformation of post independent Kerala is an riddle for achieving indicators of social development that are comparable to those of the so-called First World countries (45). With its population of 30 million (larger than that of Canada which has a land mass of more than 250 times), Kerala is the only state in India that has been declared fully literate, has the lowest infant mortality and highest life expectancy rates, and is home to one of the world's only surviving matrilineal communities, that of the Nairs. Also, Kerala has been identified as the only state in the world where females outnumber males in population (Parameshwarn 1). Besides, Kerala has the largest per-capita circulation of newspapers and magazines in India that has resulted in a thriving literary and film culture (Parameshwarn 1). Kerala's indicators of social development are comparable to many so called developed nations, although its per capita income is a mere fraction of theirs (Parameshwarn 2). Yet this transformation occurred without the rapid economic growth characteristic of the East and Southeast Asian newly industrializing economies. Economists and statisticians proclaim that enhanced social conditions in Kerala, including alleviation

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<sup>3</sup> Kerala is one of the most popular tourist destinations in India and is fondly referred to by media as *God's Own Country*

of poverty, have been attained, along with a reduction in both spatial (between rural and urban areas) and gender gaps without the to regressive trends that characterize growing economies. Most significantly Kerala's economic and social transformation took place without outside help, making her an apt site for this study. In addition, a focus on one locality enables a more grounded reading of the practices and cultures that shaped various oppressive elements as well as its own diverse brands of resistances.

Kerala is a particularly interesting site for the investigation of power relations to oppression for several reasons. First, Kerala women have received a lot of national and international attention in the recent years as they are considered to enjoy a higher social position as indicated by the favorable sex ratio in the national census. Women in Kerala also boast higher literacy rates; yet recent newspaper articles illustrate alarming evidence of inequality among women of Kerala. A high suicide rate among women, lack of women in public offices, gang rapes of young women, and a growing number of female infanticides all point to contradictions between real life situations and positive statistics projected by the media<sup>4</sup>. This disparity certainly indicates something amiss in all the glorification of the *Kerala Model* and points to the need for a “full bodied attempt at gender transformation [and] questioning of conventional gender roles” (Rajan and Sreerupa 33). Also, Kerala has had a complex tradition of caste system quite different from the rest of the country that often plays an oppressive role in the lives of women, about which much has been written in native languages. Some of Kerala's (and India's) finest prose writers—Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, M.T. Vasudevan Nair—have written powerfully about hegemonic practices of seclusion based on caste in Kerala. Second, Kerala was

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<sup>4</sup> Richard W. Franke claims that the term *Kerala Model* generally refers to the high achievements of Kerala's people on statistical indicators of development. Kerala was declared 100% literate in the 2000 census. The infant mortality rate is low and the land reforms are progressive. These indicators have been achieved despite continuing low incomes that perplexes economists.

a major trading center for centuries and it has seen an influx and mixing of cultures, including that of Portuguese and Jewish communities. Kerala boasts of a number of immigrants self-consciously shaped by movement to not only the Arabian Gulf but also to other parts of the world. Information provided by the recent decennial Censuses reveals that Kerala has an equally high number of *out-migrants* as immigrants to other parts of the world<sup>5</sup>. As a result, the concept of home becomes problematic in the Kerala setting. Homes are culturally constructed and the desire for home in migrants— be it out/in- migrants or immigrants -- often gets represented as an instrument that aids in class hegemony. Geographically dislocated, culturally disconnected from their new surroundings, immigrants are often the easiest targets for class oppression<sup>6</sup>. With the highest number of immigrants among all states in India, issue of home and class subjugation intersect in contemporary Kerala as it becomes a complex zone that warrants our attention. Third, Kerala has an “unfair” obsession with whiteness. Potions and concoctions that promise to make a person “fairer” abound in Kerala markets. Beyond its connection to power and privilege, whiteness can be understood through the process of its social construction and its function in society. The ability of whiteness to articulate (or revile) versions of its marked difference in Kerala help give whiteness a hegemonic hold over Kerala’s consciousness, making it an apt site for studies related to whiteness.

Kerala is a small state located in the southernmost tip of India and is an ideal location of study for locational discourses and the implied power structure of oppression of caste because of

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<sup>5</sup> Raju Kurian in “Patterns of Emigration from Kerala” makes a valuable distinction between immigration and out migration (refers to movement of people in to or out of an area, city, or a state within a country) as opposed to emigration/immigration (refers to population movements crossing national boundaries). In the following section of this project my use of the term immigrants refer to the general movement of people from one place to another within and outside the country.

<sup>6</sup> A good analogy for the American reader is the case of immigrant Mexican workers who remain exploited.

its unusual structural composition that has not changed considerably over time. Pre-colonial Kerala was a cauldron of caste oppression, aptly described by the nineteenth century reformist Vivekananda as a “mad-house” (Mayer 22). Caste can be roughly defined as a hierarchical socio-religious ranking often associated with an occupation. In Kerala, as elsewhere in India, the caste system was the major principle behind power divisions. However, the traditional caste system in Kerala had unique features, as did traditional systems of marriage, inheritance and succession<sup>7</sup>. Some of the worst forms of untouchability in the country were practiced in Kerala, and the persecution of people of the oppressed caste took savage forms. The rules of caste system in Kerala also included complex rules of *distance pollution*, i.e. “unapproachability and unseeability” (Mayer 45). The underprivileged group, outcastes and lower caste members of Kerala, did not have access to public places such as temples, bathing tanks, roads and educational institutions until very recent times. The employment of people born into backward castes in occupations outside their traditional caste callings was also prohibited. Conventionally, people born into unprivileged castes were not permitted to wear clean clothes, or cloth other than coarse cloth, and in some cases any clothes above the waist; they were not permitted to keep cattle, or use the service of oil mills, use metal pots and pans, or carry umbrellas or even wear slippers on their feet. They were not permitted to take Sanskrit names, and there were rules that governed the words that could be used in conversation with persons of *upper* castes; for example, the use of the first person singular *I* was not permitted (it had to be *this slave or this inferior*); a person of an oppressed caste could not refer to “‘my money’ to buy ‘copper’<sup>8</sup>” (Ramachandran 21). During colonial rule, not much reformation took place in terms of caste. The British did not involve themselves in the social segregation and generally kept aloof from the ambit of caste politics. Even in

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<sup>7</sup> Like the matrilineal Nairs not found in any other part of India

<sup>8</sup> അടിയൻ (Adiyan) is a common term used by the lower castes to address themselves.

postcolonial Kerala, caste plays a major role in social development. Though Kerala stands ahead of all other states in independent India in economic and cultural areas, the pattern of “social and economic opportunities within the state are highly inequitable among different social groups, particularly between the *harijans* and the rest of the population<sup>9</sup>” (Sivadasan 3). Caste articulates itself in every dimension—social, political, cultural of a *Malayalee*’s existence<sup>10</sup>. Despite the critical importance of many critiques of caste that exist in the academy, there is not much evidence of gender being brought into the study of caste in Kerala in any systematic way<sup>11</sup>. Thus, a woman born into a privileged caste may not receive the advantages normally ascribed to the upper caste and as a result her subaltern voice never gets heard but instead is glossed over as that of the advantaged. This project examines how notions of caste, gender, color and class function in Kerala’s peculiar geopolitical and cultural climate. By choosing literary texts that subvert the normative rhetoric of the *Kerala Model*, this project hopes to illustrate and demystify the competing hypothesis that has proclaimed Kerala utopic.

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<sup>9</sup> Harijans are the untouchables in India

<sup>10</sup> A person who speaks Malayalam; the native language of Kerala.

<sup>11</sup> Partha Chatterjee has explored the status of Bengali women but I have found no evidence of a similar study based in Kerala. Moreover, in 1980s, caste studies underwent a radical revolution in studies of India mainly from an anthropological lens. Scholars like Appadurai, Berreman, Driks and Gupta critiques how studies moved away from the “village model” towards larger structures of nation, religion and violence.

## 1.2 Localizing Resistance: From Postcoloniality to Locality

In the more than twenty-five years during which postcolonial studies has existed, the debate has raged over the use of the term postcolonial which labels nations and people, referencing only to the oppression of a particular moment in the past, a constant reference only to the British Raj and its repercussions. In 1995, the conversation concerning the naming of this field of critical and literary study was addressed in Bill Ashcroft's collection, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. In this text, Stephen Slemon, in "The Scramble for Post-colonialism," argues that the term postcolonial "ends up referring the whole structure of colonialist discourse back to a single and monolithic originating intention within colonialism, the intention of colonialist power to possess the terrain of its Others" (48). Simon During points out in his essay "Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today," that while "post-colonialism is regarded as the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images," the notion itself defines these nations and groups solely as a product of the colonial experience (35). Then, these critics seem to argue that postcolonialism has become a reductive way of repeating the Othering produced by colonization, while defining, and thereby overlooking any internal group dynamics among all of those who have been colonized by the European power structure. Benita Parry problematizes representation of once colonized spaces in *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* when she claims that very often academia "ignores that this [colonized] territory was differentially occupied, and that it was [even before British colonization] a contested space, being the site of coercion and resistance" (69). Gayatri Spivak concludes in *Death of a Discipline* that "the old postcolonial model...will not serve now as the master model" and that emphasis of postcolonial studies in the

1980s and 1990s on nation and history as the source for defining the postcolonial has evaporated into other discussions of inequalities (69). Mainstream representations of once colonized countries in the West often overlook fundamental questions of the notions of power and its play *within* the newly formed nation. Take the case of India, for example; its northern states—most specifically Punjab, Bengal and Kashmir—are often privileged in any national discourse while the rest of the country is naturally amalgamated as part of this dominant representation. Thus, the term postcolonial seems to inhabit a *queer* space of nonnormative geography and temporality<sup>12</sup>.

Rebecca Fine Romanow claims that the postcolonial is “best defined not by the history of the nation from which the individual emerges,” but instead, by the “non-normative modes of living which are produced and enacted by that individual as a response to normative demoralizations and spatializations of the cultures they inform” (4). Judith Halberstam’s opening chapter “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies” in her book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, explains that “if we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity” (1). If we do indeed, “detach queerness from sexual identity,” we can begin to imagine the space that gets occupied by the three central characters from the texts I have chosen for my study here—Thommi in *Vidheyam*, Das in *My Story*, Ammu and Rahel in *The God of Small Things* -- reflecting non-normative patterns of behavior that escape conventional definition. Halberstam emphasizes that “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely,

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<sup>12</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that “recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity constituting, identity fracturing discourses, for example” (9).

birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (2). Those who inhabit queer time upset or disengage themselves from the normative progression of life which is lived in order to fulfill the “logics of labor and production [...] and the logic of capital accumulation” (Halberstam 10). It is easy to observe how the three texts I have chosen for this study reflect the disrupted queer time as it is unleashed from the normative alliances of nationhood. Contrary to the numerous stereotypical representations of the passive colonized subject, we see that in *Vidheyan*, the immigrant slave Thommi challenges class hierarchy that has denied him and his lot the privileges of a home in Kerala’s social space; that in *The God of Small Things*, Rahel disrupts the color coded hegemonic norms of whiteness; and in *My Story*, Kamala Das transgresses gender rules by challenging heteronormativity. However, calling postcolonial queer, *in itself* provides no grand resolution to the myriad of challenges posed by this discipline nor is that my subject for this dissertation (though I touch upon it in my analysis of Kamala Das). Rather, what I hope my argument will bring to light is that just as the notion of postcolonial itself has moved from being defined by the spaces of nationalities, so the local subject is seen as performing metamorphic resistance(s) thus moving away from being submissive amalgams of the so called postcolonial nation. This move places particular emphasis on the characters of my study assuming subject-positions while resisting oppressive apparatuses such as caste, color, gender and class in a local setting. How can a subject that is caught up in the regulating discourses of the cultural conditions that interpellate her/him subvert or even challenge the powerful consequences of that discourse? How can theorists of resistance properly understand those actions while simultaneously honoring and analyzing their motivations? Resistance itself must be rethought in order to make sense of its place in this context.



It is now *de rigueur* to include resistance as a tenet of what is generally described as postcolonial writing. However, the concept of resistance from a geopolitical point of view is hardly problematized and is most often glossed over, let alone defined, by many of these writers. A careful examination of scholarly discussions about resistance shows that many disagreements center on the nature of resistance. Resistance is variously (and often confusingly) used as, for example “acting autonomously in one’s own interest,” or “active efforts to oppose, fight, and refuse to cooperate with or submit to abusive behaviors despite opposition and control;” engaging in behaviors despite opposition:” or else to simply mean “questioning and objecting” (Hollander 534). In an essay titled “Conceptualizing Resistance,” Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner make several thoughtful connections among various scholarship that exists in resistance studies by focusing on two recurring issues that abound while discussing the term, i.e. *action* and *opposition*<sup>13</sup>. Hollander and Einwohner unpack these features of *action* and *opposition* by identifying the inconsistencies involved in the usage of these terms. The visibility of the resistant *act* is one of their chief concerns<sup>14</sup>. Resistance by the powerless is very often cloaked and sometimes purposefully obscured. Hollander and Einwohner ask if oppositional action can indeed be readily apparent to others, and must it in fact be recognized as resistance? This is a relevant question in my analysis of *Vidheyan*, where the slave Thommi’s resistance is often not apparent not only to his master but also to the viewers of the film.

Political theorists Pheng Cheah and Saba Mahmood each have discussed the complexity related to representing resistance in their respective works. Cheah points to the promise and

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<sup>13</sup> Action is described here as not being “a quality of a subject or a state of being, but involving some active behavior, whether verbal, cognitive, or physical” (Hollander 544). Opposition is defined as “any behavior or discourse that countered or disrupted the dominant discourse” (Tretaway 288).

<sup>14</sup> The concept of action is problematic because one may choose to deliberately not act in defiance.

problem of the nation as the dominant framework for communal political identity. For Mahmood, the solution arises from the everyday practices of people creating their own lives and meanings from within the intricacies of their specific cultural epistemologies. For both, the “traditional aims of resistance—freedom and unification—may be gone, but the ability of people to negotiate and create their own spaces within and against the oppressions of their surroundings remains” (Ferguson 523). While discussing resistance, in *Spectral Nationality*, Cheach also examines the difficulties of national representations in postcolonial studies. Some of the issues Cheach brings to forefront include the pitfalls of nation building such as the “identification and purging of outsiders, the connection between individualized desires and projects of national culture” along with the complex relationship between the “aesthetic hierarchy and political freedom” (Ferguson 523). By excavating the relationship between the nation and organism, Cheach shows how the imagination of nationalism can engage questions of life against the nation, while also recognizing the communally created nature of resistance within smaller locales. The nation, Cheach argues, constructs “ideals” and imports concepts of “authenticity and foreignness to expel the alien within” (Ferguson 523). For Cheach, the goal of resistance studies should combat the threat of the nation with investigations of struggle within “local” environments, though Cheach never explicitly defines what he means by “local” (Ferguson 523). However, what is made clear in his argument is the need for subjectivities to negotiate the “complex interstices and imbrications of various strains of their mores, ideals, and traditions, and their negotiations” to form the kind of resistance that truly warrants our attention (Ferguson 528). Thus a general analyses of oppression that supposedly targets the problem and provides solutions must be rejected. Analysis that falls under the rubric of *India as a Postcolonial Nation* assume, on the whole, that it is possible to provide a single, universal consideration of what oppression consists of in this

part of the world – be it sexual, racial, political or economic. Oppression related to caste, color, class and gender cannot be given a general analysis for all of India, because it takes different forms in different regions, periods, and sub-cultures. This gives rise to the need to consider historically and culturally specific occasions of discursive formations to formulate a meaningful critique of resistance. By not legitimating the construction of a “metanarrative on oppression” and its resistance in India as a whole, I would like to frame this project through texts that are rendered temporally and culturally specific by focusing on the “societal microstructure” of local Kerala (Fraser 342). Rather than assuming that the politics of oppression is a *given* in all of India, I argue that such subjections based on caste, color, class and gender are products, not universal preconditions of the social practices covering all of so-called Third world. Kerala, hailed as a “paradox of Third World” clearly demonstrates the importance, difficulties, and potentialities of the defining resistance within and against the existing postcolonial narratives located in the Indian subcontinent (Rammohan 1234). While the conceptualization of resistance in the texts I have chosen for this project can never be complete, they illustrate varying viewpoints on how individual subjects resist identity, respectively, as independent from the class structure, color codes, caste hierarchy and gender binaries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala milieu by addressing the problems of everyday oppression within their own localized and specific communities.

However, following Hollander and Einwohner, I am also aware of the limitations of working with resistance within the terms of post-structuralistic thinking, where the category of the Cartesian cogito has given way to that of the fragmented and linguistically constructed *subject*. For postcolonial critics, like Homi Bhabha who employs a curious mixture of Foucauldian and Lacanese concepts, both the colonizer and colonized are subjects always already subjected to the colonial discourse. While it is all very well to examine the structure and composition of the

subject, where no analysis that disrupts/challenges/subverts the hegemonic discourse that has subjected the subject is offered; however in so doing, aren't we (as Aleid Fokkema while ingeniously quoting Foucault's *Power/Knowledge* claims) *giving into* the kinds of truths that are produced in language "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it?" (53). This confirmatory character of discourse analysis is referred to in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, when Edward Said claims that he is disturbed by the omission of the possibility of change "induced by the subject-in-discourse," which for him borders on "justifying political quietism with sophisticated intellectualism" (245). John B. Thompson, in *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*, argues that "if the subject were simply an individual interpellated by a preexisting ideological formulation, then no room would be left for the emergence of resistance and revolt, for the revolutionary creativity which is an irrepressible feature of the historical process" (252). How, then, do subjects continue to create their own lives against the power and tyrannies of others? Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* can throw light on this problem. Heidegger substitutes the category of the subject with the idea of *Dasein*; and claims that when a subject acknowledges its own structure as being unreadable and unfathomable that is, accepting its own ontological limitations, then that "Dasein gains the possibility of a new, more powerful, freedom<sup>15</sup>" (Dreyfus). This new freedom can be achieved by any one willing to "step back from the current world, to enter one of a plurality of worlds, and, thereby, facilitate a change in the practices of one's society" (Dreyfus). Following Heidegger, I proceed by acknowledging that the resisting subject in my analysis here is not a concrete definable essence but an unstable position; and that the characters that I discuss here act the way they do while coping with their own background and their own

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<sup>15</sup> Dreyfus states that in early work of Heidegger the subject is replaced by "a non autonomous, culturally bound (or thrown) way of being, that can yet change the field of possibilities in which it acts" that Heidegger calls Dasein". Later on this power is given only to thinkers and then to anyone willing to engage in plurality of non-marginal practices.

restricted experiences of the world. The texts that I have chosen for this study, *Vidheyam*, *The God of Small Things* and *My Story*, all converge in producing subjects that resist and change their own local worlds by subverting the dominant opinions in their own historical contexts. It is my hope that such an exploration of the local will make visible the various struggles and achievements of these subjects ones that are not solely based on the effects and outcomes of nineteenth century British colonization that usually gets totalized under the general label of being passively-postcolonial.

Moreover, I study these texts using my understanding of Western-oriented theories. One might argue against using this more dominant *Western* model to study the arguably-Eastern worldview. Mary John and Janaki Nair's *A Question of Silence* provides an answer to the "hypothetical question as to why bring up western theories at all?" (George 739). Prominent critic Rosmary Marangoly George also resorts to John and Nair when discussing how Western "literary-critical ideas and terms already circulate in a global framework albeit with different inflections in different locations" (739). Though John and Nair are engaged in the discussion of sexuality, it is worth quoting them at length here, as their answer/s can easily be applied to my analysis:

Our response would be that "the west" is at once a particular geographical place, and a relation. From where we are, this relation is one of domination, and about as complicated as they come; to all intents and purposes, we are effectively located in the West. It is to the credit of feminists in India that they have refused to be silenced by accusations of being western-identified, and so unable to deal with the real India. Ironically enough, the very conception of the other of the West as being something to which western concepts do not apply (or as an act of violation

from which one must be redeemed) is itself a western legacy. Such constructions of cultural difference leave the West firmly in command. (6)

Moreover, the fact that the texts I explore in this study seek to highlight exploitation in a specific geographical location should not be misread as my attempt at offering an authentic version of a *real* local Kerala (and we know that the *Real* is impossible). Against the generalizing and homogenizing stereotypes of subject construction that continuously refer to a general body of literature from the so called Third World; I explore these selected texts that imagine Kerala laced with differences. At the risk of belaboring my case, what I propose to do here is to look for possibilities where the local subject-in-discourse engages in acts of resistance, at times using the very theories that deemed such a task impossible.

### **1.3 Chapter Outline**

In this introductory section, Chapter 1, I introduce the need for moving away from a general theory of postcolonialism to a more specific one that deals with making visible the differences that exist *within* various groupings that bears the common nomenclature of postcolonial. I also attempt to provide a general outline of Kerala's socio-economic and cultural contexts that will help situate my argument in contemporary historical context. Then, I review various literatures that discuss resistance as a social theory to conclude the need to consider historically and culturally specific occasions of hegemonic oppression to formulate a meaningful critique that is resistant.

In Chapter 2, “*Engendering Resistance: The Unethical and Unstable Subject of My Story*” I examine the ways in which gender is constructed in upper caste Kerala and the resistance of such a construction by Kamala Das, who challenges the objectifications and identifications assigned to a typical Nair woman. Kamala Das registers her resistance by *writing herself* and challenging social definitions by openly retaliating against the hegemonic tools that have kept women in Kerala oppressed. Through a deliberately unreliable autobiographical mode of narration, Das defies the conventional role of a Nair woman by writing about homosexuality, transgressions, and marital infidelity. By redefining the ways in which her gender functions, and by refusing the hegemonic demands placed upon her corporeality, Das attempts to expose the constructed subject: the functioning of a father/daughter relationship within her marriage and Nair governance of gender in Kerala’s civil society. The resistance Das attains comes from her rejection of the prescribed parent-child relationship she had initially established with her husband and by later relying on her own growth, through which she attains agency that allows her to become a model for women around her. Das offers ethical action as resistance to the immaturity imposed on her by Kerala’s patriarchy.

In Chapter 3, “*Reserved Resistance: Home and the Patelar-Kudiyan Dialectic in Vidheyam*,” I explore the class contexts of *Patelar / Kudiyan* (Transl. Lord/Bondsman) relations and the ensuring ways in which power signifies itself between those empowered and those who are enchained by it in Kerala. Considering the unavailability of the film in the West and bearing in mind my non-Malayalee readers, I begin this chapter with a short synopsis of the movie after which I discuss the differences and similarities present between the film and the novella from which it was adapted. Then, I move on to provide the historical and cultural context of the Patelar/Kudiyan relationship that the film problematizes before giving a brief analysis of subjectivity

and the treatment of the concept of home in the film. In the following sections of this Chapter, I offer a reading of Hegel's master/slave dialectic as an analytic tool that helps the Patelar and Kudiyan in mutual recognition. The oppressor/ oppressed relationship the film centers on highlighting the alienation caused by the idealizations of *home* in a feudal setting. Like Das's *My Story*, the film succeeds in exploding the constructed nature of domination that struggles to fit subjects into a certain formed discourse where often the underprivileged is denied any agency to overcome class subjection. Thommi, the settler from Kerala in Dakshina Kannada, is enslaved to the local tyrant, Bhaskar. In this feudal landscape, Thommi is a double subject—to the local landlord as well as of the settler community in his adopted home. Similarly, Bhaskar's enactment of power as the Patelar is restricted to his home territory. Thus, power and oppression articulates itself based on the presence/absence of the conceptual category of home in *Vidheyan*. The film succeeds (in 112 minutes) in capturing the subtle resistances of dominant discourses prevalent within typical Master-Slave narratives while examining the paradox of mastery and dependence in class domination. Home ensures self-recognition as well as a liberatory self-formation for classed subjects in the film. Thommi's resistance to power not only enables him to eschew slavery by the end of the film he also redeems Bhaskar "to finally concede the human self that he [Bhaskar] has always suppressed" (Ganguly 16). *Vidheyan* succeeds in visually registering resistance during subject formation in the context of Patelar-Kudiyan relationships. Because of the filmic nature of the text, *Vidheyan* often demonstrates what Hollander and Einwohner claims to be an instance of *unwitting resistance*. *Unwitting resistance* refers to "acts that are not intended as resistance by the actor yet is recognized as threatening by observers" (Hollander 545). Adoor is able to take advantage of the concept of the gaze to access the psychological workings of Thommi and Bhaskar. For example, the slow transition of Thommi's gaze from *looking away* to



*looking at* his master aids in visually grounding the concept of *unwitting resistance* for the reader. Both Thommi's and Bhaskar's resistance to given roles emerges in their attempt to *being home*, which is paradoxically engendered by the very site of their subjection as Patelar and Kudiyan within the system of class domination in Dakshina Kannada.

In Chapter 4, "Unfair Resistance: Reading Whiteness in *The God of Small Things*," I begin by investigating the role of white hegemony in Kerala. In this chapter, I read the Booker Prize winning novel by Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, against the framework of dominant color politics and critical race theory. Though unexamined by critics, whiteness plays an important role in *The God of Small Things*, as Roy challenges its supremacy to suggest possible routes into social change within the Kerala milieu. Instead of perpetuating whiteness and its dominance, *The God of Small Things*, promotes resistance by revealing whiteness as a constructed social ideological structure rather than a norm we should continue to tolerate in the not-so-post-colonial value system on which contemporary Kerala rests. I explore the ways in which whiteness is metaphorically represented as a contradictory subjectivity that is as much about absence and negation as it is about power and idealization. Roy's use of Indian English and the depiction of Anglo Indian Sophie dislocates *pure* whiteness. I begin the chapter by providing an overview of whiteness studies as I understand it in contemporary academia. I also try to historicize the role of whiteness in the section entitled "Unfair Kerala," investigating the social and cultural climate apropos of Kerala's fascination with whiteness that allows Roy to use it an apt site of representation. In the following sections, I demonstrate how Roy subverts whiteness through her depiction of white Sophie Mol and Margaret as marginal figures that lack the capacity to survive in Kerala. The role assigned especially to Margaret is a stereotypical one—that of the anxious and benevolent white woman ready to shoulder the burden of her third world relatives. I also

examine how hybridity is problematized in *The God of Small Things* through Roy's presentation of Kari Saipu, the mediating, interpreting westerner as we know him from the novels of Paul Scott and E.M. Forster. I further examine the portrayal of whiteness as being destructive in *The God of Small Things*, unfolding the myth that whiteness brings progress to the non-white world. Instead, we are directed towards the local ideological formulations that resist the hegemonic hold of whiteness in Kerala. In the following section, I also attempt to argue that the fragmented nature of Roy's text and her inventive use of Indian English assist in destabilizing and thus resisting dominant ideology circulated by whiteness. The very construction of her plot appears to be fragmented, mirroring the subjects that subvert the idea of an essential and unified norm that whiteness projects in this context. The deliberate utilization of a discontinuous and unbridled narrative also helps in dismissing the myth of a totalizing, unique and unifying discourse. Finally, I end the chapter by merging gender and racial oppression as I examine the way Roy's text deals with life and death choices; I also offer a reading problematizing white Margaret's positioning between the privileges of her race and the subordination her gender usually entails. Lastly, I provide my concluding remarks in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 2

***Engendering Resistances: The Unethical and Unstable Subject of My Story***

I've spent long years trying to locate my mind  
 Beneath skin, beneath flesh and underneath  
 The bones. I've stretched my two-dimensional  
 Nudity on sheets of weeklies, monthlies,  
 Quarterlies, a sad sacrifice. I've put  
 My private voice away, adopted the  
 Typewriter's click as my only speech; I  
 Click-click, click-click tiresomely into your  
 Ears, stranger, though you may have no need of  
 Me, I go on and on.

- Kamala Das, *My Story* (1976)

But what if the object began to speak?

- Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Women* (1985)

Not long ago a woman who spoke about herself was considered  
 a loose woman. To voice a pain, to divulge a secret, was consi-  
 dered sacrilege, a breach of family trust.

- Anees Jung, *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* (1988)

In one of the reviews that appeared immediately after the publication of *My Story*, Kamala Das tells Olga Tellis and K. K. Sharma that “the morality that is practiced today is a negation of everything. It is crude. Morality needs to be liberated. The whole world should be a fiesta” (Rajimwale 9). Through out *My Story*, Das identifies and resists so-called morality as an oppressive source of gendered ideology that functions through the exploitation of women's bodies, sex-

uality and emotions in Kerala. Das argues that the repression of women's intellectual and cultural productions in Kerala (frequently cited as a women-centered culture) exposes the inherent hypocrisy of a phallogentric society. According to Das, the voices of women from Kerala—their standpoints, their awareness, their worldview—are not only unheard but, at times, condemned in the name of morality. *My Story* studies the underlying power structure at play that has kept a significant section of the population in Kerala oppressed in the name of various social institutions based on conceptual categories such as gender, caste, class and color. However, rather than submitting to the constructions of that hegemonic social order, Kamala Das exposes and explores possible forms of resistance, particularly in the form of writing *herself*, and by challenging gender normativity that have kept women in Kerala oppressed<sup>16</sup>. By refusing to allow her gender to be objectified through social definitions, Das also depicts a “calculated unreliability” in her autobiography that demonstrates her discomfort in fitting into a given “category of subjecthood” (George 741). After locating the literary, social and historical contexts of *My Story*, I will attempt to read how this text can be interpreted as constructing an ethos that delineates a refusal of modes of behavior that reflect social and cultural expectations (read: meek, subservient and selfless) from a Nair woman.

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<sup>16</sup> When using the phrase *writing herself*, I am alluding to Linda Anderson's comment in “At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography,” that “It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about her since by seeking to publicize herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden” (59).

## 2.1 Contextualizing *My Story*

Kamala Das was born in 1934 pre-independent India to Balamannni Amma and V.S. Nair at Punnayurkulam, Kerala, India. Das's mother and her uncle, Nalapat Narayana Menon are also writers of exceptional talent and, interestingly, given much more prominence than Das in most Malayalam anthologies<sup>17</sup>. Critics often frown upon the explicit treatment of sex in Das's work. For example, M. Prabha, a prominent Malayalee critic reductively concludes that Das's texts are nothing but "bedroom bardistry in which all her outpourings pertain to the pelvic region" (224). However, when *My Story* appeared in 1976, it went through six impressions, and thirty six thousand copies, in eleven months. The front cover of one edition carried the recommendation "The Most Sensuous Life Story Ever Written" (Sullivan 180). Another publication featured a depiction of Kamala Das under such headlines as "Literary Striptease" and "The Kama Sutra of Kamala Das" (Wallace-Crabbe 7). *Ente Katha*, from which *My Story* is translated, was first published in a serialized form in *Malayalanadu*, a sensationalist weekly magazine in Kerala. In an article entitled "Relocating *My Story*," K Satchidanandan claims that the publication of *My Story* "with its frank and uninhibited handling of feminine desire created a sensation in Kerala [...] literally shaking up the prudish Malayalee reading community" (vii). *My Story* examines the life and times of its female author through the lens of an autobiographical (often cited as confessional) mode of narration. While dealing with the themes of childhood, ageing and death, *My Story* also becomes a venue for Kamala Das to display "her deep insight into human relationships, her confident yet delicate handling of sexuality, her eye for the minutest detail

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<sup>17</sup> Consider, for example, Krishna Chaitanya's *A History of Malayalam Literature* or Ayyapa Panniker's *A Short History of Malayalam Literature*.

and her contempt for the hypocrisy at the heart of man-made institutions from family to religion” (Satchidanandan 12). *My Story* is undeniably Kamala Das’s signal achievement as a novelist, both in terms the magnitude of meaning and the superb artistry through which she challenges oppression regulated in the name of morality.

Kamala Das began writing *My Story* in 1971, and her family, especially her father, tried to shelve the publication of the text but Das did not yield to the pressure and continued to engage her readers with her life-story. The forthrightness with which Kamala Das discusses exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, homosexuality, violence associated with gender, caste and color shocked Kerala’s dominant patriarchy, who in turn, branded the text and its author as immoral. After the publication of *My Story* Das confesses that she “received no warmth” in her home state and says that “the book has cost me many things I held dear” (Preface). Of course, Das also confesses that no other piece of writing she has undertaken has “provided the pleasure” of *My Story* (Preface). According to Satchidanandan, even the few admirers of the book were unwilling to discuss it as the real life portrayal of the author. Even those who admired the book often defended it only as another piece of fiction from the author. The episode of “ephemeral intimacy narrated in the book were dismissed as sheer fantasy, no more than fleeting visions of unreal relationships conjured up from a sickbed in a Bombay hospital” (Satchidanandan xi). Dorothy Jones in an article entitled “Freedom became My Dancing Shoe: Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Work of Kamala Das,” asserts that Kamala Das’s “principal achievement has been to define and expose the prison in which a woman finds herself trapped as she also records the urge to escape and [exhibit] a desperate longing for freedom” (195). As part of the agenda in exposing Kerala’s oppressive rules to the world, *Ente Katha* was rewritten in English by the author herself under the title *My Story*, and to date it is the best selling women’s autobiography in

post-independent India (George 734). The English version, though following the autobiographical mode of narration, differs from the Malayalam text in its presentation and also in its content. Even on a cursory glance of both the texts, it is easy to spot the dexterity with which Kamala Das slips in and out of the linguistic, cultural and social contexts of Malayalam and English. In her poem “An Introduction,” Kamala Das writes of the predicament of the multilingual writer: “I am Indian, very brown, born in/ Malabar, I speak three languages, write in/ Two, dream in one. /Don’t write in English, they said, /English is not your mother-tongue” (Arkin 143). Kamala Das’s choice of English has been mourned, admired or at times barely tolerated by critics.

In denouncing the patriotism expected of her towards Malayalam, Das’s verse is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s comment in *Three Guineas*: “as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world” (108). Yet Das’s works curiously challenge the idea that women can evade the locational identity. In this regard Das’s stance is similar to the American feminist Adrienne Rich who claims that she “needs[s] to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist [is] created and [is] trying to create” (212). The underlying assumption is that when the Indian writer chooses to write in English, there is a hiatus between the cultural experience that is expressed and the language chosen to express it. In spite of these fears, Kamala Das explores the notion and immense possibilities of what Amritjit Singh calls the “Multilingual Indian Situation” (Naik 5). Singh claims that “the particularity and idiosyncrasies of a given language pattern or vision determines for its speaker the dimensions, perspectives, and horizon of a part of the total landscape of the world” (Naik 5). Singh goes on to argue that since the mother tongue is our window on life, learning a language besides one’s “native idiom is to open for oneself a second window on the landscape of being... it is to escape, even if only partially,

from the confinement of the apparently obvious, so corrosive just because one is unconscious of it, of a single focus and monochrome lens” (Naik 6). Kamala Das’s views on translation, expressed in her poem “An Introduction” and elsewhere, makes a meaningful connection with Singh’s, and are fairly representative of the general attitude towards language of many Indo-English writers.

Also, *My Story* provides ample scope for Kamala Das to transform the sense of distance found (if any) while writing in another language into an aesthetic product. This is especially evident when she pauses to clarify cultural connotations that could pose an impediment to understanding for the non-Malayalee reader. For example, the concept of Nalapat, her ancestral house in Kerala connotes the contemporary matrilineal hypocrisy where women are merely the named players but in actuality are subservient to the maternal uncle that rules the joint family<sup>18</sup>. Kamala Das attempts to detail the historical nuances of Nair Kerala in her English version and this could possibly explain why *My Story*, with its fifty chapters, is almost double the size of *Ente Katha*. Moreover, Das’s determination to move out of writing for a single Malayalee audience underscores her resistance to restricting herself to the circumference of the Kerala population. Using both versions of the text will not hamper the quality of this project because the translation is undertaken by the author herself, and the language employed her own, as she claims in “An Introduction”: “The language I speak/Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness/All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half/ Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest/ it is as human as I am human, don’t you see” (Arkin 143). For this dissertation, I shall focus on both the Malayalam and English versions of her text, using *Ente Katha* briefly to refer to omitted sections from the Eng-

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<sup>18</sup> The maternal patriarch is traditionally known as the ‘Karnavaar’ and is explained in detail under the following subtitle “The Matrilineal Nairs of Kerala”



lish version, while primarily referring to and also quoting from *My Story* for the benefit of the non-Malayalee reader.

Das has been very contradictory about the origins of *My Story*. In the 1976 edition of *My Story*, Das claims that the book began as a desperate recording of her past because of her fear of death due to fatal heart disease: “The doctor thought that writing would distract my mind from the fear of a sudden death, and besides there were all the hospital bills to be taken care of” (Preface). Since the publication of the text, Das has consistently changed her position in interviews and essays. Rosemary George cites that Das has presented herself as either too “bohemian to care about revealing her sexual adventures and her periods of mental break down or, conversely, as the submissive wife following the dictates of her husband who was apparently more eager than herself to cash in on a spiced-up and heavily fictionalized account of her life” (741). This deliberate unreliability as a narrator of autobiography has no doubt infuriated critics; however, it also calls into question the *Truthfulness* of her story by challenging any fixed definition of her subjectivity. Ranjana Harish, in “*My Story*: An Attempt to Tell Female Body’s Truth,” claims that Das changes her stance on authenticity of the autobiography often because of the reaction she received from a *Times* magazine article that described her as “the queen of erotica” (52). Of course, the fathers of Kerala’s patriarchal literary scene frowned upon Das’s outspoken treatment of sexuality and treated her work as “the most compelling autobiography of the most controversial Indian writer” (“I like Islam’s”). In one instance, P. Lal, a critic in “Contemporary Indian Women Poets in English” even suggests that “Kamala Das got a full-page spread in the pages of *Time* with the publication of her ‘sizzling candid’ autobiography *My Story*, an atrociously written work that has become a bestseller” (165). Later, Das’s actually registers her anguish over her own notoriety in a poem entitled “Loud Posters”: “I’ve stretched my two dimensional/nudity on

sheets of weeklies, monthlies, quarterlies” (Arkin 23). That her gender categorizes her and places an *ideological value* on her is her site of dissent: “My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl/Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook/Be quarreler with servants. Fit in. Oh/ Belong, cried categorization” (Arkin 27). That both the text and Das have been treated with confusion and mixed reactions by critics suggests the difficulty of grasping her ethos. Before embarking on a close reading of *My Story*, it is worth looking briefly at the social context of Nair Kerala to which Das’s writing refers.

## 2.2 The Matrilineal Nairs of Kerala

The state of Kerala, with a population of thirty odd million people has been hailed as the epitome of women’s educational and cultural development in a country that that does not fare too well in terms of women’s development. Kerala’s performance over the last two decades, in terms of social and health-related indicators, is well-documented and the comparative egalitarian development is oft upheld by economists and sociologists as the “Kerala Model of Development<sup>19</sup>” (Rajan and Sreerupa 32). In an article entitled “Understanding the Enigma of Women’s Status in Kerala: Does High Literacy Necessarily Translate into High Status?” author Swapna Mukhopadhyay briefly sums up the reason why the popular belief about women in Kerala is that they enjoy an advantageous position; and it is worth quoting at length here:

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<sup>19</sup> A term initially used by Nobel winning economist Amartya Sen to describe that Kerala’s accomplishments show that the well-being of the people in terms of demographic, education, health and other social indicators can be achieved at a low cost and with a low per capita income.

The high status traditionally enjoyed by women in matrilineal systems, of which Kerala could boast a few, the history of early spread of female education in the state through the agency of benevolent rulers as well as Christian missionaries, the seemingly proactive role played by the state government in the post-independence years in terms of early inception of family planning, the long history of the Left movement which had pushed the interests of the economically disadvantaged sections of the population, were some of the elements of the set of explanations that have been invoked to cement the popular understanding. (6)

In *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen give high credit to Kerala not only for its “history of a more liberated position of women in society” but also because of the female-male ratio (1:06) existent in this state (232). Based on the 2001 census, both Drèze and Sen claim that in Kerala, the female-male ratio (1058 females per 1000 males) is “higher than any of the world’s major regions” (231). Health indicators in the state of Kerala are equally impressive, with its high level of life expectancy for women, which is the case in all the so-called developed countries of the world. It is often claimed that part of the credit for Kerala to differ from other states in India is perhaps due to the unusual importance given to its long history of the matrilineal society of Nairs that reside in the state. Indeed it is, if one goes by the conventional indicators and tools of measurements and adopts a comparative perspective vis-à-vis other Indian states. However, a closer examination of this complex and systematic hierarchical caste system reveal disquieting evidence that “although gender parity has been achieved in select indicators in Kerala there is much to be desired in terms of equity in gender relations [and there has not been] a full bodied attempt at gender transformation or questioning of conventional gender roles” (Rajan and Sreerupa 33). Nair society is not free from the evils of the caste system

that has plagued India from times immemorial, and is comprised of a complex and systematic hierarchy of several sub castes. Since one of the social norms that the author of our study, Kamala Das, resists is the Nair caste system of Kerala with its façade of female agency, it becomes necessary for us to problematize this group.

Legend has it that etymologically the term Nair is derived from *Nayakan*—the Sanskrit definition of *leader*, and the general role of the person-in-charge adopted by Nairs in Kerala’s social space gives this definition a certain amount of credibility to this term. While there are many subclasses under the general category (and each one subject to its own subset of hierarchy) of Nairs<sup>20</sup>, they generally shared the same matrilocal system of existence up to the implementation of the ‘1932 Cochin Nair Act’ by the British. Robin Jeffery, when detailing Nair women’s autonomy in Kerala explains that: “though the system was not matriarchal—women did not govern the household—it accorded them greater freedom, choice and respect than they would have found elsewhere in the world until the twentieth century” (35). K.V. Krishna Ayyar, in *A Short History of Kerala*, describes the Nairs as belonging to the *Kshatria* (warrior) caste of Hindus, where even the women folk went through rigorous training in an intricate and refined form of martial arts known as *Kalari Payyatu*. Customarily the *Chaver Pada*, a group similar to the Samurai warriors of Japan, also consisted of Nair women who took vows to *pass into death* rather than to surrender to the enemy in case of a war. Ballads and songs have been orally transmitted about these women warriors like Unni Archa, who terrorized the local Nagapuram patriarchs by her adept skill in *Kalari Payyatu*. In *A Survey of Kerala History*, A Sreedhara Menon, emphatically points out how the British perceived the Nairs as a threat to their colonizing mission and outlawed the Nair’s right to bear arms and practice *Kalari Payyatu* (388).

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<sup>20</sup> Such as the Menon, Pillai, Nambiar, Psharadi, Kaimal and Mannadiar to name only a few

Matrilinearity ensured that the procession of inheritance and descent is through the female line. Conversely since the Nairs are not a matriarchal group, it is the eldest maternal uncle (*Karnavar*) who resided in the joint family known as the *tharavaad* that controlled family affairs. Traditionally, the Nair women lived in their own *tharavaad* and the husbands visited often. Elias states that the *Sambandham* [marriage in Malayalam] being matrilocal, the “women folk among the matrilineal people enjoyed freedom unknown to their patrilineal sisters” (133). Matrilocality often ensured economic comfort to the Nair women even when their male partners defaulted. Usha V. T. claims that although the situation was not ideal Nair women’s position in Kerala was “better than elsewhere in India or abroad” (108).

However, British colonization and the patriarchal paradigms it brought with it to Kerala quickly replaced the old model of matrilinearity as “Nair youth grew ashamed of their time honored woman-centered” society and rushed to pay homage to the patriarchal institutions of their colonial masters (Usha 108). Thus colonization was “largely responsible for depriving Kerala of its matrilineal positions” (Usha 108). While the supposedly strong position of women in the Nair caste has always been a façade, where in reality the laws set forth by the *Karnavar* (the maternal uncle) proved to be the ultimate verdict, it is also true that British colonization played its own part in further denying Nair women their freedom. David Schneider and Katheleen Gough sums up this predicament in her exhaustive study entitled *Matrilineal Kinship*: “Since about 1890, Nayar [*sic*] men have assumed rights in and obligation to their children and the matrilineage is gradually disintegrating and the elementary family is gradually emerging as the key group in a system of bilateral interpersonal kinship ties” (383). Das explains the limited but granted freedom her ancestress Kunji enjoyed in pre-colonial Kerala when choosing a husband; incidentally, a privilege denied to Das herself years later: “An aristocrat was to be shown to her at Cochin

who was to marry her if she liked his face and if her uncles approved of his deportment” (*My Story* 12). Soon, the British reform laws of inheritance and marriage, under a series of ‘Nair Acts’ that concluding with the ‘Cochin Nair Act of 1938’ brought about the complete disruption of the institution of *Marumakkathayyam*, or the matrilocal system of inheritance. In fact, *Indulekha*, Kerala’s first Malayalam novel by Chandu Menon, depicts the disintegration of Nair joint family system under the British rule.

The joint/extended family of the Nairs, the *tharavaad*, is housed in an architecturally complex and aesthetically pleasing residence known as the *nalukettu* or *ettu kettu*. Das’s ancestral home that gets featured in *My Story* is the 400 year old *tharavaad* of Nalapatt, which she claims was “the house gifted to [her] ancestress, the 15 year old Kunji” (*My Story* 11). It is of course tragic that these outstanding houses are fast becoming a rarity on the Kerala landscape and the demolition of these residences that housed not only large amount of wealth but also an equally large amount of native art and architecture began with the onslaught of the British in Kerala: “to spite the Dutch and their last Indian Governor, Von Spall, the English Governor blew up with gunpowder the magnificent warehouses and the residences of the traders and the nair barons” (*My Story* 12). While in the past Nair women enjoyed a small degree of power and autonomy within the *tharavaad*, decision-making was always centered on the maternal grand-uncle, the *Karnavar*. The ‘law of the *Karnavar*’ was so authoritative that it is interesting to note that even when Das resists Kerala’s patriarchal society, she shows evidence of internalization of the concept of the *Karnavar* as king: “My granduncle Narayana Menon was a famous poet-philosopher [...] he looked every inch a king” (*My Story* 15). This class contradiction suggests Das’s ambiguity in registering her resistance to her uncle as a representation of patriarchy.

Gender regulates and controls social norms, and as also is in the case of Nairs, it offers its subjects a *false consciousness*, which masks its oppressive nature. With the dissolution of the matrilineal structure in the twentieth century, the power accorded to the *Karnavar* was simply transferred to the father/husband figure in the nuclear Nair family; this transfer is explicated in *My Story*. Kamala Das emphasizes the lack of agency she experiences in Kerala's patriarchal culture in her poem "Next to Indira Gandhi" in which she depicts the plight of a young subaltern lacking a voice: "You chose my clothes for me/my tutors, my hobbies, my friends/and at fifteen with my first saree you picked/me a husband" (Arkin 118). Through her poetry Das questions her father's role in her life: "Father, I ask you now without fear/ Did you want me/ Did you ever want a daughter" (Arkin 118). Thus the assumption that matrilineality automatically offered its women autonomy and agency needs to be questioned. *My Story* demonstrates that the pervasiveness of the ideology of the Nair women as a historical model of self assertion has little or no direct connection to its living counterpart. This is not to deny the existence of some *domestic agency*, which often gives a few women considerable control over family members and family affairs, despite complete dependence on males in financial and civil society. Still, even such agency is not always forthcoming, varying considerably across the spectrum that it becomes imperative to showcase women such as Kamala Das.

### **2.3 Das and Feminism**

Das's writing is molded, she insists, by the notable segregation between men and women that the Kerala society continues to command and her language is marked by an awareness of the strict division of roles. Sharad Rajimwale assesses Kamala Das's writing as a forerunner of the expression of the feminine consciousness in Kerala:

Kamala Das's poetry embodies agonies of women emerging from the state of subjugation and bondage, and seeking to establish their identity and the self. Obviously, this is not an easy and uncomplicated process, as it involves discarding a lot, adopting a defiant attitude and probing the self. (166)

Most of Das's writing criticizes the subjugation of women and most specifically, the oppression of the women in Nair societies. Women in Nair societies are seen as powerful, but men have the authority to regulate that power, enforcing the subordination of women to the family structure. It is men, therefore, who make decisions and engage in public life, while women occupy the domestic sphere. Nair society is also territorially divided, and the intersections between masculine and feminine space are carefully administered. The sexes, then, are separated by a rigid frontier that can be traversed only with accepted rules. Oppression results from the strict social segregation and from the limitations placed on female activity, and also from subordination in the name of class.

It is a fact that not more than twenty women get listed in bibliographies as women writers from Kerala. Amongst these are some names with which most will be familiar—Balamaniamma, Arundhati Roy and so on—but the majority of women writers remain unknown; their voices essentially remain unheard and they have appeared irregularly in literary anthologies. It remains a disappointing fact of Kerala's literary history that only a few writers have gained substantial critical recognition either regionally or internationally. Clearly publishing op-



portunities have been limited. Furthermore, enormous socio-political and cultural factors have also contributed to this silence. A history of colonialism, a migrant male labor force, and restricted opportunities for women have limited the potential of a sustained literary output from Kerala women. Perhaps the most important fact is that over two-thirds of Kerala households are headed by women whose responsibilities for child rearing within the context of an extended family are enormous. Not paradoxically, but ironically perhaps, given the centrality of the matrifocal base to Malayalee Nair society and culture, the men have tended to hold the political power and until recently have been solely responsible for articulating the nature, the boundaries, the concerns, and innovations of Kerala's literary tradition. This is not an unfamiliar or uncommon problem for woman writers in previously colonized countries. Frequently, the issue of women's liberation is seen as subordinate to and often a betrayal of traditional codes of practice and belief, a betrayal of the broader struggle for decolonization, nationhood and independence. In addition, the imported notion of western feminist models of discourses within what are predominantly rural communities has been regarded with suspicion both by women and by men and seen as another form of cultural imperialism. Therefore the women writers who are often torn between traditional local culture and those imposed by a patriarchal colonial education system is an ambivalent and an ambiguous one. In fact these themes concern many contemporary Kerala women writers who are struggling not only to get published but to write the unwritten local history of the community in a form that is both liberating and innovative.

In one of the interviews entitled "Of Masks and Memories" that appeared in 1993, Kamala Das tells P. Raveendran that "Feminism as the Westerns sees it is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance" (147). The concept of womanhood or femininity inhabits a complex position in the works of Kamala Das. As one of the earli-

est Indian woman writers originating from Kerala, Das is on the one hand evidently concerned with the Malayalee woman's experiences, relating plentiful instances of female subjugation and emancipation. As a plethora of critics, such as Dorothy Jones, Usha V.T., and K. Satchidanandan have noted; Das's texts endeavor to reclaim the voices subjugated in the name of gender normativity and in so doing, she succeeds in depicting the association between femininity and writing. For example, Das's autobiography, *My Story*, explores the significance of generating agency through self-articulacy. Alternatively, however, Das also subverts our very conception of what it means to be female as she disputes the legitimacy of the definite feminine experience. Careful in not associating herself to women's writing movements, Das rejects the term *pennuerutthu*, because she "has never tried to identify herself with any particular version of feminist activism" (Raveendran 52)<sup>21</sup>. Through her writing, Das explores the varied experiences of the Kerala women while concurrently resisting the pigeonholing tendency to categorize all women's experiences into a rigid taxonomy. Das sustains the need for feminine camaraderie and action as a mode of resistance, but in addition she presents feminine experience as being continually inconsistent, unpredictable and impractical to delineate.

Das is evidently a writer who champions resistance; her inquires delve into the exploitive culture she interrogates in order to encourage the improved liberation and freedom of the Malayalee women. In proceeding to confront this challenge, nonetheless, Das is confronted with the complexity of maneuvering between opposing and conflicting ideologies. On the one hand, Das is persuaded by her desire to highlight the need for unity among women in order to fortify her own resistant voice. For example, in *My Story*, Das draws a detailed genealogy of the women in her family and identifies their shared aims and common goals. Specifically, it is among some of

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<sup>21</sup> *Pennuerutthu* refers to writing by women about women in Malayalam

the Nair women at Nalapat (the author's ancestral home) that Das best finds inspiration to protest that initiates her into resistance. Her mother Balamaniamma, for example, is a rare (and gifted) poetess in a patriarchy-dominated world of Malayalam literature; her grandmother is a staunch Gandhian woman who resisted anything British; her great grand-aunt, Anmmalu, also a poetess is passionate about her craft and chose to "remain unmarried [not a common find in Kerala] although pretty and eligible" (*My Story* 17). Conversely, Das is also at pains to undermine the amalgamating nature of creating a feminine society by underlining the distinctiveness, fluidity and uniqueness among women. Das writes of her own mode of resistance as her way of challenging the particularities of her situation. For instance, after her betrothal, Das learns to resist social normativity by making her dissatisfaction of her marriage and patriarchal hegemony explicitly evident by giving it a voice through her writing; although, as she confesses in the Preface of both *My Story* and *Ente Katha* that in doing so she "had disgraced [her] well known family by telling her readers that [she] had fallen in love with a man other than [her] lawfully wedded husband" (Preface). In presenting this conflict, then, Das is being attentive to the stereotypical binaries of the so called East and West; where the local women (read: third world) is depicted as one inevitably consigned to being mute and powerless. While essential typecasts state the Kerala lifestyle as a communal one (if at all it is even heard of in the West) where individuality is a potential threat to the harmony of the group, Western ideology has been linked with giving precedence to the individual. Das's writing employs both strands of thought; she is at once concerned about dislocating the notion of the individual as a sound, autonomous agent while also unsettling postulations concerning feminine similitude or society. By being attentive to the ironical complexities of her own cultural positioning, Das uses the genre of autobiography to signal the limi-

tations of the self-knowing subject, and in the process challenges the regulations practiced in the name of morality through gender and caste structures in Kerala.

#### **2.4. Moral Intersections of Patriarchy and Caste in *My Story***

Morality and regulations based on it, according to Philip Corrigan, is a project of “normalizing, rendering natural, taken for granted, in a word ‘obvious,’ what are in fact ontological and epistemological premises of a particular and historical social order” (4). Caste practices, in addition, support a common experience of its subjects, which glosses over differences including class, gender and sexuality. Corrigan and Seyer argue that this notion of a communal perception of a caste is not a “free flowing signifier, but is enmeshed in relations of domination and subordination,” where very often the powerless are rendered mute and weak (6). For Corrigan and Seyer, these “socially produced notions are simultaneously descriptive and moral” (6). In the context of *My Story*, the manner in which Kerala’s Nair caste system endorses its collective norms highlight a concrete set of ideas of what is morally acceptable, distinguishing between being a *good* Nair and an *evil* one. The morality endorsed by castism can be seen to constitute the subjectivity of the feminine Nair subject in Kerala.

Moreover, Jeffery Weeks in *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty*, identifies the correlation between perceptions of morality and sexual behavior, and claims that

“immorality in the English language almost invariably means sexual misbehavior” (47). This notion emerges accurate in the case of Nair Kerala too. Caste prescriptions of morality aid in preserving a timeless notion of a Nair grouping that omit references to gender contexts. Practices, rules and regulations are powered by caste ideology that control gendered bodies into passive compliance in ways that aid patriarchal welfare. This method allows for sex to be relocated from the *private* individual sphere to the *communal* field, where it can be molded to seem as if overlapping with the interest of the general community. Simply put, regulated caste rules allow the Nair patriarchy to construct an ethical project that recognizes and controls sexual behavior and practices as a vital aspect of maintaining a moral society. As a result, Nair women are often coerced into submission for upholding caste values. For instance, Nair women occupy an oppressed space in the domestic society of marriage where the norm up to the last decade was that of *Marumakkathayam*, i.e. the early arranged marriage of young girls to a much older relative, some times as old or older than their own fathers. As in the case of Das’s family, men regularly controlled women of their family by using the practice of *Marumakkathayam*. Gayle Rubin, in “The Traffic in Women,” refers to the works of Claude Levi Strauss when she claims that marital relationships in some communities are a type of “exchange among kin groups, where women are considered as gifts” (24). This gift permits kin clusters to construct relations and make blood alliances; however, “women are not equal partners in this transaction as they do not get to savor the profits of their circulation” (Rubin 25). For Rubin, men are primarily the beneficiaries of this exchange. Apparently, the Nair patriarchs of the Nalapat family too find their daughters’s sexuality valuable assets, a commodity that they exchange with whomever they deem fit, most often with a much older male relative in order to safeguard the family property. Das herself was not exempt from this as she was asked to marry her cousin to appease caste norms:

Marriage meant nothing more than a show of wealth to families like ours. It was enough to proclaim to the friends that the father had spent half a lakh on its preparations. The bride was unimportant and her happiness a minor issue. (*My Story* 87)

Das reveals that most of the Nalapat women, right from her great grandmother Kunji up to Das herself, were *sold* into marriage under the pretense of maintaining a *good* caste unit. Nair men, however, were free to marry anyone they pleased, irrespective of caste or class differences. Das claims that women are forced into assimilating into the customs and codes of gendered behavior in patriarchal Nair Kerala: “It was *customary* [my emphasis] for the Nair girl to marry when she was hardly out of her childhood and it was also *customary* [my emphasis] for the much older husband to give her a rude shock by his sexual haste on the wedding night” (*My Story* 26). In *My Story*, Das’s dissatisfaction with patriarchy becomes explicit with her concerns about the customary nature of contemporary Nair castist norms.

The men of Das’s family were typical in that they set forth rules for the women folk to obey. This form of hegemonic control even extends to appropriating the personal freedom to the extent of choosing what the women wear: Das’s father “stipulated firmly” that her mother “was not to wear anything but Khaddar and preferably white or off white” (*My Story* 5). Das claims that “the Nairs, particularly the males, were coarse when their ire was aroused” (*My Story* 28). Yet another example of patriarchal and castist oppression in *My Story* can be found in Das’s valiyamma (grand-aunt) who, worried about public opinion, “had not stepped out of the Nalapat House for over thirty years except to go to the privy that was a furlong away and to the pond for her baths” (*My Story* 35). This quote suggests that Das’s valiyamma was concerned of public opinion that might cast her as not being a *good* Nair woman. Similarly, in the Malayalam ver-

sion of her text, Das claims that as a young girl she was made to conform to Nair rules and regulations and was admonished for self-expression (i.e. if she danced or expressed her love for a servant girl by hugging her) by patriarchy and given a sermon about the need to uphold the family name (നല്ലപേര്), which was ascribed primarily to the women folk (*Ente Katha* 46). Das states that she realized early in her life how the very fact of their gender constitutes for women in the Nair world in which she grew up an almost insuperable limiting factor to their life-chances. Nair women are thus constructed as possible *victims* for acquiring a bad reputation that could harm the harmony of the Nair kinship. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, no evidence of a desire from Nair men for *good* reputation can be found in Das's text. However, Das by exposing this hypocrisy occupies a position of resistance as she discusses her awareness of the predicament of her gendered-self along with the fellow oppressed subaltern women trapped in the ethical project of patriarchy within the Nair caste system. Women who defied the codes of Nair laws, like Das herself in later years, were constructed as disobedient and therefore immoral. O.J. Thomas claims that Das's "quest to establish a meaningful relationship with others, whether it is her husband, the society or the members of her family are the burden of her poetry" (54). For example, in "The Suicide" she writes: "I must pose/I must pretend/I must act the role/of happy woman/Happy wife" (Arkin 86).

In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality*, Anne McClintock discusses the role of class within female society when she claims that "female respectability appears linked to the middle class woman [...] and the disease of poverty was especially dangerous in the female body and served to rationalize the policing of boundaries between the ruling class and the immoral poor" (35). *Good* Nair women not only follow the norms, but at times they seem to even viciously enforce them. For instance, in chapter seven of *My Story*, it is suggested that the kitchen-

maid, Kunhukutty, is a victim of rape by the chief cook of the Nalapat family, and in a “whimsical antifeminist” twist, she does not even gain any sympathy from other women of the house; the grandmother upon hearing the news of a self conducted abortion by the young victim retorts “change your clothes and get out this minute<sup>22</sup>” (*My Story* 26). The ideology of the *good* Nair woman, who does not transgress societal norms, prohibits the usually charitable grandmother from being sympathetic to the poor Kunhukutty’s cause. For each of them, the tension between the expected liberal humanism from an upper class Nair woman and the reality of a confined existence, creates an ethical crisis for struggle that is finally addressed by Das, who may be seen as a figure of resistance in promotion of her own difference from the group.

As discussed in a section above, the Nair women of Kerala because of the matrilineal system of inheritance and existence have been falsely hailed as a group that enjoys considerable amounts of freedom from patriarchy compared to other women in the country. However, this is false conception because, in reality, the maternal uncle (the *Karnavaar*) simply replaces the role of the authoritarian father as in any non-Nair the family unit. Nonetheless, what differentiates the Nair patriarchy from the rest is that in their desire to maintain the upper caste/class Nair values they deliberately construct their women as potential victims that may pollute castist purity through sex with non-Nair members. Such an inter-caste sexual relationship could lead to dispersal of family property into non-Nair societies. This is one of the reasons why Nair patriarchy constructs their women as naïve, child-like beings devoid of any agency that can contribute towards building/ maintaining let alone resisting social norms. In fact, most Nair women are even named with the common suffix of *Kutty* that can be roughly translated to mean *female* child or

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<sup>22</sup> Philip Young’s usage of the term “whimsical antifeminist” to discuss the irony of women assuming the role of opposition with each other as evidenced in *Rip van Winkle*. Young uses the term in Judith Fetterly’s seminal work *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*.



young one<sup>23</sup>. In psychoanalysis, specifically in Lacanese a name guarantees identity as it is the *objet petit a* that forms a gateway to the Symbolic order, to language itself. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler elucidates how naming promotes certain gender ideals in the subject. According to Butler, pronouncements such as “it’s a girl!” compels and regulates the subject to function in a certain way. Butler states that the pronouncement of a girl:

initiates the process by which a certain *girling* is compelled [. . .] This is a “girl,” however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no “one” who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a “one,” to become viable as a “one,” where subject formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (*Bodies That Matter* 232)

Actually, Kamala Das too was named *Madhavikutty*; literally remaining the child of Madhav (coincidentally the name of her husband) till her death<sup>24</sup>. Nair men adopt a paternal stance towards their woman; under the disguise of being keen on protecting them from so called *evils* of society. To elucidate further, until recent times, Nair women had to be accompanied by men folk when they stepped out of their homes. They were depicted as needing constant support, guidance and control. Thus, the promotion of *Marumakkathayam*, the arranged marriage of women to older men within the Nair caste, along with literally naming women as Kutty (child) suggests the hegemonic role adopted by Nair patriarchy to produce a gendered Nair woman. Moreover, the dis-

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, my grandmother was given the name *Kunjukutty* (transl. small child). She was known as *Kunjukutty* till she died at age eighty one.

<sup>24</sup> Kamala Das is her pseudonym

course of *good* Nairs interpellates its women as potential *victims* of evil reputation that could threaten the group's ethical credibility.

Alain Badiou, in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, claims that for ancient Greeks, ethics “concerns...the search for a good ‘way of being,’ for a wise course of action” (10). Badiou claims that in modern times there has been a shift in the concept of ethics, from individual action to cultural reaction, where ethics imply “a principle that governs how we relate to ‘what is going on,’ a vague way of regulating our commentary on historical situations” (2). According to Badiou “reducing ethical issues to matters of human rights” results in an ethics “which defines [wo]man as a victim” (10). The construction of this *victim* plays heavily into the representations of Nair women in Kerala by always associating them to the helpless victim, who are devoid of any agency to perform reactive action (and thus any act *for the self*) to oppression (the woman lives, labors and dies for patriarchy). While it's true that Nair women are indeed victims of the hegemonic tools that help castist patriarchy imagine itself as ethical, the actual construction of women as potential victims to non-Nair men who may pollute caste normativity continues to be a central tool in restricting their freedom. Such an ethics also defines the Nair man/woman binary in terms of a parent/child relationship; where the women are made to believe that they need constant supervision lest they inadvertently violate their own caste codes. For instance, in a chapter entitled “Calcutta's Cocktail Season,” Das's husband is seen to assume the paternal role in their marriage: “You are always a child in my eyes, Amy, he said, you may play around with love but be choosy about your playmates. I do not want you ever to get hurt in your life” (*My Story* 151). Also, such a grouping only serves to strengthen the case of an amalgamated and universal idea of Nair women, one that generalizes them as passive victims without a voice. Theorists (especially feminist theorists) in academia have protested when identity based

groups are described as an undifferentiated totality that can succumb to naturalization of essential categories. While it is important to portray the deplorable conditions in which most women of Kerala survive, it is also equally vital to not omit and examine the struggles undertaken by specific female subjects (such as Kamala Das) to advance common interests of their sex. In *My Story*, an ethics is enacted and modeled by Das that refuses the binary of man/woman and that asks the Nair subjects around her to disrupt ‘interpellation’ based on victimology<sup>25</sup>.

Das’s reaction against the Nair caste ideology, which regulates the lives of women in Kerala, as a bedrock value is reflected in Badiou’s contention that “ethical consensus is founded on the recognition of Evil and the effort to unite people around a positive idea of the Good” (13). To be *good* involves the embracing of the greater social world’s agreement and definition of what is *evil*. The very acceptance of *good* must then make the individual complicit in a disciplinary project that tightens the subjectifying bonds of the larger culture. Thus, in order to belong to a culture, notions of *good* and *evil* must be adopted and assimilated, and must serve to implicate the subject in the overall cultural ethical stance. Badiou suggests that this project reinforces the “binary of us/them” (45). The Nair women of Kerala are then placed in a position where they are required to be on both sides of the binary: victimized in her silence in suffering to adopt the notion of the *good* Nair woman in historicized terms, and concomitantly subjected to the (false) privilege of a matrilineal system that ought to grant her a sense agency, which in turn requires her to adopt the notions of *good* and *evil* that implicate her in the ethical project of patriarchy. Thus the Nair subject is born into Kerala’s palimpsest, marked as *privileged*, and in order to assimilate with the dominant ideology must adopt the ethics of *good* and *evil*, which in reality places her as victim, as Other (Badiou 14). It is this ethos that Das rejects so that the tradi-

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<sup>25</sup> By ‘interpellation,’ I refer to Louis Althusser’s political theory of the construction of the subject where “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects”

tional approach to *good* and *evil* is undone and subverted in favor of an ethics that redefines notions of the Nair woman as victim-child, primarily through a reinterpretation of normative notions of marriage, love, and sexuality.

What distinguishes Das from her fellow female characters in her text/society is her successful progression and final achievement of a female independency and voice in order to live out her own life. In “A Feminist Voice—A Study of Kamala Das’s Poems” Ramesh Kumar Gupta places Das alongside other women poets like Gauri Deshpande, Mamata Kalia, Eunice de Souza and others for attracting attention by virtue of “her bold uninhibited articulation of feminine urges<sup>26</sup>” (31). Another critic, O. J. Thomas, in an article entitled “Kamala Das: ‘The Tragedy of Life is not Death but Growth’” locates Das’s writing under the umbrella of the Indian Renaissance with its emphasis on “the discovery of the self” (42). It is indeed through a journey towards the articulation of the self that Das in *My Story* exhibits her resistance to subvert the modes of behavior ascribed to her by social norms. In an interesting parallel, Das’s constructive feminism allows her to set forth on a journey comparable to Elaine Showalter’s detailing of the three stages of the development of consciousness in women’s writing in her seminal work, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Showalter delineates this progression through her definition of the three terms; i.e. *feminine*, *feminist* and *female*. Showalter describes that the *feminine* stage is achieved through “imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition,” the *feminist* stage through “protest against these [masculine] standards and values, while the *female* stage is accomplished through “self-discovery” (13). Rather than a mundane analysis of how Das fits into each of these Showalterian categories, my focus is

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<sup>26</sup> Gupta’s use of the term *feminine* urges refers primarily to the articulation of the gendered self. For Gupta, Das and her fellow poets attract attention for their resistance to male patriarchy by moving away from gendered prescriptions of ideology.

to provide a reading that demonstrates how Das is uncomfortable in settling into any rigid classification of subjecthood; which in turn allows her to progress to resist categorizations of binaries such as that of the parent/child, male/female and good/evil.

## **2.5 Good Nair Women Never Mention Sex: Challenging the Ethical Nair Subject**

One of the ways in which Das disrupts the ethical project of good/evil binary propagated by Nair patriarchy is through the depiction of sex in *My Story*. Das's discussion of her infidelity in marriage, her selection of love objects (women, men and herself) and the calculated unreliability with which she writes about sex in her autobiography clearly places her outside the register of the *good* Nair woman. In the chapter entitled "Women of Good Nair Families Never Mention Sex," Das says that Nair women never mentioned sex because it was "their principal phobia" (22). Married off to older Nair men at early ages primarily for reproductive purposes (very obviously to further propagate Nair values), Das suggests that that these women were often raped by their husbands leading them into a state of "rude shock" (*My Story* 25). Thus, in a society where even a reference to sex is taboo, and in a society women were often rape victims, Das's resistance is registered when she boldly discusses her transgressions of marital and heterosexual normativity in *My Story*. Even Das's choices of chapter headings reflect her desire to be unconventional. Rosemary Marangoly George notes that "chapter headings for thirty-eight of the fifty chapters are quite clearly sexual or at least hold the promise of some sexual content" (742). In

crafting *My Story* as one that primarily focuses on sex, Das serves as a model and guide for a new attitude towards sexuality and the body for the Nair women.

The patriarchal conception of the nature and role of women in a Nair society is a conception that governs attitudes and social practices, and imposes on its women an immense burden of fear that limits expression, a turning away from oneself, which in turn is misread/misrepresented as being *good*. For example, Das's conception of a relationship and marriage greatly differed from other Nair women in her family who often suffered, as Dorothy Jones claims in an analysis of Das's poems, "emotional deadness within marriage" for the sake of societal approval as being *good* (198). Initially, Das wonders how life would be if she was to follow the normative rules set forth by her caste:

I would be a middle-class house wife, and walk along the vegetable shop carrying a string bag and wring faded chappals on my feet. I would beat my children...and then make my thin children...and make them scream out for mercy. I would wash my husband's cheap underwear and hang it out to dry in the balcony like some kind of national flag, with wifely pride... (*My Story* 96)

While most of her female relatives lived their lives in the fashion described above, Das would rebel against these prescriptive behavior patterns that ideology dictated her to follow. For her mother and grand mother "timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony which satisfied the relatives and friends" (*My Story* 5). For Das's mother, such "timidity," was the response to fear of the hegemonic patriarchal norms that plotted her destiny: "She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired" to bring her a husband who was to provide her with children (*My Story* 4). Das's "mother did not fall in love" with her father; rather, she simply obeyed him to keep up the façade of a good marriage: "After the wedding he

made her remove all the gold ornaments from her person, all except the mangalsutra. To her it must have seemed like taking to widow's weeds, but she did not protest" (*My Story* 4). This lack of protest (due to fear) coupled with the historical (false) conception of the Nair women to have agency leads to oppression of the female subject in Das's text and connotes the general condition of Nair women in Kerala. The commitment to be a *good* Nair woman required Das's mother to hold up such a "dissimilar and horribly mismatched" marriage which expresses a lack of resistance to Nair patriarchy's ethical project (*My Story* 4). Most Nair women accept/imitate this patriarchal law/custom and lived the rest of their lives in misery.

A questioning child, Das too is oft told by her immediate family to follow the norms of society; to be a *good* Nair woman. However, Das's claim that she "was drunk with power" and "spoke her mind" strikes an opposition exactly to the submission of that of her mother's; or as figuratively represented in her mute great grand aunt Ammalu: "It was not seemly for a Nair child to call an aged relative by name but I called her Ammalu. She could not protest anyway" (*My Story* 16). Das advocates the exhibition of the autonomy to act in ways that suggests that gendered and castist norms, such as the need to uphold the family name (സല്പേരം), should be transgressed if they challenge individual freedom. Badiou suggests that "the Good is Good only to the extent that it does not aspire to render the world good," emphasizing that the *good* must support autonomous individual belief, action, and truth (13). The "Good that renders the world good" is the good that serves the world, and is comprised of those "constructions of truth that have been imposed by society," a construct which naturally involves the Us/Other binary (Badiou 13). Thus while "lack of protest" and "timidity" are fully imbricated with Nair societal and patriarchal values, the sense of pleasure that Kamala Das is able to grasp in her relationships echoes the subject's desire for and an investment in behavior that the self has deemed necessary

for resistance. Defining and delineating an ethos that is structured around constructs and performances of sexually-saturated and oppressive notions such as loyalty and fidelity (as obediently followed to sustain being a *good* Nair by the typical Nair women featured in *My Story*) to a marriage that she was forced into, Das claims that such notions composes not an investment in the self but rather supports the hegemonic social constructs.

Das rejects the expectations and interpellations of Kerala's patriarchal culture by refusing to accept the epistemic violence of self/other binary. Spivak contends that Western philosophers such as Foucault maintain an "epistemic violence" by supporting hegemonic binary constructions that produces "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other" ("Can the Subaltern Speak" 25). Nevertheless, for our study of the Nair male/female opposition, Foucault's ethical stance, which seeks to undo this binary, and as detailed in his essay "What is Enlightenment?," can be useful. Following Kant, Foucault argues that the "way out [from social constraints] is a process that releases us from the status of 'immaturity' [...] a certain state of our will which makes us accept someone else's authority" ("What" 305). Foucault acknowledges that this 'immaturity' creates its own epistemic construct, an 'us versus them' mentality that cannot lead to a positive ethos or way of being. Kant, in "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment," declares that "Enlightenment is man's exit from his self-incurred minority," noting that to those who wish to adopt the role of master or "guardian," "the step into maturity is perceived as very dangerous" (135). The danger lies in that the move from immaturity must come from what Foucault, in "What is Enlightenment," describes as "an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (319). This "limit-attitude" involves "a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute our-



selves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying,” and the move to a “mature ethos, then, involves a separating out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think” (“What” 316). The structure of both Badiou’s idea of victimology and Foucault’s ethics of maturity present the ‘feminine’-subjects of our study with an ethos of not merely refusing the ‘interpellation’ imposed by Nair society, which replicates a parent/child binary, but a way of moving beyond and dissolving this hegemonic construction itself. The inhabitation of the ethos of maturity can be useful in this context, as Foucault clarifies in “What is Enlightenment”:

We have to give up hope of ever acceding to the point of view that could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge [...] of what may constitute our historical limits. And, from this point of view, the theoretical and practical experience we have of our limits, and the possibility of moving beyond them, is always limited and determined; thus, we are always in the position of beginning again. (317)

The “position of always beginning again” becomes, for Foucault, the “experiment with the possibility of going beyond” (“What” 319). In this, Foucault outlines a problematic space which can be appropriated by us where the ‘feminine’-subject must both examine the historical conditions of the past and attain the ethical maturity to cast off the effects of the patriarchal system that is assumed to support its ontological constructions. Parallel to what Spivak claims for postcoloniality, literature of feminine-subjects also creates “a history that can attend to the details of the putting together of a continuous-seeming self for everyday life,” but this “continuous-seeming self” is, in fact, continuously disrupted because it is “a story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured” (*A Critique* 208). The resisting female-subject,

then, exists within a fracturing of the normative timeline that Judith Halberstam, following Giroy, in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* describes when she claims that histories of oppression “cannot avoid spatial conceptions of time, conflict or political economy,” and are supported by contemporary notions of “identity politics” (8). Halberstam likens identity politics to the concept of an immature ethos, where “identity politics has become [...] a marker [...] of some combination of naïveté and narrowness that supposedly blocks more expansive and sophisticated projects” (19). While, conventional identity constructions involve “an immensely subtle and complex understanding of the relations between the ‘now’ of performance and the ‘then’ of historical time,” the movement away from dependence on the historical past as a means of understanding the self, which Foucault suggests, offers a way in which the oppressive time is fractured, the patriarchal past is disrupted and the “now of [resisting] performance” becomes Foucault’s “position of beginning again” (“What” 319). In *My Story*, Das’s resistance to societal norms becomes an alternative ethics to the construction of *good* and *evil*, and it involves a commitment to the self as opposed to compliance for societal approval. Dealing with the “flop marriage in the conventional sense,” between Das and her (unnamed) elderly husband, *My Story* examines the crumbling fabric of their marriage and Das’s resistance to fit into the slot of the silent *victim* that Nair caste ideology proposes for its women (*My Story* 193).

After two years of being married, Das harbors few illusions about her relationship with her husband. In chapter 22, Das narrates the ‘brutal shock’ she receives from her husband during their wedding night when she claims: “again and again he hurt me and all the while the Kathakali drums throbbed dully” (*My Story* 79). Das becomes pregnant almost immediately and she delivers a boy by the time she is eighteen. George analyses this situation and claims that the consequence of the “marital rape” that takes place between Das and her husband is that “now

aged seventeen or eighteen, Das decides to be unfaithful to him, at least physically” (747). Das confesses that initially she had no power to resist the parent/child register that she and her husband find themselves, because she was indeed a child (fifteen) when she got married. Of her arranged marriage, Das tells her reader that “My life had been planned and its course charted by my parents and relatives. I was to be the victim” (*My Story* 85). In fact, at first, the fifteen year old Das wanted to reproduce a father figure in her husband, and in the process rebukes him for not assuming the socially produced codes of behavior. Das writes of their first encounter during their engagement:

My cousin asked me why I was cold and frigid. I did not know what sexual desire meant, not having experienced it even once. Don’t you feel any passion for me, he asked me. I don’t know, I said simply and honestly. It was a disappointing week for him and for me. I had expected him to take me in his arms and stroke my face, my hair, my hands, and whisper loving words. I had expected him to be all that I wanted my father to be. (*My Story* 95)

During this stage, Das first defines her relationship with her husband as one of lack: “I felt that his love was never to be mine” (*My Story* 104); and “I felt lost and unwanted” (*My Story* 126). In the poem “The Stone Age,” Das states her lack in her relationship with her husband: “Fond Husband, ancient settler in the mind/ Old fat spider, weaving webs of bewilderment, /Be kind. You turn me into a bird of stone, a granite/ Dove, you build around me a shabby drawing room,/ And stroke my pitted face absent mindedly while/ You read” (Arkin 21). Again in “The Old Playhouse” she writes: “you dribbled spittle into my mouth, you poured/ Yourself into every nook and cranny, you embalmed/ My poor lust with your bitter-sweet juices. You called me wife, I was taught to break saccharine into your tea” (54). At the same time, Das promotes her

husband/father-figure to the level of regal supremacy, underlining his paternal connection, “My husband came from a *joint* family and had several young cousins who liked to flock around him admiringly<sup>27</sup>” (*My Story* 90). And later, this regal sentiment is captured in the image Das portrays when she claims “Whenever I lay clutching my husband’s feet at night, I felt that his love was never to be mine” (*My Story* 104). Nonetheless, the moment her husband exhibits a lack of authority, when “taking [her] into his confidence for the first time” tells her how his “new superior was unreasonably brutal with him,” Das is able to express a disobedience to the Oedipalization she initially finds herself in, and the emotional response she is able to muster up is that of sympathy: “I felt very sorry for him all of a sudden” (*My Story* 194). Later, she is able to reach a point of assertion to resist the parent-child relationship with her husband as unnecessary: “All commandments engraved on the columns of my mind gradually faded, the fierce winds rising out of the Ganges devoured their words and I changed into a disobedient daughter” (*My Story* 153). Das learns that for her husband, holding on to his job at the Reserve Bank was what was most valuable, more than anything else was and this had become the very essence of the conflicts between them.

In his work, French theorist Jacques Lacan locates the oedipal family in linguistic and social context while investigating the nexus between human subjectivity and language. For Lacan, the phallic Oedipal father is replaced by the Name-of-the-Father, that signifies language, culture and authority (Juncker 425). The Lacanian gendered subject comes into being through language (symbolic order) by internalizing the law of patriarchy and as a result the female associates herself with absence or lack. However, French feminists, especially, Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous

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<sup>27</sup> A joint family is an extended family arrangement prevalent among upper caste Hindu’s in Kerala. Under the joint family system, as opposed to the nuclear family system, many generations live in the same house, or in this case the same *tharavaad*.

claim that in order to subvert the symbolic system governed by the Phallus, women must speak/celebrate her female sexuality. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous exhorts her fellow feminine subjects to write: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard” (334). French feminists claim *jouissance*, “or women's orgasmic pleasure beyond the needs of reproduction or copulation, as a way out of identifying women simply as reproductive or copulative bodies” ( Subramanyam 40). In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous and Clément argue that “woman must write her body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves” (94). Similarly, Das unlearns her fraternal fantasies; and her claim that “I mixed my pleasures as carelessly as I mixed my drinks” vouches for her search of freedom from her husband’s denial of her existence (*My Story* 219). Unlike her women relatives, suffering the “emotional deadness within marriage,” Das’s language implies the progressive actions of a subject that moves from a state of passive acceptance of Nair ideology to an actively resisting one; one where she advances to even choosing her own non-Nair lovers: “there was Carlo, the dark haired young man who loved me enough to want to marry me; there was in another city, the one I was infatuated with” (*My Story* 145). In her disregard for maintaining the caste name (സല്പരം), by choosing her own lovers and then by speaking/writing about it, Das illustrates a commitment to herself wherein she depicts a resistance to the domestic society of arranged Nair marriage; which in turn is instituted to limit her life-chances as a woman.

In championing her cause, Das attempts to encourage her fellow oppressed including her mother to resist: “You have lived/ in a dream world all your life, it’s time to/ Wake up, Mother,/You are no longer so young you know” (Arkin 26). Das has claimed that she is not a “feminist” and this statement cannot be reduced to what some critics see as aversion to feminism, but

rather must be attributed to Das's movement through the process of resistance in an effort to refuse sexual and gendered subjectivity. In her repulsion at the constructions of sexuality layered within gendered and hegemonic expectations, Das seeks to make use of her body, by finding pleasure in it and by writing it, in ways that underpin a freedom from learned corporeal functions and expectations. In an article entitled "The Strange Case of Matthew Arnold in a Sari: An Introduction to Kamala Das," C. S. Harrex claims that in *My Story*, Das "admits to a polemical desire to communicate her experience to her readers so they can benefit from them" (164). *Time* magazine's interview with Madhavikutty indicates her political sensibility:

Love is a happy thing. I hate it when love is made evil and furtive...we make our girls guilt-ridden...Every middle-class bed is a cross on which the woman is crucified. I fling arrows at the uncivilized, brutal norms of life for woman in Kerala. I tweak the nose of puritans. (Lal 7)

Das's approach to sexuality is a candid one and her work, which includes verse and short stories, exhibits a tension between sex and social norms and actions. The poem "The Looking Glass" introduces the readers to Das's "myth-exploding themes concerning the difficulty of being a woman in Indian society, and of finding love [...] in the institution of arranged marriage" (Sullivan 163). In this poem, Das asks her women readers "to be honest about your wants as Woman" (Arkin 25). Das's transgressions outside societal norms of a marriage "offers one possible escape from the prison of an unhappy marriage, [but] these also entraps the woman, either because the lover departs, leaving behind a terrible sense of loss and longing, or else depressingly he comes to resemble a second husband" (Jones 198). Ultimately, Das's relationship with patriarchy results in a clear depiction of heteronormativity as a power relation that cannot and should not be sustained, as it replicates the power systems that are at work in the 'legal orbit'.

## 2.6 The *Calculated Unreliability* of Das's Autobiography<sup>28</sup>

Das's texts have primarily displayed an anxiety regarding the issue of representing the self. Das seems to be aware of the knowledge/power nexus; that the production of knowledge is always shaped by power and that there is no room for an untainted or authentic voice in any discourse. This also means that self-authored texts or autobiographies are just as mediated as works of fiction. Philip Lejeune, in *On Autobiography*, argues that the autobiographical genre is based "on a relationship between reader and writer in which the former is promised by the latter to be told the truth about their lives" (3). However, the assumption that autobiography is mimetic and that it reveals *truth* about its writer is a misguided one; for even an autobiography that aims to resist ideology is always already a product of the prevailing discourse in which it functions. Thus the author-ity of the author of an autobiography gets challenged because the author is "not an autonomous consciousness whose text can express untrammelled what he or she did, thought and felt, because the cultural codes of the day shape subjectivity itself" (564 Daymond). In her analysis of the South African writer, Sindiwe Magona's autobiography, Margarat Daymond makes a relevant parallel:

Thus while direct access to the author's self , and to his/her encounters with the actual world and people , may be the promise of the distinctive pact between the writer and the reader of autobiography, and while the writer's honesty and sincerity-

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<sup>28</sup> I borrow this phrase from Rosemary George

ty of purpose are therefore drawn into the criteria which form our responses to autobiography, it simultaneously has to be recognized that in the act of writing, the autobiographer is creating a self from within the current possibilities of discourse (564)

Daymond's analysis of Magona's autobiography reveals that Magona is ultimately freer to represent the experience and meaning of class through her fiction because of the lack of suggestion of an "autobiographical pact" between herself and her readers in the fictitious genre (561). However, in Das's case, her awareness of the constructed and mediated-subject actually provides her with agency to deny her text of any essentialist notions of the subject, which in turn aids her assessment of the systems that have constructed categories based on gender and caste. Moreover, by repeatedly presenting varying and contradictory accounts of herself and her autobiography; by experimenting with the form of the typical autobiography (by using *Indian english* and including poetry as a prelude to her chapters) that I have discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, Das is able to challenge the mode of writing that her texts often gets positioned in academia. The fluidity of Das's writing suggests a thrust towards a refusal of classifications. Das, a Malayalee housewife who claims to be dying, writes her autobiography (in both English and Malayalam in a style that incorporates poetry and prose) to later announce that it was "a spiced-up and heavily fictionalized account of her life," is thus able to reject categorization at many levels (George).

*My Story* demonstrates the role of desire and the pleasures of identification. In *My Story*, Das says "One's real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards will realize that his route has no end (109). Interestingly, this quote is from her English translation and an equivalent sentiment can-



not be found in the earlier Malayalam version. Besides her subversion of the gendered pronoun, the quote can be read as a retrospective examination of the effects which narrating her life, *My Story*, has given to the author. Das is at once admitting her desire for a sense of self, to find the *real world* for/that is herself while concomitantly acknowledging that the production of this *real world* is a literary effect, a *route that has no end*. Das realizes that the only accessible real-ness we have of the real world is its immeasurability and thus its impenetrability. Yet Das's choice to write an autobiography ironically implies that she chooses to find pleasure in the attempt to narrating her *Story*, albeit in the instability of her discourse, than resort to its mute alternative. In choosing to write, then, Das succeeds in demonstrating her desire to dislodge Nair patriarchal discourse through her attempt in writing a *woman's story* while living within a male dominated culture.

## **2.7 Exploring the In-between: Husband as Villain(-) Lover**

In *My Story* Das succeeds in eliding the traditional gender and family roles ascribed to Nair subjects, undermining the structures that are used to support the creation and maintenance of Nair patriarchal hegemony. A major step in pursuing this sense of self by Das is attained while challenging the parent/child and man/woman binary that Das and her husband initially enters by virtue of their arranged marriage. Typical feminist readings would dispense with a villainous role to the husband character in *My Story* that represents patriarchy's oppressive aspects. However, Das is keen on being deliberately slippery in her representation of the role she assigns

to her husband in *My Story*. Das's portrayal of her husband in *My Story* is an ambiguous one. On the one hand (and obviously so), Das's husband stands for patriarchy—he is her older Nair cousin, marries her when she is fifteen, treats her like a child, and is also sexually aggressive with her. In her study on Das, Vrinda Nabar states that Kamala's husband was “crude, insensitive, and incapable of even basic human decency. He emerges as the worst kind of conventional Indian male” (10). To a great degree Das does present her husband as a figure that causes her sexual, emotional and psychological trauma. However, Das also discusses how in later years they are able to participate in joyous lovemaking. Moreover, we are also told, for instance, how her “husband encouraged her infidelities and even offered evaluations of each of her lovers” (George 751). This lack of attention to marital fidelity, one of the most crucial elements of the Nair civil marriage places Das and her husband at odds with Nair patriarchal conventions. Also, we are told by Das that she discusses her desire for other women, particularly the medical doctor who takes care of her at the hospital with her husband: “I kept telling my husband that I was in love with the doctor and he said, it is all right, she is a woman, and she will not exploit you” (152). Yet again Das, in her poem “Composition,” challenges rigid sexual classification of subjectivity: “I asked my husband, am I hetro / am I lesbian / or am I just plain frigid? He only laughed. For such questions/ probably there are no answers/or else/ the answers must emerge/from within.” (46). Rosemary Marangoly George discusses how Das's poem “Composition” weaves “heterosexuality and homosexuality,” and claims that Das's “constant sexual (re)orientations do not provide identities as much as they provide roles that intersect each other” (751). By presenting such inconsistencies, Das constantly interrupts the stability of her narrative by refusing to depict the husband-figure and herself in *My Story* as occupying a single subject position that patriarchy ascribes to them.

In her attempt to present herself with a calculated unreliability, Das is fairly steady about the “unconventionality of every aspect of their marriage” (George 752) Later on in the text we learn of the sexual scenario where Das and her husband enjoy sexual pleasure. However, this time Das also acknowledges the need to recognize gender as one that does not preexist discourse. In *My Story*, Das illustrates the performative nature of gender when she describes the sexual pleasure she is able to enjoy when wearing men’s clothing:

During my nervous breakdown there developed between myself and my husband an intimacy which was purely physical...after bathing me in warm water and dressing me in men’s clothes, my husband bade me sit on his lap, foundling me and calling me his little darling boy...I was by nature shy...but during my illness, I shed my shyness and for the first time in my life learned to surrender totally in bed with my pride intact and blazing” (126).

Reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theory of *gender performativity* where the nature of gender gets fixed or stabilized by repeated or forced enactments, and this move by Das to present herself in men’s clothing to find pleasure is an attempt on her part to make visible the incomplete, parodic, duplicitous and unstable nature of gender norms. Butler states that gender is a “compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged” (“Critically Queer” 22). For Butler, as it is for Das, there is no essential subject that attempts resistance as there is no self-willed autonomous subjectivity. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler contends that:

gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or disguises an interior *self*, whether that *self* is conceived as sexed or not. As performance which is

performative, gender is an *act*, broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority. (279)

One instance where Das challenges the notion of a real self and the futility of attempting to discover that real subject can be found when she deliberately misuses the third person singular in the following lines: “One’s real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end” (*My Story* 109). In her attempt to present a subversive performance of gender, Das also succeeds challenge our reading of the husband-figure as we begin to renegotiate our understanding of the stability of gender practices. Thus in her performance, Das is able to make visible gender norms prescribed by the Nair patriarchy by revealing how she gets constructed into a gendered discourse.

Moreover, in Das’s desire for freedom the heterosexual relationship is redefined. This of course does not simply relate to the performance of an *open* marriage<sup>29</sup>. For Das, in her relationship with normative Nair society, writing about homosexuality in *My Story* becomes a source of conflict with Kerala’s heteronormative society. After Das’s initial encounter with Devaki, one of her young female admirers whom she rejects, in the chapter entitled “She Lay Near Me Holding My Body Close to Hers,” Das details her sexual encounter with a girlfriend that “a friend of the family had *warned* [her] against associating” (*My Story* 78). Das understands that warning to be synonymous with heteronormative performances of expected sexual limits and as a result differs from the “conservative, puritanical and orthodox ladies at Nalapat” by even taking a bath with her lady lover, and later both of them feeling “rather giddy with joy like honeymooners” (*My Story* 80). Rosemary George claims that in Das same-sex desire does not “operate along a hete-

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<sup>29</sup> Both Das and her husband freely consent to each other’s having sex outside the marriage

ro-homo divide, nor does it confer an identity as lesbian ( a word used enough in the autobiography) on the protagonist [because] just as Das consistently encodes the homoerotic into her work, she just as consistently devalues its purchase” (740). In “Composition” Das inquires: I asked my husband,/ am I hetero/am I lesbian/or am I just plain frigid? He only laughed/For such questions/probably there are no answers/or else/the answers must emerge/from within (46).

Das’s freedom does not merely encompass sexual freedom, but also engages all of the freedoms to create the self in resistance to socially constructed interpellations. Here, Das attempts to explain the ways in which human behavior is implicated in interpellation. In redefining the performance of the body through writing about her transgressions of the heteronormative, she unpacks the ways in which marriage, romance, and sexuality become processes for hegemonic constructions, binding the self to a process of immaturity and acceptance of societal norms. By redefining the ways in which her body functions, and by refusing the hegemonic demands placed upon her corporeality, Das attempts to subvert the constructed subject. Thus, if Nair patriarchy “has been made to see itself, or more accurately to see itself as others see it, it has now reached a moment” where it cannot portray itself as either benign or “normal” (in the sense of constituting a norm) and thus patriarchy must now reckon with its own history of aggression and hegemony (Lopez 14). By rendering Nair patriarchy in Kerala’s social space visible, Das challenges both its invisibility and its unspoken claims to an essential superiority. Therefore, by making the privileged nature of Nair patriarchy that continues to plague Kerala visible, Das succeeds in exposing the performativity of gender as she subverts its naturalization.

## 2.8 Radha as a Trope of Resistance

Besides featuring herself, Das further supports the need for a commitment to the self by the presentation of Radha, the mythological consort of Krishna, as the purveyor of a “new possibilities of resistance, interventions, and life” (Archer 23). The radical figure of Radha is an oft-occurring trope in Das’s oeuvre. In *Kamala Das: a critical spectrum*, Mittapalli and Piciucco claim that the Radha-Krishna relationship in Das’s writing portrays “sexuality, one of ideal lovers realized in human terms,” which is unlike the religious one presented by Sarojini Naidu, yet another woman poet from India, in which “the Radha-Krishna relationship is a metaphor for that between the Atman-Brahmin” (63). Das’s sympathy also extends to unconventional mythological characters such as Ravana and Kichaka, two principal figures of *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* respectively. In the chapter entitled “Women of Good Nair Families Never Mention Sex” she argues that “women of best nair families [...] were fed on stories of Ravana who perished due to his desire for Sita and of Kichaka, who was torn to death [...] only because he coveted her” (*My Story* 25). Radha, one among many of Krishna’s mistresses, and idealized by our author seems “to be the only heroine whose sex-life seemed comparatively untumultuous [...] but she was another’s wife and so an adulterous” (*My Story* 26). The figure of adulterous Radha, worshipped as a Hindu deity by the Nair caste, aids in underscoring the hypocrisy within which Nair patriarchy operates. Radha’s placement as adulterous and as an ideal woman in *My Story* parallels the ways in which Das mediates the slippage and the edges of the oppositions of in-

law/out-law; good/bad binaries. An examination of Radha's ethical role reveals deep parallels with Das's move to ethical maturity.

Legend has it that Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu, the preserver in Hindu mythology, multiplied himself into many to dance and make love to the numerous cowherds' wives in the town of Brindavan. Radha, the wife of a local cowherd was the most special mate of Krishna. Dorothy Jones claims that in Indian paintings details of this story are often presented and "comparisons have been made between the frank sexuality of this tradition of Indian mysticism and the mystical writing of St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa of Avila" (203). There are legends that when Radha's husband, Ayanagosha, sought to surprise the lovers, Krishna transformed himself into a goddess so that Radha appeared to be engaged in an innocent act of devotion in which her husband joined (Thomas 34). *Lila Hava*, a famous painting attributed to Nainsukh and at display at the Museum of Fine arts Boston, illustrates how Radha and Krishna engage in a playful performance donning each other's clothes. *The Divine Consort* depicts Radha as "wearing his peacock feather, she dons his lovely, delicate crown; She sports his yellow garment [...] How charming the very sight of it [...] The daughter of Vrsabhanu [Radha] turns [into] Nanda's son [Krishna] (Translation Srivasta Goswami, 87). In fact, in northern India, this playful tradition of *dan-lila* is celebrated every year when little boys and girls dress in each other's clothes. The inclusion of the figure of Radha in *My Story*, has led to much speculation as to her role's symbolic presence in the text. For Jones, Das is fully aware of the ironies implicit in her use of the legend, where "love of Krishna is one way of expressing a woman's quest for self-transcendence and freedom from social obligations" (*My Story* 205). However Das's agenda, made especially explicit in her performance of wearing men's clothing, is to underscore gender's constructed nature. In depicting the figure of Radha, Das succeeds in emphasizing how history

continues to cite its subjects based on gender, and consequently the importance of challenging gender norms through alternative performative acts. Also, in *My Story*, Das repositions herself as one who aspires to freedom from social institutions of marriage and family, and thus aligns herself with the mythical and transgressive Radha. The very inclusion of Radha in *My Story* as an icon interrupts what might be seen as a normative discourse, and introduces the possibility of married female subjects such as Das to operate outside the normative binaries constructed by patriarchal Nair system. Supporting Das, as the model and guide for ethical maturity, the iconography of Radha completes the essential step of this ethos: to move beyond boundaries and binaries of bodies, politics, and implicit power systems, the voice of possibility must come from where it can operate within Das's concept of freedom. For Das, freedom is equal to the season of autumn; when experience allows her to be "yellowed like a leaf/ and free" (*My Story* 178). And it is in this stage of being *female* that Das negotiates the rupture, with the help of Radha, as they alone seem to function outside of binary oppositions in which the older *good* Nair women are embedded.

Deleuze and Guattari point out that the "only way to get outside the dualisms is to be between, to pass between, the intermezzo"—that is what Das lived, in all her work never ceasing her quest for freedom (*Thousand* 277). Radha in her state of being in-between (her marriage and her love) is the 'intermezzo,' much as Das is in her existence. Both refuses to reduce sexuality or identity to dualisms and binaries, and neither Radha nor Das remain within the systems of ethics or morality that have been constructed to maintain the hegemony of obeying, or of supporting the subject as victim. Radha and Das enter an *intermezzo* that moves between the two poles of the epistemic binaries which have been socially constructed. In doing this, the opposition of the binaries collapse, forming an 'in-between' of a space that undoes, disrupts and damages the he-



gemonic productions themselves. The uneasiness with which society received this text reflects the unfolding of the place where Das has situated herself and Radha as a model—where “the woman hopes to grow in self knowledge,” a “female quest for transcendence—an attempt to move beyond the limits of self” (Jones 202). In spite of being a mythological figure herself, Radha functions as subversion to classical-religious ideals of Indian womanhood typically portrayed by mythological characters enshrined in devotion and sacrifice such as Savithri and Sita. Butler, in *Performativity*, describes how heteronormativity upholds its rules through our repeated enactment of these norms:

The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (272)

In this, Radha is an anomaly because she herself is a figure drawn from classical/religious/patriarchal Hindu mythology, and her depiction as one that transgresses these *given* norms aid in her success to destabilize the essential nature of these gendered rules. By appropriating the patriarchally produced Radha, Das is able to convince her reader that gender does not declare any essential truths about the subject but, as Butler in *Performativity*, argues has a history that preexists the subject who cite these norms.

Radha, although aspiring to be a devotee to the Spiritual patriarch, Krishna, nonetheless can be seen as a figure that opposes the bondage sanctioned by the past. Radha’s presence as a cultural symbol in Das’s writings enables her to challenge conventions of Nair marriage and of gender normativity. S.C. Harrex says that Das protests using the “alternate account of Indian

love making by inverting the Krishna-Radha myth and giving it a female not the male point of view” (173). Radha experiences ‘deadness within marriage’ and this is analogous to the predicament narrated by Das : “At sunset, on the riverbank, Krishna/ Loved her for the last time and left.../That night in her husband’s arms, Radha felt/ So dead that he asked, what is wrong” (Arkin 128). Harrex is of the opinion that through the Krishna-Radha tradition, Das is able to “invert the conventional idea of beauty, conventional terminology, presenting them as a perfect, fulfilled embodiments of their sex; thereby she exposes the conventional hypocrisy” (173). Both Radha, through her transgressive model, and Das through her challenge of *good* and *evil* binary can be seen as figures involved in a project that make visible the enactment of social conventions. In the ethical decision to choose *freedom* from being subjectified, both Radha and Das are ethical figures who commit to living their lives outside of the judgments of what is *good* and *evil* in the patriarchal society. Refusing to be implicated in an ethics that replicates the construction of the other for herself as a gendered or caste being, Das denies victimology complicit in both the domestic society of Nair marriage and the construction of women as passive objects. Therefore Das’s concern is to expose the constructed and artificial nature of gender and caste rules that posit itself as the center that holds the Nair community together. For Das’s project is not concerned with creating a new genre of autobiographical writing nor does it advocate an alternative set of ethics to the Nair world, but it succeeds in directing our attention to the tensions engaged in the creation of a collective narrative that functions hegemonically in gendered and castist Kerala. Das explores the effects of the ethical project of Nair patriarchy and advocates multiple resistances for women’s freedom. Ultimately, Das succeeds in her resistance because of her ability to identify the contradictions in categorizations while concomitantly emphasizing the intricacies and pleasures that exist in the in-between.

## CHAPTER 3

**Reserved Resistance: Home and the Patelar-Kudiyan Dialectic in *Vidheyam***

...a freedom still enmeshed in servitude.

- Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977)

All these signs can be ascribed to a generalized anti-Hegelianism: difference and repetition have taken the place of the identical and of the negative of identity and of contradiction.

- Gilles Deleuze, *Difference et repetition* (1994)

കാട്ടുകുറുപ്പുകളും പുല്ലുകളും കോണ്ടു ഞാൻ പട്ടേലരേ മൂടി. എന്നിട്ട് പട്ടേലരുടെ തോക്ക് എടുത്തു പുഴ വക്കിലൂടെ നടന്നുചെന്ന് പാറക്കെട്ടിൽപിടിച്ചുകയറി തഴെ വെള്ളച്ചാടത്തിൽലേ മുകളൽപറന്ന് മഴവില്ലുകളിൽലേക്ക് അത് എറിഞ്ഞു. അപ്പോൾഎനിക്ക് ഒരാശ്വാസം തോന്നി. ഒരു ധൈര്യവും തോന്നി. ഞാൻപുഴ കടന്ന്, പട്ടേലർമരിച്ച വിവരം ഒമാനയോടു പറയാൻഇചിലംപാടിക്ക് ഓടി<sup>30</sup>.

- Paul Zacharia, *Bhaskarapattellarum Ente Jeevithavum* (1995)

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<sup>30</sup> I covered Pattelar with grass and twigs. Then I took his gun, walked along the bank of the river, climbed on a rock and threw the gun into the rainbows that fluttered in the waterfall beneath me. I felt a kind of relief. And also, a kind of courage. Crossing the river I ran to Ichilampadi, to tell Omana that Pattelar was dead (Transl. Gita Krishnamurthy)

The ways in which power signifies itself between those empowered and those who are enchained by it present an ethical and moral predicament that invite analysis within the class contexts of *Patelar/Kudiyar* relations in Kerala<sup>31</sup>. Why does the enslaved subject acquiesce to the status of object? From what place does the complicity or submission arise? Is subservience absolute in power relations? Is there a venue for possible resistance(s) within the restrictive plasma of power for the powerless? The visual adaptation of Paul Zacharia's *Bhaskarapattellarum Ente Jeevithavum* (trans. *Bhaskarapattellar and Other Stories*) by Adoor Gopalakrishnan in the film *Vidheyan* (1994) provides a fascinating lens to view power and its resistance/surrender as converging through the conceptual categories of class and home within the milieu of feudal Dakshina Kannada a.k.a. South Canara in the Kerala-Karnataka *border* of India during 1960s<sup>32</sup>. Defined against the norms of Malayalam *mainstream cinema*, Adoor's *Vidheyan* depicts "the sentiment accompanying the absence of home—homesickness" (George 173) as affecting the complex relationship between Patelar-Bhaskar and Kudiyar-Thommi as it becomes a paradoxical venue of class domination and its acceptance and sometimes passive resistance by the enslaved<sup>33</sup>.

Though implicit, *Vidheyan* conceives of the desire for home that acts as the primary constitutive technology of class domination within Dakshina Kannada in the mid twentieth century while also advancing the prospect of a symbiotic dependence and recognition between the one who wields power and the one who is subjected to it. And while the film is mindful of history, in fact, directed by historical concerns, *Vidheyan* also demonstrates the functioning of the politics

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<sup>31</sup> *Patelar* is a designation given to the village feudal landlord (a.k.a. *Janmi/Zamindar*) during British colonization of India. *Kudiyar* is the slave/tenant of the landlord. I discuss this in detail later on in the chapter.

<sup>32</sup> South Canara is a place that forms the border between Kerala and Karnataka

<sup>33</sup> Adoor Gopalakrishnan has been hailed as the proponent of the "cinema of auteurs" in Kerala (Chaudhuri 147)

associated with home, most particularly in molding subjectivities into particular stereotypes, which in fact can alternatively be applied to various other locations, people, or events. Noah Cowan, in *Adoor Gopalakrishnan: 25 Years of Film Making*, asserts that “with its thickly drawn narrative lines and characters, *Vidheyan* (The Servile) can serve as a grand metaphor for any modern power relationship. But the poetry of the film is perhaps found elsewhere” (54). Cowan’s comments are appropriate as Adoor is able to draw performances of great emotional clarity and power from his lead actors. Yet another critic, Mark Schilling agrees that “in a certain sense, as in classic silent films, words seem almost superfluous; a look or gesture says everything by its very intensity and significance” (55). Adoor confesses to retaining a great deal of control over pre-production and production processes and as a result his films possess persistent visual characteristics manifest in their *mise-en-scène*, together with editing and camera work (Banerjee 117). The filmic language Adoor employs and the camera’s construction of the gaze exemplify the possibilities of transforming vision into a highly contestatory medium of cultural production in terms of the Patelar Kudiyan relationship depicted in *Vidheyan*.

A simple reading of the plot of the film eludes a more complex engagement with the nature and representation of the appealing but complex notion of home, especially when the film is most often cited simply as a successful portrayal of oppression by the villainous feudal landlord Bhaskar. Such a reading does not succeed in unpacking a careful analysis of the ways in which the ideology and ideological interpellation of feudalism functions within this context. The model of power that *Vidheyan* displays is not a hierarchical top-down structure where institutions and mechanisms ensure continuous subservience from a static group but it is an interaction of unstable relationships that involve an asymmetrical and mobile symbiosis. Also, within literary circles, the film can be hastily dismissed as crude political critique—a telling of feudal slavery,

abuse and domination from the point of view of the Kudiyan-Thommi. However, a more advanced reading of the film confirms that *Vidheyan* focuses not so much on the plight of the oppressed as on the dynamics of oppression itself—most pertinently articulated when oppression expresses itself apropos the conceptual categories of the presence/absence of home. In this chapter, I will examine how being attentive to the functioning of home—of both oppressor and oppressed, and its manifestations within the setting of the Kerala-Karnataka boarder space in 1960s help in recognizing the subtle resistances of dominant discourses prevalent within typical Master-Slave narratives while examining the paradox of mastery and dependence in class domination within the context of *Vidheyan*. By reflecting on the concept of home and its representation(s) as enabling self-recognition between the landed and landless, both as a form of ensuring suppression and of a libratory self-formation for classed subjects, I hope to illustrate the relationship between class-subjugation and the search for home as that which help define subjectivity in *Vidheyan*.

To comprehend class relations within a very limited notion of absolute control is also to affirm the perspective of “class as an establishment of complete power that only revolution can satisfactorily address” (Wood 72) and thereby ignoring the more nuanced transference of power relations and resistances dealt within the film *Vidheyan*. Also, consequential to such an approach is the furthering of stereotypical representations of both the oppressed and oppressor as fitting only into a certain orthodox classification/grouping. Absent from such a study would be the plethora of instances of more subtle and complex resistances associated with the alienation caused by the idealizations of home that attend to the performances of domination and subjection of human relations between the tyrant and subjugated as represented in *Vidheyan*. Though not overtly resistant like Kamala Das in *My Story*, Thommi’s resistance is played out in much more

subtle ways, made most obvious in Ganguly's words, when he succeeds in enabling Bhaskar "to finally concede the human self that he [Bhaskar] has always suppressed" (16). The success of Thommi's resistance lies not only in his recognition of the idealistic nature of home but also in *functioning* as an agent that enables Bhaskar to identify himself as the oppressor and then in his relationship with Thommi recognize his other. This is to say that, although we do not see explicit cases of resistance from the underprivileged in this film, what it succeeds in undermining is the consistently constructed nature of domination that struggles to fit subjects into a certain formed discourse where the representation and narrative form of powerlessness becomes an unchanging source of helplessness—the norm. The didactic dismissal and the ascribing of *Vidheyan* as *parallel cinema* also evade the question of how resistance can be found in the visual elements portrayed within the cinematic oeuvre of class representation<sup>34</sup>. The depiction of Thommi's alienation in a foreign land at the beginning of the film and the slow movement of the film towards Bhaskar's disintegration after murdering his wife present an intricate construction of home as a problematic site for both Patelar and Kudiyan. The psychological struggle to construct home as a meaningful site of privileges aid in class formation within the social space of Dakshina Kannada with its significant *Malayalee* immigrant population (described as *Kochikaars* by Zacharia); therefore *Vidheyan* complicates our perception of power and our understand-

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<sup>34</sup> Parallel cinema, as defined by Sohini Chaudhuri, "sets itself against the norms of Indian popular cinema and is songless, starless and low budget. It can trace its origins back to the Indian Peoples Theater Movement (IPTM), founded in 1943 by a left-wing avant-garde collection of writers, dramatists, musicians and film makers" (144). Satyajit Ray is variously regarded as either the forerunner or founder of parallel cinema in India. Ritwik Ghatak, the Marxist Bengali director, also contributed significantly to the field. Ray has often been criticized for his lack of political commitment to Bengal. Ashis Nandi, for example has stated that "being Calcutta born and bred, had little or no knowledge of rural Bengal," and that Ray and his films "are not Indian, Bollywood being quintessentially Indian." Darius Cooper, on the other hand, finds the Ray films as "examples of the traditional nine Rasas" (Basu)

ing of class subjugation and home<sup>35</sup>. In *Vidheyam*, what occurs when desire for home disturbs and challenges class order is an instance of the paradox of the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship, a confrontation between freedom and domination as delineated by G.W. F. Hegel's dialectic of the Lord and Bondsman.

Robert Bernasconi, in "With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Basis of Hegel's Eurocentrism," brilliantly points out Hegel's unfair and racialized "treatment of non-western cultures" (171). Bernasconi traces Hegel's trajectory of history and problematizes the casual dismissal of India and China (along with all other non European nations) as not being an essential part of world's historical progress. Hegel's history begins with Persia, and India is assigned a state of prehistory/prediscourse. Bernasconi credits Hegel's rejection of India to its lack of "expansion outside political action, instead of conquering other nations, which would be a mark of civilization, India has been subject to a succession of conquests. Its essential vocation is to be subject to mixing [...], conquest and subjugation" (182). While, Hegel's criteria for civilization seem to reflect a positive stance towards war and colonization, he is also quick to discard the possibility of self-realization and progress to people classified on the geographical binary of being Caucasian or non-Caucasian. Relevantly, this contradicts Buck-Morss's argument, in her book *Hegel Haiti and Universal History*, when she persuasively illustrates how Hegel's 1805-06 Jena texts prove that contemporary events in Haiti in fact, lend a great deal in shaping Hegel's master-slave dialectic:

Conceptually, the revolutionary struggle of slaves, who overthrow their own servitude and establish a constitutional state, provides the theoretical hinge that takes Hegel's analysis out of the limitlessly expanding colonial economy and onto the

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<sup>35</sup> A *Malayalee* is a person who speaks Malayalam, the vernacular of Kerala; and *Kochikaars* refer to people from Kochi (Cochin), a port city in central Kerala.



plane of world history, which he defines as the realization of freedom—a theoretical solution that was taking place in practice in Haiti at that very moment (12).

Not surprisingly, Hegel does not provide any direct reference (let alone acknowledge) to Haiti or its struggles by the slaves in any of his works. Thus, without being an apologist for Hegel and his clearly prejudiced views, I would like to (re)read his Master-Slave dialectic to not only demonstrate the fallibility of exclusivist thinking but also to extend his theory to demonstrate how it can function as a liberatory tool for the oppressed in precisely the place(s) he deemed not capable of self-realization. More specifically, I would like to investigate how Hegel's perception of the power structure between the lord and bondsman portrays a symbiosis that helps the Other construct the self. In a parallel, the Hegelian lord is the Patelar only because the bondsman accedes to his position as the Kudiyan with in the context of *Vidheyan*. Both the Patelar and the Kudiyan retain their sense of self from a state of mutual dependency. To apply such an analysis to *Vidheyan* is, on the one hand, to notice the nuances of the gaze and the sexual relationship the master-Bhaskar has with Omana (Thommi's wife) and how his disintegration accelerates as a consequence of Saroja's murder; and on the other hand, to also observe the slave-Thommi's and Omana's growing sense of belonging, in spite of the violence it engenders, in Dakshina Kannada after encountering Patelar and Saroja. Such paradoxical instances not only elucidate cases of subjugation, but also problematize self and subject construction.

Being attentive to the intricacies of the desire for home as such is also to encounter the popular trend of assigning this reading to the genre of diaspora studies. Rather than ascribing home as a problematic site associated to the larger world of international immigration and exile and ignoring its validity within local contexts, we must also problematize home in the more intimate realm not only to address the equally pertinent dislocation, fracture and transformation of

settler subjects within local but diverse cultures but also to contest the question of the very existence of what we casually assign to be home. To study the notion of home as associated with class not only brings to forefront the question of how immigration enables subjugation, but, in fact, pertinently addresses the presence of violence within class relations and subjectivity, particularly when desire moves outside the limits of normativity. But before going any further, let me provide a brief outline of the plot of the film.

### 3.1 *Vidheyan*—A Synopsis

Because of the immense difficulty in obtaining an English subtitled version of *Vidheyan*, I think it will be useful to offer a summary of the film especially for the benefit of the non-Malayalee reader of this work. Set in the 1960s, *Vidheyan* presents Thommi and his wife Omana as among the last of the *immigrants* to arrive in Dakshina Kannada, Karnataka from Wayanad, Kerala<sup>36</sup>. Thommi and Omana, like the other immigrants, manage to illegally fence off a few acres of land for cultivation. By sheer chance Thommi catches the attention of Bhaskar, once the privileged Patelar of the land. Though shorn of his powers, the people around him fear to question the Patelar-Bhaskar's authority. Thommi is terrorized into submission and Omana is raped by Bhaskar. Thommi wants to retaliate but for reasons discussed later in this chapter is unable to do so. With the unfolding of time, Bhaskar slowly begins to take a liking to Thommi and finds

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<sup>36</sup> According to UNESCO, the term immigrants apply also to internal migration, which “refers to a move from one area (a province, district, state, and municipality) to another within one country” (UNESCO). After World War II, many landless tenants/ Kudiyaans moved from Wayanad, a state in Kerala to the adjacent state of Karnataka.

him a job in the village toddy shop. Bhaskar also commences to embark on an open affair with Omana. Eventually Thommi becomes the principal aide and accomplice to Bhaskar's projects.

Bhaskar's wife, Saroja, is a gentle woman who sympathizes with Thommi and Omana. Bhaskar cannot bear Saroja's efforts to restrain him. Unable to live with Saroja, Bhaskar decides to hatch a plot to kill her by taking Thommi into confidence. The plan literally misfires when Thommi gets gravely wounded from Bhaskar's misfired gunshot. Determined to put an end to the landlord Bhaskar's tyranny, the local settler population unites to seek Thommi's assistance to successfully kill Bhaskar. The group manages to convince Thommi that killing Bhaskar will be beneficial for him. The crucial moment arrives and when the shots are fired, Bhaskar escapes with minor injuries. Bhaskar finally executes his plan to kill Saroja when he disguises himself and throttles her to death. Interestingly, Thommi is absent from the scene. However, Bhaskar seeks Thommi's help to fake Saroja's murder as suicide but the plan fails and Bhaskar is forced to leave his home to go hiding in the nearby forest. Days later a shaken Bhaskar visits Thommi in the dark to seek help by accompanying Bhaskar to his nephew's house, where he is hopeful of finding refuge. Turned down by his cowardly nephew, Bhaskar and Thommi set out to find shelter in the wilderness of the forests. Inescapably, in the wilderness of the jungle, Bhaskar meets his nemesis, as he is shot down by Saroja's brothers. The grief-stricken Thommi slowly regains his composure and removes the gun from the firm grip of the dead Bhaskar and throws it into the waterfall thundering below. At last, Thommi suddenly realizes his freedom as he runs beyond the wilderness where life and Omana await him. Before we move on, I would like to focus on my choice of using *Vidheyana* as my primary text of analysis and in supplementing this discussion with Zacharia's literary text.

### 3.2 The Film vs. the Novella

While attempting to problematize resistance within the geographical space of Kerala, it is hard to miss the creative brilliance of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, whose sparse (just ten feature films that span over a career of thirty five years) yet remarkable oeuvre of films are firmly rooted in the cultural, linguistic and social experiences of the Malayalee folk. Yet, although he is often cited as being “culture specific,” Adoor’s movies are still permeated with a human concern that makes them universal (Ritchie 56). Kathleen Murphy suggests that “though Adoor has been called a Marxist filmmaker, his work focuses on existential politics, the interior evolution of the individual within a social context: from idealism or illusion to reality, from irresponsibility to maturity, from ignorance to enlightenment” (60). Shayam Benegal’s comment, in 1995, that “I have no doubt in my mind that Adoor Gopalakrishnan is by far the most accomplished filmmaker of India today” continues to ring true; for like Satyajit Ray in Bengal, Adoor too has risen from being the foremost filmmaker in Kerala to being the pre-eminent filmmaker of India, today (1).

Though Adoor has placed Malayalam cinema on the world map, he has not always received the attention he deserves in the West. Derek Malcolm attributes the lack of commercial reception to Adoor’s movies as being the result of “the restrictive systems operating in the West than with any difficulties that might be apparent in his work” (55). South Indian cinema, particu-

larly that of Kerala, is not so easily received in the West as are those originating from Bengal or from what in the west goes by the name of *Bollywood*. When all of the filmic enterprise generated from India gets generalized by collapsing it into a single terminology—Bollywood—the differences that exist within the filmic cultures of the subcontinent (just as in the case of Hollywood) gets ignored. Also, a false consciousness is induced through the suffix -wood in Bollywood, making Hollywood the touchstone of global film making. My point is not only to criticize the West's glossing over of all Indian cinemas as Bollywood, rather to imply the difficulties in speaking about any group as a whole, even as in the case of Western films attributed to Hollywood. Adoor's dislike of the coinage and use of the term Bollywood to denote all movies emanating from India is legendary. Adoor argues that "Bollywood is a very derogatory term [...] We are known by that name and it is very sad [...] There is a whole other realm of Indian cinema, that entertain audiences not with songs and dances, but with the experience of life and the small, joyous moments of life and also the grief [...] Life as it is" (Asmar). However, though there is a lack of commercial interest in Malayalam films in the West, Adoor's work has won him much critical acclaim, most of them routinely bagging awards at International Film Festivals. *Vidheyan* has won several prizes including the Netpac Prize Rotterdam (1995), the Fipresci Prize and Special Jury Prize (1994), and the Critics Prize for the Best Indian Film (1994). M.K. Raghavendra (in the process of likening Nagisa Oshima of Japan to Adoor) claims that it is Adoor's "subtle sense of humor, stunningly beautiful visuals, and masterly control over rhythm, the multilayering of the image, the aspiration of poetry, and the effort to reach out to the infinite through the finite, the subtle through the gross" (62) that has given Adoor's work a distinctive style which he has refined over two decades of his career.

Adoor's protagonists display an instinct for survival and act in ways that reveal life's many contradictions. Most of Adoor's central characters are people who live in the margins, who "are fractured than flawed, constantly attempting to transcend the condition in which they are placed" (Benagal 5). Viswanathan's dislocation from the utopic village life in *Swayamvaram* (1970), Sankarankutty's flight from the institution of marriage in *Kodiyettam* (1977), Unni's resistance against modernity in *Elipattayam* (1981), Sreedharan's psychological dilemma to present a political image of himself in *Mukhamukham* (1987) are some instances of Adoor portraying human beings stamped as outsiders, struggling at the dislocations chalked out by social conventions. Ganguly suggests that Adoor's "outsiders are also prisoners of history, of a society caught between a not yet dead feudal yesterday and the not fully born modern tomorrow [...] between decaying feudalism, changing caste hierarchies, the coming of Marxism and chaotic modernity" (38). What Ganguly alludes to is the unique sociopolitical climate of Kerala that Adoor has used as the setting for *Vidheyan*. Yet, beyond all this, what makes Adoor's work inimitable is the characteristic way in which he translates the human condition to celluloid.

Adoor often compares cinema to literature in the flexibility it offers to the creator but is also quick to find a difference between the two mediums:

Cinema for me has a dream-like quality. When you dream, it is only of the essentials, and highpoints of emotional experiences. Similarly, in films you would have experienced a person's entire lifetime in two hours. A whole life-span pared down to essentials. And the whole thing is happening before you in the present tense. You can play around with time, place...everything. You can do the same in literature but that is an art of contemplation. (Jayaram 31)

Evidently, such a passion is made obvious by Adoor who is recognized by cineastes as an auteur and a “perfectionist who conceives his own ideas for the screen, takes time to mull over his visions, trying them for their durability, before finally writing and directing them into the fluid syntax of cinema” (Mohammed 60). However in just two of his films, *Mathilukal* and *Vidheyan*, Adoor adapts the stories of Vaikom Muhammed Basheer and Paul Zacharia respectively to make them his own. These films are loose adaptations of the stories Adoor had borrowed from Basheer and Zacharia. Basheer applauded Adoor’s adaptation of *Mathilukal*, while Zacharia was not satisfied with the treatment of his story. Adoor claims that Zacharia too “liked my version initially but then changed his stand for reasons known only to him” (Venkiteswaran 93). Adoor says that one of the advantages of “working with others’ stories is that we get an opportunity to respond to approaches and worldviews that are entirely different from ours” (Venkiteswaran 92). Discussing what prompted Adoor to choose Zacharia’s story, Adoor claims that he had “read the story when it appeared in a magazine and there was something very attractive about it, but it was also very raw and violent [...] The violence had to be tamed and brought under reasonable control, this was the first task” (Venkiteswaran 93). For Adoor, what emerged when he wrote the script connecting loose ends and “finding reason and justification for actions, tracing characters to their origin was [his] own text of the author’s writing. It had toed the same line as the author’s in most part but had per se deviated from it too as my perception of it were not the same as the original’s” (Venkiteswaran 93). As in Adoor’s earlier film *Elippathayam*, in *Vidheyan* too, he probes into the nature of power within the larger context of powerlessness. In responding to the film’s textual authenticity, Adoor states that

in *Vidheyan*, I have altered the total tone of the story and the characters. The two women Saroja, Patelar’s wife and Omana assume importance in the film whereas

they play little part in the novelette. Patelar kills his wife for her property in Zacharia's story. I have changed that. I use one murder—Patekar killing his conscience. That is the turning point of the story. On the whole it shows how unchecked power creates problems. Sex & violence are very suggestive and internalized. For that matter even surrender is violence in the movie. (Jayaram 42).

While Adoor aims to reveal the inner workings of power and the way it affects both the Patelar and the Kudiyan, in the novella, Zacharia is more conservative and less sympathetic to Bhaskar. Bhaskar is a total and complete villain for Zacharia while Adoor is more concerned about what power does to Bhaskar. The director's exploration of the change that overcomes Bhaskar after Saroja's murder is what allows Adoor to investigate subject formation in this context. Also, the film uses stunning visuals to capture the psychological workings of its characters. For instance, a "surreal freeze" of a one-armed, three legged chair that "exudes authority even in its rickety state [remarkably] represents Patelar, who has inherited the British legacy of collecting taxes, recording and legitimizing land holdings" (Rao 40). In addition, the film enables the audience a visual interaction with the story often facilitating Adoor to employ the gaze as a tool of both resistance and subservience. In a way, as audience, we get an opportunity to participate as subjects when we watch the film.

While establishing Thommi's journey from abuse to independence remains Adoor's clear and consistent focus in *Vidheyan*, Zacharia's concern in *Bhaskarapattellarum Ente Jeevithavum* seems to be directed only towards the social ramifications of feudalism. Since my subject of study in this chapter is resistance during subject formation in the context of Patelar-Kudiyan relationships, my primary focus in this chapter is *Vidheyan*, but at times I have purposely conjoined my analysis with the novella, *Bhaskarapattellarum Ente Jeevithavum*, oft quoting from it (espe-



cially when the film's dialogue is *ad verbatim* with that of the novella), for a comprehensive study of the subject and for ease in documentation. But before going any further, I should pause to elucidate the historical context of the Patelar-Kudiyani relationship that the film problematizes.

### 3.3 Patelars and Kudiyans of Dakshina Kannada

The district of Dakshina Kannada or South Canara borders Western Kerala and belongs to the present state of Mysore in the district of Karnataka. Although the district is formally located under the state of Karnataka, the general way of life in Dakshina Kannada is not very different from that of the people of Northern Kerala/Malabar. This is because prior to British colonization the area was generally known as Malabar and comprised of districts that fall under present day Kerala. The name Canara is a corrupted form of Kannada, the native language spoken in Karnataka. Silva and Fuchs suggest that the term Canara was “invented in early 16<sup>th</sup> century by European traders (Portuguese, Dutch and English) for whom the letter ‘d’ was always pronounced as like ‘r’ and the district was named by then as Kanara for Kannada” (1). The name Canara was retained by the “British after their occupation of the district in 1799” and ever since the area has been referred to as Canara (Silva 2). However, in post-independent India there has been a preoccupation (especially by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's Hindu nationalist political wing) to retrieve lost origins and rename places that were anglicized by British colonialism. Hence, officially the district is currently identified as *Dakshina Kannada*<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Dakshina can be roughly translated from Sanskrit as the English equivalent of South

When Tipu Sultan signed the Treaty of Sreerangapattanam in 1792, all of Malabar came under British rule. Soon, the British introduced their colonial policies that ought to have hampered the existent feudal system powered by the monarchy. Ironically, the British did not dissolve the existent feudal system but appointed the feudal chiefs as tax-collectors of the land. The feudal chiefs were levied huge sums of money as tax to the British government which they, in turn, collected as revenue from the tenant-peasants. In place of the traditional monarchy, the British law courts and police helped the landlords collect taxes. These landlords were known as *Janmis* or *Patelars* in Malabar and were equivalent to the *Zamindars* of Northern India. The *Patelars* were the official landowners and they leased parts of their land for cultivation to local *Kudiyans*. Very often the *Kudiyans* were evicted from their land for trivial reasons and this led to wide dissatisfaction among the peasant group that did not own the land they cultivated. The Malabar *Kudiyans* Act passed in 1929 did little to help the plight of the underprivileged *Kudiyans* who were exploited by the *Patelars* (Silva 4). *Vidheyana* is set within this framework of the *Patelar-Kudiyans* relationship. Adoor claims that in order to make *Zacharia's* story “valid and authentic,” Adoor had to historicize the storyline by contextualizing it within the reference of the *Patelar-Kudiyans* relationship of Dakshina Kannada (Venkiteswaran 93).

According to Adoor, although India had shaken itself out of colonial control, the system of *Patelars* that had existed from British period continued to exert itself on the local population:

[*Patelars*] were like local chieftains who were responsible to collect taxes. But along with it came other auxiliary powers—judicial and social, which they abrogated. That is how *Patelars* became authorities. Interestingly, this system continued even after independence, until up to the sixties when regular revenue officials took over. All the same, by sheer force of convention the head of a *Patelar* family

enjoyed respect and evoked fear in the village fiefdom. Not all, but some abused these powers to a great extent. (Venkiteswaran 93)

Adoor's *Vidheyan* is set in post World War II in Dakshina Kannada, which analyzes the nature of power that the master Bhaskar (who enjoys the inherited British legacy of collecting taxes, recording and legitimizing land holdings) unleashes upon Thommi—the Kudiyan who was “driven away by scarcity from Wayanad to the comparative security of south Karnataka” ( Rao 40). Adoor, while examining Thommi's “psychological dependence” (Rao 40) and his chronic inability to free himself from slavery as seen through the lens of immigration, also problematizes the Patelar-Kudiyan discourse as representing totally determined individuals exemplifying ascribed roles of being tyrant/victim. Initially in *Vidheyan*, the desire for an idealized physical and psychological space conceived as home causes Thommi to succumb and sustain to the violence inflicted by Bhaskar. Adoor asserts that he has “used the plot of the story to explore the subterranean landscapes of the human mind. Here, terror the oppressive form of power joins hands with servility in a pathological alliance of interdependence” (Jayaram 42). The desire for home is what sustains the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship in *Vidheyan*.

Derek Malcolm points out that *Vidheyan* is “directed with a strength and certainty that drums its message home with a cumulative power that you can't easily forget” (55). Adoor attempts to explore the nature of the master-slave relationship between a poor immigrant Kudiyan, Thommi and the “gangster-despot” Bhaskar, the Patelar of the land (Schilling 55). *Vidheyan* also studies the subversion of Patelar's self-certainty and the Kudiyan's bondage to assert how home opens up possibilities for destabilizing and resisting class structure as a total system of domination.

### 3.4 Power and Subjectivity in *Vidheyan*

Critics usually assign the titular role of *Vidheyan* to Thommi but it is worth speculating the possibility of identifying Bhaskar by the same title. Though usually translated to mean *The Servile*, the Malayalam term *Vidheyan* also connotes the synonym of being a subject (വിധേയൻ= വിധിക്കപ്പെട്ടവൻ), as one who is almost fated to be subject to something/someone. Within the setting of the ongoing feudal milieu, even after Indian independence in Dakshina Kannada, Thommi lives not just as a subject to the local Patelar but also as another type of subject—as one who is a subject of the settler community there. Conversely, Bhaskar becomes a subject in a different way—his enactment of power is subject to his past privilege restricted within his home territory by the designation as the Patelar of Dakshina Kannada which, relevantly, is a vestige of British colonization. Thus by extension, Bhaskar’s subjectivity as the Patelar is defined by the territory he knows and accepts as home. Adoor emphasizes the need to observe Bhaskar (along with Thommi) as subject to class ideology when he says that:

Thommi is not the only ‘*Vidheyan*’ [servile] in my story. Patelar [Bhaskar] is equally chained to his background, the decadent traditions and passions of a man mightier than others. Until he kills his wife, he is a slave to his past and upbringing-

ing, at the mercy of others from whom he seeks help. He too becomes a fugitive.  
(Jayaram 42)

Bhaskar's exercise of mastery, ironically, is subject to the mercy of settler-Kochikaars, who must accept him as their master because of the once-privileged (and constructed) signifier of Patelar in areas related to land and its distribution in Dakshina Kannada. Bhaskar's entitlement to mastery, thus, rests not only on how he represents himself but also on how others see him as an authority on the land (especially made predominant as a native member of the area) that they have transgressed to make a home for themselves. Michel Foucault, in a section entitled "Why Study Power: The Question of the Subject" in his essay "The Subject and Power," discusses the ways in which we can read the term subject when he elaborates that "there are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to" (212). By "strategically" tying this Foucauldian notion of subjectivity with the desire for home, in all its representative modes, as done by Rosemary Marangoly George (who in turn, has appropriated the term from Spivak's *strategic essentialism*), it is useful to problematize subjectivity in *Vidheyan* in terms of class hegemony intersecting with a settler consciousness<sup>38</sup> (25).

*Vidheyan* is set in Dakshina Kannada at the dawn of Indian independence, where an ex-feudal Bhaskar belonging to the British enforced Patel system of administration continues to reign supreme by terrorizing the local population that consists mainly of settler immigrants from Kerala. Adoor differentiates the indigenous Dakshina Kannada population from the settler-group by assigning Malayalam to be spoken by the settlers as opposed to the Konkani-Tulu used by

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<sup>38</sup> Spivak speaks of the usefulness of "essentialist formulations in many struggles for liberation from the effects of colonial and neocolonial oppression" (Ashcroft et al. 79)

local *Kannadigas*, who are hardly visible in the film. Bhaskar is uninhibited in tormenting people he wishes to control<sup>39</sup>. Suranjan Ganguly in “Narratives of Dislocation: The Theme of the Outsider in the Films of Adoor” argues that the very existence of such a “monster that can hold an entire village in thrall, even when he’s been officially stripped of power, is proof of the enduring legacy of feudalism” (16). The aggressive and tyrannical Bhaskar’s will is the law of the land, and though feared by all, he is also a victim of alcohol abuse and flattery.

Thommi, in contrast, is an underprivileged settler from Wayanad district of Kerala who has encroached five acres of land controlled by Bhaskar at Ichilampadi, Dakshina Kannada. Thommi gets caught up in Bhaskar’s net and though devoid of any legal powers, Thommi and other ‘Kochikaars’ fear to question Bhaskar’s authority. Jayaram in *Adoor Gopalakrishnan: 25 Years of Film Making*, attributes Thommi’s silence to “the urge to survive” in their newfound settler home (21). According to Rajmohan, “a humiliated Thommi wants to avenge his dishonour, but the urge to survive ties his hands—turns him mute” (21). Adoor, while arguing that “it is Thommi that makes him [Bhaskar] possible, for you need a slave to create a master,” also emphasizes the role of the sycophantic settlers from Kerala who play a major function in ascribing Patelar as the master of the land: “Patarlar is powerful only with his cronies around him. When he is alone he is much more contemplative and talks about his plans and confesses” (Venkiteswaran 96). Bhaskar’s minions are all depicted as immigrant settlers from Kerala (as vouched by their use of Malayalam) and it is obvious that, much like Thommi, he has abused them into subjugation.

Once Thommi is brought under Bhaskar’s control, he becomes an object of display for Bhaskar—a performance of his power. Initially, Thommi functions very much in the vein of

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<sup>39</sup> People from the state of Karnataka, India

Bhaskar's gun that represents the feudal lord's power. Thommi must succumb to Bhaskar's brutality as he witnesses how other immigrant bodies are trampled upon by Bhaskar. In one of the opening shots, Thommi is overwhelmed with anger at Bhaskar's encroachment into his home, to molest Omana, and thinks out loud that he must resist by killing Bhaskar. Immediately, in the following frame, the camera narrows to focus in on one of Bhaskar's followers who informs Thommi of the need to be submissive if he intends to make Ichilampadi his home. Here then, through the film's continuous focus on Bhaskar's supporter-group as settlers in search for a home, Adoor depicts the tyrant's minions as successful apparatuses that ensure slavery to the Bhaskar. In this context, immigrant settlers are seen as being familiar with such violence that extends into the domestic space of their lives. Alienation and the desire for a home act as catalysts to sustain and reproduce class dominance in the everyday of the settler community in *Vidheyana*.

Being a settler, Thommi occupies a liminal space as one who has been physically dislocated from Wayand, Kerala and lives in Dakshina Kannada under the constant threat of removal from the margins. Even when given an opportunity to escape thralldom, Thommi refuses to fight Bhaskar and this is why *Vidheyana* provokes a different mode of reading resistance. From humiliated migrant, Thommi graduates to being the "sadistic Patelar's favorite slave," allowed to illegally cultivate land; and gradually Thommi's initial rage turns into a "frighteningly strange sense of vicarious pleasure" when he revels in Bhaskar's scent that envelops his wife (Rao 41). Ganguly claims that "once he [Thommi] gives into his oppressor, his servility is total and abject [and] after a point he even relishes his condition. Oppression, in fact, becomes a state of being [for Thommi]" (16). According to Adoor, Thommi's interaction with power takes place in various stages: at first power is "resisted and detested in silence without any of it being articulated

and then it is slowly accepted as one learns to live with it. Before long, it is absorbed as a fact of life and it becomes pathetic when one finds it difficult to carry on without it (Venkiteswaran 94). Of course, Thommi is seen as going through the above stages. But, however subtle it may be, what makes Thommi give up the resistance he had once practiced?

Given an opportunity to end his misery by pushing Bhaskar into the well, Thommi is unable to perform and worries: “who would be there for me then” (*Vidheyan*). What is significant is that Thommi, even before Bhaskar unleashes his violence on him, seems to acknowledge and submit to the position of the subjugated. Bhaskar thinks he has some power to exercise while Thommi submits in fear of losing. As the film begins, Thommi having no idea who Bhaskar is nor what he represents responds to Bhaskar’s violent interpellation (The Althusserian Hey!) by immediately entitling Bhaskar as master, for no apparent reason<sup>40</sup>. Zacharia narrates the scene vividly:

The man who called me was seated in a chair on the verandah opposite. He must have been about thirty-five years old. He was as tall as he was large. He wore a silk jubba and was fair-skinned. His eyes and hair had a coppery tint. He had a big moustache which curved downward and his lips were stained red with betel-juice. His big body barely fitted into the chair. Half a dozen people stood around him respectfully. ‘Come here, you whore’s son!’ Patelar called out in Kannada.  
(210)

Adoor Gopalakrishnan, in an interview on *Vidheyan* with C.S. Venkiteswaran, states that “The exercise of power anticipates two sides, that of the one who wields it and the one who is subjected to it. Here Patelar assumes that he has the power. The taker on whom it is exercised

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<sup>40</sup> Thommi’s response in Malayalam is : ‘ദയ കാണിക്കണേ യജമാനരെ;’ which can essentially be translated as ‘master, have mercy on me.’



is the settler Thommi who thinks he has something to lose in resisting the violation” (93). Thommi’s spontaneous reaction to Bhaskar is subject to his fear as a newcomer into the place. Bhaskar is presented as speaking the native tongue of the place, Kannada, and seems at home when he interpellates Thommi. Thommi registers the difference between the caller against his settler status and refuses to resist Bhaskar’s demand by becoming his slave. Of course, Thommi resents Bhaskar’s control, but always serves when called upon— whether it is to help Bhaskar escape from Ichilampadi, or to make his own wife, Omana, sexually available to Bhaskar. While Bhaskar is the one that wields power, both Thommi and Omana must engage with the onslaught of this power. Passively resistant at first, not only does Thommi slowly accept Bhaskar’s intrusion into his settled home but even “seems to take pride” in it by desiring Bhaskar’s scent on Omana (Ganguly 16). Adoor problematizes such a non-normative desire in the film when he focuses on the female characters that get caught up in the power play between Bhaskar and Thommi.

Not all members of the feudal household are antagonistic to Thommi; in fact, it is in Bhaskar’s very home that Thommi encounters kindness and consideration for the first time in the alien land. He is treated with human dignity and generosity by Saroja, Bhaskar’s wife, who provides him with food, comfort and gentleness. In Zacharia’s story too we see Thommi reminiscing about Saroja: “Sarojakka was such a good person. She gave me something to eat or drink everyday. She knew Pattelar’s ways, but always spoke to him with affection. She gave him good advice and never quarreled with him” (219). At one point in the film, Thommi is saved because of Saroja, who insists that he be taken to the hospital to treat the injury inflicted by Bhaskar when he accidentally shoots Thommi. Adoor deliberately problematizes the relationship between Thommi and Saroja just as he does the bond between Bhaskar and Omana. In an

interview Adoor asserts the significance of the two women characters in the film when he says “Patelar’s wife and Omana assume importance in the film [...] sex and violence are very suggestive and internalized. For that matter even surrender is violence” (Jayaram 42). Actually, the lone instance in the film when (a usually mute and passive) Thommi verbally resists Bhaskar is at the latter’s suggestion to kill Saroja. Thommi negates Bhaskar’s insistence to kill Saroja by saying: “No! Why do you do this, master? Isn’t she a good woman? (*Vidheyana*). The subsequent violent death of Saroja leads to Bhaskar’s dislocation from his own home town leads to a circumstance that even out the identities for Thommi and Bhaskar.

Bhaskar’s relationship with his wife, Saroja, is an ambiguous one just as it is with that of Thommi. Reminiscent of Othello, when Bhaskar at last accomplishes his plan to kill Saroja by choking her to death, the efforts to mask the crime as suicide fails and he is forced to go into hiding. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, in an interview with C.S. Venkiteswaran, explicitly states that, Bhaskar “only kills one person—that is his wife, and with this murder there is a change in his character—he has doubts” (92). By the end of the film, Bhaskar is stripped off all powers that he had internalized. Ganguly, in “power within powerlessness,”—the subtitle of his analysis of *Vidheyana* -- claims that in Bhaskar “what we witness is the pathology of power, how it degrades and dehumanizes a human being into brutish existence and makes others servile to him” (16). In the final shots of the film, Bhaskar is hunted down by Saroja’s brothers, and in a classic scene by Adoor, we find him emulating the same posture we found Thommi in when the film begins—squatting on the ground “meekly watching over the rice boiling in the pot while Thommi is bathing in the river naked and in pure abandon” (Venkiteswaran 92). Such a role reversal dismisses the rigidity in the categorization of subjectivities as the powerful and powerless into unyielding pigeonholes. As the film draws to an end, Patelar and Kudiyan are seen seeking shelter in a for-

est and “they are equals at last but only for awhile—before death can release Thommi from this yoke to an evil mentor, he breaks free of his internalized shackles of psychological bondage and ultimately hope lies in the desire for freedom” (Rao 41). Within this particular system of feudal domination, then, Bhaskar’s behavior appears to destabilize what is typically considered as fixed identities for the Patelar and Kudiyan. The depiction of this role reversal, unfurled through a series of events in the film, dispels the rigid roles assigned by discourse to Patelar and Kudiyan through problematization of their subjectivities. But, how does the notion of home help in depicting both the oppressor and oppressed as a source of sustenance for the other? What exactly does this complex concept signify within this context?

### 3.5 Unpacking *Home* in *Vidheyan*

In his novel *Shame*, Salman Rushdie explodes the myth of being *rooted at home* when he clarifies that “we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places” (91). Yet, it is precisely the metaphor of *the root* that often finds currency when the notion of home is explored in literary circles. Discussing the complexities of subjugation in his film, Adoor claims that Thommi “submits and accepts it [abuse] as something natural [because] as a settler he has no *roots* or rights there<sup>41</sup>. He is totally alienated—whether it is the unfamiliar language spoken or the lack of a sense of belonging there.

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<sup>41</sup> my emphasis

The soil under his feet is not his, he is an outsider there, he is at the mercy of the one who wields and exercises power” (Venkiteswaran 93). An analysis of the key phrases/words used by Adoor in the quote cited above—roots, alienation, sense of belonging, soil under his feet, outsider—all point to what is conventionally recognized as home in popular culture. But what exactly is this notion of home? For bell hooks, “home is nowhere [and] it is no longer just one place [but] it is locations,” while for Novalis “home is everywhere” (George 1). There has been such an abundance of unsuccessful attempts to define home in a few formulaic sentences that it becomes a daunting task to yoke together a definition for our purpose. To define home minimally on the basis of the categories provided above would be a simplification, and since all simplifications are inevitably falsifications it is beneficial to unpack this term that forms a significant tenet of my argument.

Towards the beginning of her influential work, *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George, while suggesting that the concept of home is a “way of establishing difference,” elucidates her claim by saying that “the basic organizing principle around which the notion of home is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions” (2). For George, these “inclusions are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion [where] membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control” (9). George emphasizes the role of the “politics of location” as subjectivities are constructed geographically, psychologically and materially by “the experience of the place one knows as home or by resistance to places that are patently ‘not home’” (2). In yet another seminal work, Chandra Mohanty and Bidy Martin read home in Minnie Bruce Pratt’s essay entitled “Identity: Skin Blood Heart” as being “constructed on the tension between two specific modalities: being home and not being home” (196). Martin and

Mohanty clearly delineate the ambiguities in defining the tenuous concept of home that can be useful to our purpose in reading *Vidheyan*. “Being home,” according to Martin and Mohanty, is “where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; “not being home” is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (196). For my purpose, I will appropriate Martin and Mohanty’s idea of “being home” and “not being home” to derive that the rigid roles assigned to Patelar and Kudiyan gets subverted in *Vidheyan* as a result of the “search for a location in which the self sees itself being ‘at home’” (George 3). As discussed by Adoor himself, Thommi’s settler status constitutes his subjectivity as a slave to Bhaskar and *Vidheyan* provides a venue to problematize the conceptual category of home in the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship between Bhaskar and Thommi.

In “Narratives of Dislocation: The Theme of the Outsider in the films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan” Ganguly discusses the primacy of the role of home in Adoor’s movies:

The issue of home, in particular, is central to Adoor’s discourse of the outsider [...] his protagonists inhabit spaces that are fragmented, therefore, precarious to their moral and social well-being. Related to this are questions of identity and selfhood as some [of his characters] withdraw from society or try to remake themselves against the forces of change. (9)

*Vidheyan*, particularly with Thommi, interrogates the significance of the notion of remaking the self within the enforcement of class identities in Dakshina Kannada. The film discusses how home functions as a space for “select inclusions and exclusions” and its ramifications that organize classed subjectivities in a rigid arrangement of subordination through physical violence, legal defilement, and sexual domination (George 9). Bhaskar establishes his power in the community

through his abuse of immigrant settlers from Kerala. Through out the film, Bhaskar's supporters are made distinct as *Kochikaars* and are excluded from the politics of the place they inhabit. Because of economic hardship and political eviction, the immigrant community in *Vidheyan* is at the mercy of Bhaskar. However, for Bhaskar, it is his learned sense of superiority endowed to him because of the geographical and psychical territory he calls home that makes him Patelar of the land. Bhaskar's authority as the Patelar of the place is portrayed as being recognized only by immigrant settlers in Dakshina Kannada. George while arguing that homes "are place of nurture and violence" also claim that they "are places that are recognized as such by those within and without" (9). Thus, for Patelar, home is the learned (and desired) privilege of the past that gets bound to a geographical location while the Kudiyan slowly learns that home is an impossible event in a permanent future space/time. It is because Bhaskar and Thommi move in and out of this normally unyielding discourse of master/slave that *Vidheyan* becomes an interesting site for exploration.

Bhaskar's privileges as Patelar enable him the corruption of the structure of kinship at Thommi's home, made most obvious when Bhaskar's abuse extends to Omana, Thommi's wife. Bhaskar is presented as a regular visitor to Thommi's home where he not only enjoys Omana's body but also participates in the private and domestic sphere of their life (partaking of food that is cooked by her etc). It is apparent that in these relations, Bhaskar derives pleasure as he concomitantly encroaches to displays his power over Thommi's private life. In doing so, Bhaskar relegates Saroja, his own wife, to a marginalized space by denying her the ability to successfully engage in a marital relationship with him. For Bhaskar, Saroja's upper class status is simply a key to monetary gains and procreation. Bhaskar's interaction with his wife is different from that with Omana. In spite of resisting a reading of Bhaskar's physical home as being a gendered *fe-*

*minine* space that is made possible by Saroja, it is impossible not to notice the ways in which Saroja's position as the key member of Bhaskar's home gets recognition only after the climax of the film—Bhaskar's murdering of Saroja. Adoor, in the Venkiteswaran interview, is very articulate on this topic and states that:

it is possible that Patelar actually loves his wife but probably he himself did not know it, and it is after he kills her that he begins to doubt himself. He has no doubts till then [and] firmly believed that he had a natural right over others' lives, including his wife's and with her murder, there is a change in him, for she was someone who really loved him and wished him good. That loss makes him feel guilty and [he] finally succumbs to it. (94)

It is hard to provide any justification on Adoor's comment on how Bhaskar could actually have loved his wife after the violence he unleashes on her. But Saroja, unlike Bhaskar, finds neither agency nor pleasure in class domination and in victimizing Thommi and Omana. In fact, Saroja is seen as being *at home* with Thommi as she chats with him in the private space of her own residence. Saroja does not hesitate to visit Thommi with gifts while he recuperates after the injury afflicted by Bhaskar. It is this redeeming quality exhibited by Saroja, a member of the upper class and the only humane representation of Bhaskar's physical home, which enables Adoor to successfully portray Saroja not as just another victim of Bhaskar's tyrannical rule but also as being the cause of his alienation and subsequent downfall.

The notion of home is linked with violence to uphold class structure in *Vidheyan*. The film opens with the shot of a chair, a very powerful symbol of control (especially made noticeable if used as a verb) that soon gets occupied by Bhaskar. Also featured besides the chair is Bhaskar's constant companion—his gun. What follows immediately is the brutal violence

enacted upon Thommi to bring him into submission before the other Kochikaars by Bhaskar. Mastery is guaranteed for Bhaskar by the oppression of others who for the ex-feudal exists in the form of the settler laborers in the village he controls. However, Bhaskar's dependence on Thommi grows on a regular basis and reaches an extent that it becomes difficult for Bhaskar to see Thommi being servile to anyone else but him. It is fascinating to note Bhaskar's violent resistance to Thommi's interaction with Yoosepachayan—a wealthy Christian merchant from Kerala who falls victim to Bhaskar's wrath for no apparent reason but for Thommi's obsequious greeting to the fellow Malayalee. By incessantly subjecting others to violent submissions publicly, Bhaskar “spectacularizes” and verifies his authority (Hill). Such a performance of power enables Bhaskar to instill terror among local population to ensure that classed subjects submit themselves to him for fear of eviction.

Though passive, during a few critical filmic points, Thommi and Omana succeed in resisting Bhaskar's violent production of their subjectivities as Kudiyans in Dakshina Kannada. Adoor carefully monitors the performance, editing, and shot-compositions to privilege the powerless. While Bhaskar imposes his oppression in their public and private spaces, Thommi and Omana do not always inertly acknowledge the ongoing violent onslaught by Bhaskar. In the first scene, away from his home, Thommi wanders into Bhaskar's trap where Thommi is brutally kicked into submission. But it would be erroneous to view this instance of Thommi's audibly mute reaction as a given passivity or lacking resistance through out the film; Thommi, by the end of the film, responds visually to the camera. The initial scene of brutality is shot primarily to emphasize the violence inflicted on the Thommi as other sycophants surround Bhaskar. Thommi's body curls up and convulses at the agony of Bhaskar's brutality. Thommi is continuously subjected to Bhaskar's cruelty and, initially Thommi appears to allow his subjugation and even



Thommi's body language as narrated by Adoor depicts the forcible violence and humiliating oppression contained in these performances. However, we do notice a movement in Thommi's reactions to Bhaskar especially when by compelling Thommi to serve him; Bhaskar demands Thommi's support in order to murder Saroja. At this moment Thommi resists being an accomplice by verbally and visually registering his resistance to Bhaskar, and although Thommi gets shot in Bhaskar's project to kill Saroja, Thommi's absence from the scene when Bhaskar actually murders his wife is significant. Thommi's unavailability marks his movement to the resistance of Bhaskar's violent enactment.

Within her newly set up home, though Omana is repeatedly raped by Bhaskar without resistance, she reveals that she recognizes the plight of her lot. Bhaskar violates her body as though he is entitled to it by the powers vested in him as an ex-feudal chief. Omana's subjugation is similar to that of Rajamma's, a homeless character in Adoor's *Elippathayam*. Both the women are marginalized in every way—economically, socially and sexually. Rajamma works as an unpaid laborer in her ancestral Nair house (*Naalukettu Tharavadu*) which is depicted as a rat-trap (*Elippathayam*). Ganguly states that “physically dislocated from home like Thommi, Omana is also the displaced Other by virtue of being a woman without power and resources. She too, like him, has no choice but to submit to the indignities that are heaped on her. And, also like him, she comes to welcome Patelar's advent in her life” (16). However, it would be misleading to read Omana's submission as a voluntarily consenting one because Adoor carefully depicts the *mise-en-scen * to capture her sobbing response to this customary assault. The initial scene of rape, though implicit, is shot primarily to emphasize the violence inflicted on Omana. Omana's muffled sobs are a response to the agony of the rape and her facial expression suggests that no matter how accustomed she may be to patriarchal dominance, the event is traumatizing to her.

Although Omana remains verbally mute, she registers a complete contradiction through her body's responses. The shot depicts the display of Omana's subjugation: an intimate view of her agony in the background, and discernible in the forefront is a complete body shot of Bhaskar stepping out of the house. We also see Thommi's expression of utter physical and psychic agony, though unnoticed by Bhaskar, as it becomes obvious that Adoor privileges Thommi by centering in on his suffering. By the middle of the film, however, Omana's sobbing (as a reaction to Bhaskar's assault on her body) becomes non-existent. Zacharia filters Omana's response for us through Thommi's consciousness: "Whenever I heard a girl cry out, I would think of Omana; of the first day. Omana had stopped crying as time went by. That was a great relief for me" (215). Omana's slow avoidance to reveal her suffering to Bhaskar can be read as her way to resist how he appropriates her for his pleasure as well as to reinforce his power. Thus, contained in the film's symbolic representation is Bhaskar's acceptance of his superiority by asserting his entitlement on settlers who are in the process of *home-making* just as Thommi's recognition of his role as a settler in seeking a home within the community as forcibly being prone to the landlord. Accordingly, the desire for home is the location of domination and violence within *Vidheyan*. The film presents both the landlord and the slave as molding their subjectivities that cannot be complete outside the sphere of the politics of the imagined space addressed as home. The film succeeds in presenting the argument for home as a fundamental tenet of oppression within the institution of feudal tyranny. Then, how do we comprehend the capacity of the notion of home to subvert the assigned position of and the wider connections between the Patelar and Kudiyan?

### **3.6 Class, Home and the Patelar-Kudiyan Dialectic *Vidheyan***

*Vidheyan* portrays the notion of *being home* as fracturing the traditional Patelar-Kudiyan relationship. In this section, I will attempt to closely read the encounter between Thommi and Bhaskar to show how they define home—both as physical and psychological spaces that impose and subordinate—as a signifier that ensures agency and protest in *Vidheyan*. In the film, the displacement associated with immigration acts as the apparatus that keeps subjugation functioning, but ironically, at the same time, it also provides the key to the dissolution of bondage between Patelar and Kudiyan. *Vidheyan* seeks to subvert the notion that all Patelar-Kudiyan relations are always already spaces for complete oppression that renders the tenants as commodity to be consumed for the landlord's gratification without resistance. By employing the unstable marker of home as a means towards class oppression, *Vidheyan* in fact conceives of a symbiotic relationship between the two.

The scenes that portray dependence of Bhaskar on Thommi in the dénouement of the film are presented as desirable and progressive. Adoor's visualization of Zacharia's story enables us to gain a better understanding of the power of gaze in this context. In power relations, the gaze can be viewed as a way in which power is secured. Bell hooks emphasizes that "slaves were denied their rights to gaze" which was a way to ensure the master's privileged position (197). Bhaskar's gaze acts as a Foucauldian instrument of surveillance that disciplines Thommi and other Kochikaars by compelling them to "turn in on themselves in a form of self-policing" (*Discipline and Punishment* 197). Celine Parrenas Shimzu in an analysis of master-slave gaze aptly quotes hooks who points to "how slaves did indeed look back at masters, albeit in secret, so as to secure power in not looking. Slaves who choose not to look back strategize relations of self-protection by making unavailable their true feelings to master and his gaze" (223). Such a self-

policing through the gaze is most evident at the ways in which Thommi responds to Bhaskar after Saroja's murder. Zacharia makes the distinction between Thommi's responses with and sans the gaze very clear as he narrates it in Thommi's own voice: "Pattelar shone the light into my blinking eyes and asked in a small voice, 'Tell me, look at my face and tell me. Can one recognize a person by just touching his hands?' I said, 'Who knows. Yejamanare?'" (236). Thommi is unable to confront Bhaskar's gaze and respond frankly but is able to do so when the gaze is averted: "In the darkness, stretching both hands towards my blinded eyes, Bhaskar said, 'Touch my hands.' My fingers brushed his outstretched hands. 'Is this me?' he whispered. 'Yes, yejamanare'<sup>42</sup>, 'I said and drew back my hands'" (Zacharia 237). The question of how Bhaskar will know what Thommi really thinks is not posed here but what is presented is a careful documentation of a mutual dependence (for Bhaskar dependence on Thommi's opinion; and for Thommi dependence on Bhaskar for his survival as an outsider) made especially significant by the gaze within the context of Patelar-Kudiyan relationship. This dialogue is presented as liminal in the film, where Patelar and Kudiyan convene in a moment of recognition.

Dylan Evans, in *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, claims that for Lacan there is an "antinomic relation between the gaze and the eye: the eye which looks is that of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object, and there is no coincidence between the two" (72). For Lacan, there is a split between the eye and the gaze. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, Lacan asserts that "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" (72). Calvin Thomas, in his work entitled *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety, and the Male Body on the Line*, while noting the active and passive construction of Lacan's syntax in the quote above, claims that "In Lacan the eye ("I") represents the Cartesian subject of certainty, or

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<sup>42</sup> Yejamanare can be translated to Master in Malayalam.

consciousness as transparent self-identity, whereas the gaze represents the occlusion of that transparency to the extent that the ‘I’ is given over as the object of another’s decisive vision (113). Here, with reference to Bhaskar’s gaze on Thommi, what we see is a disruption of Bhaskar’s sense of self-certainty as the Patelar when he gives himself over to Thommi’s judgment.

If read carefully, such a recognition becomes apparent between Bhaskar and Omana too. A thoughtful rapport slowly surfaces and is made evident between Bhaskar and Omana as Bhaskar regularly visits her home. Bhaskar gradually reveals a gentle fondness formed for Omana and hence subverts their position as empowered-enslaved to alter their subjectivities. Bhaskar is seen buying gifts for both Thommi and Omana towards the beginning of the film and later before Bhaskar flees the city, Bhaskar addresses Omana: “he took some money out of the fold of his mundu, put it on the mat and said, ‘this is for your expenses until this fellow comes back.’ Then he raised his head and looked at Omana” (Zacharia 238). Atypical of conventional master-slave relationships, what we see here is Bhaskar registering his concern for Omana’s future needs. Such a non-normative interaction also unfolds between Bhaskar and Thommi. Once Bhaskar leaves to the forest, one of the most interesting dialogues unfurls between them. Both Zacharia and Adoor describe the scene when Bhaskar tells Thommi that he “must never again make Omana cry,” with a lot of warmth and affection (Zacharia 240). Omana, on the other hand (for the first time in the film), is seen weeping for Bhaskar when he announces that he was leaving the village. Zacharia narrates this unusual scene vividly as sifted through Thommi’s eyes: “would Omana feel sad, I wondered [...] Omana came up to me, held my hands and began to cry. She put her face between my palms and sobbed. Pattelar sat staring at the ground. Omana’s crying suffocated me. Trying to lift her face, I said, ‘Omana, I am there for yejamanar’”

(Zacharia 239). Bhaskar's unusual practice of being affectionate to his Kudiyan and the reciprocity from Omana and Thommi upsets the acceptable role ascribed to them as it also confronts the audience by rewriting the terms of the typical Patelar-Kudiyan relationships.

The film also problematizes the connection between Thommi and Saroja as discussed by Maithili Rao in an article entitled "Adoor Gopalakrishnan: The Apolitical Humanist Projects the sky on a Dew Drop." Rao claims that "Adoor brings in a new element of eroticism that cuts across class and caste barriers when just as Omana, Thommi's wife is the object of Patelar's lust, Patelar's wife, the refined and gentle Saroja is the object of Thommi's inarticulate devotion" (41). Thommi is, at one point, saved by Saroja. When Bhaskar *accidentally* shoots Thommi, Saroja demands that Thommi be taken to the hospital<sup>43</sup>. Thommi enjoys Saroja's company and is seen at ease conversing with her in the kitchen of Bhaskar's home. In Zacharia's version, we even get to see Thommi dreaming about Saroja when he is unconscious:

I had many dreams of Sarojakka and Omana. It was while I was dreaming that I lay with my head on Sarojakka's lap that I woke up. My head swam in a wave of happiness. The warmth and softness of Sarojakka's lap clung to me for a long time. I laid my hand on my wounded stomach, feeling very happy that Sarojakka was alive. (222)

In Thommi's imagination, Saroja is the perfect metaphor for his idealized notion of home. By virtue of being Bhaskar's wife Saroja represents the domestic sphere of upper class in Dakshina Kannada. Yet, Saroja is ill at ease with the role of master and is kind when she interacts with both Thommi and Omana exemplifying Martin and Mohanty's idea of "being home" by providing Thommi and Omana with "familiar, safe and protected boundaries" in Dakshina Kannada

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<sup>43</sup> Accidental because the shot was meant to kill Saroja

(196). Within the feudal household, Saroja does not possess *any powers* in terms of dealing with the public<sup>44</sup>. We see the patriarchal Bhaskar as always dealing with the local villagers where as Saroja is presented as occupying the domestic sphere of their home. However, Saroja articulates a sense of agency when the sanctity of her home is being defiled as she tells Thommi that she is unhappy when people bring gifts to her home because she rightly reads fear behind their gesture: “Do people give these things out of love? They give them because they’re afraid. I don’t like to keep such things at home” (Zacharia 228). Saroja is neglected by Bhaskar and her advice to him falls on a deaf ear. There is not a single shot with in the entire film where we see Bhaskar either talking to his wife or providing her with anything. In a notable and ironic contrast, we see Bhaskar buying gifts and uttering words of comfort to Omana and Thommi when he decides to flee home. Here, while we see an example of Bhaskar registering his affection for Omana as a case of his recognition of her as a human being, we also notice how he represses Saroja’s personhood by taking her life, which in turn acts makes him a refuge as he is required to flee from his home.

Maithilli Rao, in her analysis of *Vidheyan*, is quite explicit about the role of home in enabling mutual recognition for both Patelar and Kudiyan when she says that it is only when they are away from home (either real or imagined), when both “master and servant are fugitives seeking shelter in the beautiful forest that they are equals at last” (41). Bhaskar’s physical home is burned down by Saroja’s brothers as he tries to insert himself between the marital relationship of Thommi and Oman by taking refuge at the Kudiyan’s home for a night before he asks Thommi to accompany him as a fugitive. This scene between Thommi and Bhaskar eventually transforms

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<sup>44</sup> Partha Chatterjee’s “The Nation and its Women” exemplify the manner in which the nationalist project used essentialist binary dichotomies such as spiritual/material: ghar/bahir (home/outside) to keep women as representatives of the *pure* indoor space of home.

into one of mutual dependence. Though, Thommi is bound to agree to follow Bhaskar into the wild (because if he disagrees Bhaskar could kill him) it also takes Patelar and Kudiyan away from their home turf into the forest where Thommi's desire for recognition becomes fruitful as Thommi is identified by his name by Patelar for the first time in the forest. The scene of recognition is a scene away from home and is depicted and described carefully by both Adoor and Zacharia:

The hiding place that Pattelar had in mind was on the far side of a river. We heard the murmur of the river from quite a distance. We were then walking under a wild champakam tree full of flowers. The fragrance of Pattelar's perfume! With an indescribable feeling of uncertainty, I paused beneath the tree. 'Yejamanare' I called, 'the fragrance of your perfume!' Pattelar turned. He called me by my name, 'Thommi.' Yejamanare, I answered. Pattelar stood on the fallen wild champakam blossoms, gun in hand.

In "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse," Caren Kaplan uses Deleuze and Guattari's theory of deterritorialization as a process advocated to western feminists to approach other feminisms. According to Kaplan, deterritorialization is a radical process of "becoming a minor" based on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "the moment of alienation and exile in language and literature," that becomes appropriate to formulate "a new terrain, a new location, in feminist politics" (197). For Kaplan, this deterritorialization necessitates a reconstruction of our conception of home:

We must leave home, as it were, since our homes are often the sites of racism, sexism, and other damaging social practices. Where we come to locate ourselves



in terms of our specific histories and differences must be a place with room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new. (195)

It is this process of *making anew* that helps Bhaskar and Thommi in mutual recognition.

Bhaskar is away from the geographical location that privileges his mastery, where the signifier *Patelar* loses its signification and hence is able to recognize Thommi as an independent self-consciousness. Thus, although Thommi surrenders to Bhaskar's wish to leave home to accompany him into the forest it seems that it is this very act of leaving home that fulfills his desire and his need for recognition from the master. Looked at in this way, *Vidheyan* portrays home as a liberatory tool that is meant to depict the possibility of class freedom between Thommi and Bhaskar.

### **3.7 Hegel and Home: Mutual Recognition**

Hegel's master-slave dialectic has formed the basis for many critical analyses on human subjugation. Hegel's conviction that an individual entity's meaning rests not in itself but on the relationship of that thing to other things within an all encompassing changing whole can be beneficial to this study. Many of Hegel's ideas are predicated on a sense of Otherness. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes of Hegel's master-slave construct: "they are views which invite a comparison with something/ someone else which exists on the outside, such as the oriental, the 'Negro,' the 'Jew,' the 'Indian,' the 'Aborigine'" (106). Within the context of Patelar-Kudiyani relationship, the class stratification/order/structure enables a comparison to be made between the peri-

phery—the Kudiyan and the privileged loci ascribed to the Patelar. The space occupied by Kudiyan in Dakshina Kannada becomes invested with suggestions of lack and difference, and stands in a clearly hierarchical relationship to Patelar, the privileged member of the home community. Thommi, the slave/Kudiyan in *Vidheyan* attempts to resist this hierarchy as we shall see in the following discussion.

Michael Roth claims that the “Master/ Slave dialectic is fairly straightforward” where Hegel describes “the confrontation of two persons, two consciousnesses,” who have forged their “identities in isolation from other people, and upon meeting, each sees the other as a threat to his or her individual existence [...] and seeks to dominate the other as to be more certain of this existence” (100). By supplementing Roth’s version of the Hegelian dialectic, it is possible to claim that the Master-Slave dialectic finds one of its most compelling personifications in the Patelar-Kudiyan interactions in *Vidheyan*. *Vidheyan* facilitates a new way of reading Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic that is favorable to our understanding of class, home, and subjectivity. The conceptual divide between the private sphere of the individual subject’s home and the public/ universal realm of civil society (that enables class structure in our study) has been the subject of Hegel’s study. In “Ethical Life” from *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel elaborates the discussion of the subject in “Abstract Right and Morality,” which sublates the contradiction of individuality and universality into ethical determination. Hegel defines subjectivity as the universal “reflected into itself” (136). Although some critics of Hegel, such as Karl R. Popper, accuse Hegel of “ethical and juridical positivism in the doctrine that what is, is good,” and therefore “might is right;” others such as Herbert Marcuse, in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* inform us of Hegel’s ambivalence to authoritarianism in *Philosophy of Right* (Pinkard 41). For Hegel, the ethical realm confirms the subject’s “essence, universality, and right to freedom”

(*Philosophy of Right* 153). Hegel argues that ethical substance constitutes “the actual spirit of a family” whose members demonstrate self consciousness of themselves as individuals within a unity” (*Philosophy of Right* 158). Bridging the family and state, in Hegel, is the social institution of civil society. Allen W. Wood suggests that one of Hegel’s most original contributions to social theory is his conception of civil society as “indispensible for the self-actualization of the modern self” (26). For Hegel, human beings gain a definite social standing through participating in the life and labor of civil society and their image of themselves comes to be “bound up with the honor or dignity of their estate through which they gain recognition both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others” (Wood 27). During this process of self-actualization, they achieve “ethical dispositions, values, and interests in common with others in their estate,” and this leads to a “sense of solidarity with these others, institutionalized in corporation membership” (*Philosophy of Right* 251). Thus, for Hegel, it is participation in work/labor that links a subject to the community in which he/she inhabits, which in turn moves the subject towards self-consciousness—a critical step en route to Absolute Freedom. Through a rewriting of the Hegelian dialectic, *Vidheyam* succeeds in presenting a temporary rupture in the class system (which is the civil society that binds Bhaskar and Thommi) represented in the story by problematizing the desire for home to challenge absolute class domination. The breakdown of Bhaskar’s privileges as the Patelar ensured by his home state and Thommi’s search for a home seemingly trespass the laws that dictate class structure when Bhaskar affirms the humanity of Thommi and Omana, and leaving home (physically and symbolically) becomes desirable as an act that bestows mutual recognition between Patelar and Kudiyan.

Hegelian dialectic narrates mutual recognition as progression where the lord relies on the bondsman for the affirmation of his mastery or self-certainty. The lord is the superior and exists

*in and for himself*, whereas the bondsman is depended upon and works for another. The bondsman confirms the superiority of the lord and concomitantly is subjected into servitude. The bondsman forfeits his self-certainty for the service to the lord. Of course, the Hegelian dialectic doesn't stop there but continues to prove that it is the slave and not the master who is able to achieve self actualization. Throughout *Vidheyan*, we witness a new appropriation of the Hegelian dialectic, one that acknowledges the likelihood of mutual recognition when both Patelar and Kudiyan realize the inauthenticity or the created aura of security embedded within what is traditionally conceived as home. Mutual recognition comes about in the self-conscious awareness of the empty signifier of *being home* that promotes and disseminates power within a system where possession and successive occupation of land ensured authority. In *Vidheyan*, mutual recognition takes place when shared displacements are recognized by Patelar and Kudiyan.

Thommi and Bhaskar frames Patelar and Kudiyan as agents who have the potential to rearrange, if not drastically reshape, the static roles of lord and slave in a feudalistic setting. *Vidheyan* conceives of both Patelar and Kudiyan as reframing themselves against the atrocities of feudalism when an alternative mode of recognition occurs between them through the unraveling and unlearning of their conception of an idealized home. Mutual recognition suggests that dislocation from learned privileges enable likelihood of a libratory potential for both Patelar and Kudiyan. Such a suggestion helps in understanding the inference of home as a site of learned privileges that act as a tool that not only forms subjects but also releases them, to an extend, from and within the shackles of feudal hegemony. By presenting Patelar and Kudiyan as meeting each other across asymmetrical sites of power, *Vidheyan* explodes the myth of self-actualization occurring as a result of living “within familiar, safe, protected boundaries” (Martin 196). When Bhaskar is evicted from his home, the symbolic powers associated with Patelar become nonexis-

tent and it is the Kudiyan (himself, in this case, searching for a home) that survives and is ultimately revealed to be having the potential for redemption.

In the Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic the first form of sublation takes place as a result of the hostile encounter between self-consciousnesses that are not fully developed. The first desire of the animate self-consciousness is that of annihilation of the other self-consciousness in order to establish independence. According to Hegel, this is also the first negative form of freedom. The self-consciousness demonstrates that it is boundlessly free by showing that it has absolutely no sense of investment in any particular thing, even ultimately in its own self. This act of freedom is negative freedom but it is also the immediate form of self-knowledge. In this hostile process, the self-consciousness seeks its recognition (that it is willing to engage in a death struggle), on the part of the other self-consciousness. The animate self-consciousness cannot demonstrate the full extent of its freedom if there is no risk involved. The death struggle for Hegel is a must, and both combatants will learn something during the death struggle and their relationship will dialectically change. The winner (the one who does not fear death) will turn the other into a bondsman/slave (the one who does fear death). Thus in the Hegelian model, the master assumes the recognized, *for itself*, and the independent role, while the slave assumes the dependent, *in itself*, and the recognizer role.

For Hegel, the existent self-consciousness of the slave is always impeded by the master. Detailing an original and ahistoric struggle between master and slave, Hegel claims that “the master secures his position of domination by risking his life” while the slave “who has not risked his life may well be recognized as a person, but he has not attained the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 114). While analyzing if pleasure

is possible within relations of dominations, Celine Parrenas Shimizu's uses the Hegelian dialectic that can be appropriated for our purpose here:

In his original life-or-death struggle wherein two self-consciousnesses struggled with each other, the master wins and subsequently dominates the slave. In the master-slave dialectic, however, the slave's self-consciousness is still the one with potentiality for transformation; in other words, the one in the process of becoming. In other words, the master is already free—yet his freedom is contingent on the slave's bondage. Not free, within the world of slavery, the slave holds the potential for revolt that can become a pursuit of freedom (225).

The desire for home becomes the new life-or-death struggle between Patelar and Kudiyan in *Vidheyan*. The Kudiyan consents to work for Patelar for fear of eviction and in hope of setting up home in the encroached space in their settler community. Kudiyan performs labor in fear of Patelar's capacity to remove him from the land. In *Vidheyan* home is the contested space for which Thommi performs what is dictated by Bhaskar in fear of being removed from his new found home in Dakshina Kannada. At the same time, later on in the story, it is the deterritorialization of the privileges associated with home that allows Bhaskar to recognize Thommi as an individual.

This fear of death is also what enables Kudiyan towards a new self-recognition, in a parallel of the search for home as work offered by the film. Hegel, in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, claims that it is because of the "fear, the being-for-self is present in the bondsman himself; in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self belongs to him, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right" (115). For Hegel, the master gets what he wants at the end of the death struggle but it is only in a slave form. Hegel maintains that the master only

thinks he gets what he wants but it is only a *thinghood* relationship that the slave offers to the master. The Hegelian Master-Slave dialectic establishes a relationship of consumption. The freedom that the master had initially (in making the *other* a slave) soon becomes non-existent because he becomes dependent on the slave, and realizes that the self-consciousness he sought is not what he wants because it does not give him absolute freedom. The slave, in turn realizes that he is the freer one and that he is in fact the pure and ideal self-consciousness. In the fear of death that the slave experiences during the struggle, the slave, unlike the master, gets thrown back fully to an awareness of what it would be to be nothing because death was not abstract for him. The slave recognizes his potential (he becomes aware for itself) when he transforms things through different complex skills that are embodied in the material he brings to the master. The master consumes what the slave creates according to his will.

The slave ultimately is working for (and on) himself, and soon recognizes his own freedom and becomes a self-conscious human being. The mediation occurs through a process of *thinghood*. First one must become like the thing in order to work one's desire on the thing, and that work becomes one's own reflection of the self. At this point one is no longer a thing due to the dialectical process. In the dialectical process a human being learns of oneself and *thinghood* in a way that completely overcomes the initial opposition between *thinghood* and self to a new form that is no longer dependent (a Nietzschean self-overcoming of man). The slave will then follow a series of consciousness. Hegel claims that by working on our desires, rather than on our consumption, we are annihilating the thing. This annihilation is not desire unsatisfied, but that becomes the expression of desire (Hegel says work is desire held in check, which the master is unable to perform). Home remains a place of desire for Thommi and the work towards the search for what Martin and Mohanty claims to "be home" transforms him into recognition of his

own self-certainty (196). In *Vidheyana*, Thommi's self consciousness is not fixed. Unlike Bhaskar who works to maintain his power as the Patelar at all costs, Thommi has the possibility to alter, become, and evolve out of bondage. Thommi's desire to set up a home and the comforts it ensures is unusual and not acceptable in the traditional Patelar-Kudiyan relationship where the enslaved is forbidden to own property and this transgressive desire is what brings an autonomous sense of self for Thommi. Conversely, Bhaskar's interaction with Thommi is a progressive one which exceeds beyond the project of feudalism and class domination, most pertinently visible in Bhaskar's transformative act of recognizing the self-consciousnesses of Thommi and Omana.

In *Vidheyana*, the key apparatus available for Thommi to move out of bondage and establish a sense of being home in the newly immigrated land is to work for Bhaskar, the Patelar of the land. Submitting himself to the Patelar becomes for Thommi the possibility for living without the fear of eviction from Dakshina Kannada. Although a form of subjugation, working for Bhaskar becomes a possibility for transformation for Thommi. Thommi's status as Bhaskar's slave and the work he performs for Bhaskar that produce not just material goods but also that which ensures Bhaskar's position as the Patelar of the land through the public performativity of power ties Bhaskar to Thommi. Thommi's display of servitude and the resulting favors he receives from Bhaskar establishes a symbiotic, though uneven, relationship between Patelar and Kudiyan. Thommi's work is thus his expression of his desire for home. By working on his desire, Thommi is able to annihilate it and home becomes an expression of work towards independence. Being a Kudiyan, the security of being home is what Thommi labors for in bondage and is consequently that which "holds the bondsman in bondage; it is his chain from which he could not break free the struggle, thus proving himself to be dependent, to possess his independence in thinghood" (Kojève 48). Mapping Kojève's claim, that the slave transforms himself through the



independence of work, on to *Vidheyan* we find that Thommi's work towards establishing a sense of home—for being home is the tool through which he can progress.

If establishing a home is what makes the Kudiyan be subservient to Patelar, it is the same desire for *being home* that “forms and shapes” self-consciousnesses in this context (Kojève 48). According to Kojève, the Hegelian “becoming” takes place through work: “through work the bondsman become conscious of what he truly is [and] Work is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing” (Kojève 48). The possible way in which Kudiyan can begin a journey out of bondage in trying to establish an independent sense of being is by considering the work he undertakes as a step towards freedom. Thommi's desire for a home is what constitutes him to work for Bhaskar and transforms himself to a greater awareness (not to forget also by his interaction with Saroja and ultimately his experience of freedom when Bhaskar dies), and at times even claim pleasure (Thommi finds Patelar's scent desirable on Omana) for himself in his servitude.

### **3.8 Paradoxical Freedoms**

Assigning agency to the underprivileged presents a historical and ethical dilemma. Can the very structure that hails the Kudiyan into enslavement facilitate the likelihood of autonomy? Does the class structure that deems the Kudiyan homeless and endows the Patelar with home privileges actually work towards enabling a higher understanding of the self in *Vidheyan*? Such paradoxical circumstance is what makes the film so striking and apt for critical reasoning. Fol-

lowing the path of class oppression and cruelty along with a measurable dose of violence, we rarely ask if mutual recognition between the Patelar and Kudiyan is feasible in their desire for home.

In this section, I revisit three scenes to question the potential liberation made possible by the desire for home in the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship. Firstly, Bhaskar asks Thommi if Saroja would know that it was he (Bhaskar) who had killed her. The nature of Thommi's response is irrelevant in this case but that it is Bhaskar who seeks his opinion and standing on this issue that gives credibility to the moment. Secondly, Bhaskar is seen as being a caring individual when he ensures Omana has sufficient money to take care of herself. In the forest, different from what is usual in the Patelar-Kudiyan relationships, Bhaskar is shown as being affectionate to Thommi (and Omana) when he advises Thommi to take care of Omana. This moment is depicted as a scene that is non-normative and the audience is left to wonder why Bhaskar behaves in this way because regardless of the enemies Bhaskar has accumulated, it is clear that Thommi will continue to serve him. Thirdly, Saroja and Thommi display affection for each other and are seen as resisting Bhaskar to ensure each other's safety. The usually mute Thommi voices his protest at Bhaskar's suggestion to kill Saroja while Saroja is the one who ensures Thommi be taken to a hospital to get treated for the bullet injury inflicted by Bhaskar. The film is atypical because the characters mutually recognize each other in ways not approved by Kudiyan-Patelar relationships. Bhaskar's interaction with Thommi in the forest humanizes Bhaskar. Meanwhile, the care Bhaskar displays for Omana, and Thommi's affection for Saroja romanticizes the class terror of Patelar-Kudiyan relationships. This transgressive interaction is striking not only for its portrayal of the Hegelian analytics of dependence and interdependence between the upper-class and enslaved but also in its efforts to portray the effects of the desire for home by both Patelar and Ku-

diyan. In *Vidheyan*, two individuals who would typically resist against each other's disparities are seen as progressing towards a state where they accept one another's inadequacies and dependencies within a system of dehumanizing cruelty. As a result, a Patelar and Kudiyan meet with a mutual understanding within the restrictive plasma of class domination. In *Vidheyan*, as autonomous self-consciousnesses, both the privileged and the disadvantaged equally depend on the other to form themselves. Kudiyan's slavery to *be home* sustains Patelar's mastery; and the Patelar's substance of privileges ensured by his home territory depends on the Kudiyan's corroboration. *Vidheyan* challenges the nature of our conception of home and its relationship with power so as to unravel the potential emergence of Master-Slave dialectic in this context.

The scenes between Thommi and Bhaskar after Saroja's murder redefine the conventional Patelar and Kudiyan relationships. Bhaskar begins to have doubts after he murders Saroja and in an unusual moment we see Bhaskar seeking Thommi's judgment about his action. Bhaskar is forced to leave his home and the ensuring privileges it had provided him. Outside home ground, Bhaskar commands Thommi to look at him and "asked in a small voice, 'Tell me, look at my face and tell me. Can one recognize a person by just touching his hands?'" (Zacharia 236). Thommi's gaze would typically be seen as transgressive because of his subservient position within the system of class domination in Dakshina Kannada. But, what we see in this scene is an unusual case of Bhaskar allowing Thommi to forsake class distinction to forge a new relationship between them. This shot is deliberately set outside Bhaskar's home which obviously represents his learned sense of authority. In being forced to unlearn his privileges, Bhaskar relocates himself in the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship by allowing Thommi to express himself, albeit at his command. Thommi is visibly shaken up by the experience of looking outside the territory sanctioned by the local law as their relationship based on the gaze gets transformed from a puni-

tive one to that of mutual recognition. Bhaskar permits his own gaze to be confronted as he is willing to look beyond granting him the object position. Apparently, the idea of absolute mastery gets challenged when Bhaskar momentarily forsakes his power to seek Thommi's opinion.

Similarly, Bhaskar's relationship with Omana can also be read as transgressing the normative rules of the Patelar-Kudiyani relationship. Omana is presented as receiving more attention and favors from Bhaskar than his own wife, Saroja. Bhaskar visits her everyday and offers her gifts and instructs Thommi that he "must never again make Omana cry" (Zacharia 240). We never see Bhaskar being affectionate towards his own wife but he moves beyond the rules dictated of a Patelar by making an emotional investment into his relationship with Omana. As the plot progresses Omana too is seen reciprocating his affection for her made most obvious as he prepares to leave home. Likewise, Saroja goes beyond the calling of an upper class woman in the context when she overtly asserts her voice in matters related to Thommi and Omana. Such unusual relationships corrupt/resist class domination within the Patelar-Kudiyani association because Bhaskar no longer assigns Thommi and Omana into a definite death in life situation through their subservience but as an alternative disturbs the system with an avowal of their personhoods. Adoor succeeds in bringing to attention the film's role in depicting both Patelar and Kudiyani as subjects in struggle.

What Adoor has successfully presented in *Vidheyan* can be better understood by Mohanty's idea of "temporality of struggle" (74). In "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience" Martin and Mohanty explain the "temporality of struggle" as one

which disrupts and challenges the logics of linearity, development and progress  
[...and it] suggests an insistent, simultaneous, non-synchronous process characte-

rized by multiple locations, rather than a search for origins and endings which, as Adrienne Rich says, ‘seems a way of stopping. (74)

When Bhaskar moves beyond the typical Master-Slave roles assigned, he succeeds in resisting the continuous upkeep and progress of performing the role of the Patelar and finds himself acknowledging Thommi’s self consciousness when forsaking his home territory. Similarly, Thommi succeeds in experiencing freedom outside thralldom with the death of Bhaskar and the restrictions the position ensured as a settler there. The film portrays home as a contestatory site that obviously transforms the relationship between Patelar and Kudiyan.

Additionally, the desire for home seemingly makes anew the relations between Patelar and Kudiyan. Once Thommi is brought under Bhaskar’s control, Thommi is seen as the constant companion to Bhaskar. Bhaskar slowly begins to confide in Thommi of his plans, be it to break the rules of the land to enter the temple pond to fish or to kill Saroja. Thommi is granted favors by Bhaskar in the form of a job, gifts and general security. No one questions Thommi about his motives and as he claims in Zacharia’s text “people saw what was afoot as soon as they saw me” (215). Soon Thommi begins to welcome Bhaskar’s presence in his life and even finds pleasure in Bhaskar’s scent: “Early one morning, I was lying with Omana, hugging her close. She was still enveloped in the fragrance of Pattelar’s perfume. I breathed in that scent which I loved, deep into my nostrils and lay there, pressing Omana with great pleasure” (Zacharia 228). Thommi’s nonnormative desire for Bhaskar stems from his own insecurities from being a displaced other and he seems to have internalized a certain sense of comfort and security made possible by Bhaskar in the alien land. Similarly, Bhaskar must unlearn his home based privileges when he takes Thommi into his confidence. This confidence is reciprocated by Thommi when he saves Bhaskar from the Kochikaars who attempt to kill the Patelar. At times, Thommi’s de-

pendence on Bhaskar enables the former to occasions of self analysis. Even though Thommi is unable to carry the existential query through, it is his almost involuntary reaction to save Bhaskar that allows Thommi to seek himself:

I stood looking at Pattelar and thought, why did I save this man? A small push with these hands of mine would have been enough. I stared at Omana. Was this really Omana? Who was I? Who was this wounded man, sitting on my torn mat? In the shadows thrown by the wind-shaken flame of the kerosene lamp, it seemed to me that Pattelar and Omana were turning into shapeless, writhing forms. My head reeled. I fell down in a faint. (Zacharia 233)

The film presents mutual participation by Patelar and the Kudiyan in supporting the other. In the final scene, Bhaskar acknowledges Thommi's self-consciousness not only by addressing his name but also in being presented as a look alike of Thommi. Ganguly asserts that at the end of *Vidheyan*, "when Patelar, accompanied by Thommie, is on the run from the law, we see a significant change in their relationship. Master and slave now eat the same food, sitting next to each other. Patelar, wearing a *mundu*, even physically resembles Thommie" (16). Such a "leveling of identities" is made possible only because "shorn of his illicit power and privileges, [Patar] finally concedes the human self that he has always suppressed. In the final equation, both men, despite their very disparate social and economic backgrounds, reveal themselves as outsiders" (Ganguly 16). In effect, through their participation in moving outside the norms set for them by ideology, they meet each other in a world outside the class roles prescribed for them. While liminal, they meet in recognition of their shared displacements inside the alienating system of class domination. Liberation of self-consciousness is portrayed through each of their dislodgment from the "familiar, protected and safe boundaries" that Martin and Mohanty calls "being

home” so that their transgression supposedly introduce potentialities for agency (196). Thommi’s and Bhaskar’s resistance to given roles emerges in their engagement with *being home*, which is paradoxically engendered by the very site of their subjection as Patelar and Kudiyan with a system of class domination.

The Patelar-Kudiyan relationship depicted by Adoor can be identified as what Judith Butler, in *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* discusses as acts that are not “purely consumptive” but those that “become characterized by the ambiguity of an exchange in which two self-consciousness affirm their respective autonomy (independence) and alienation (otherness) (51). Bhaskar and Thommi meet in an act that is best described as homesickness, a desire for home, where they mutually sacrifice and recognize themselves. Thommi’s and Bhaskar’s meeting in the forest reveals their independence from the assigned class roles. In a way, both Thommi and Bhaskar resist the hegemonic construction of the rigid Patelar and Kudiyan positions when they recognize each other’s independence. The authority of this transgression offers the potential of realizing an unfettered self and one’s self consciousness.

The fresh bond between the transformed Patelar and Kudiyan gives Thommi a new sense of self as exemplified in the scenes within the forest. Thommi and Bhaskar share food from the same leaf and they work together to protect each other. While Bhaskar’s transformation depletes the illicit power his home conferred on him, Thommi garners power in recognizing that he is no longer a slave to Bhaskar made obvious in the final shot of the film. Clearly, Thommi is the winner in this battle as he gains a new self certainty that is exemplified by the act of throwing away Bhaskar’s gun—one of the primary apparatuses that helped Bhaskar spectacularize his power. The centrality of home in controlling the relationship between Patelar and Kudiyan is made apparent by a number of instances peppered throughout the film: Thommi’s desire to set

up home in Dakshina Kannada, Bhaskar's privileges granted by the virtue of Dakshina Kannada being home for him, Thommi's relationship with Saroja that provides him a glimpse of the inner workings of Bhaskar's home, and finally the mutual recognition taking place outside the physical location of Dakshina Kannada.

The final act of Thommi throwing Bhaskar's gun into the river is an independent performance that leads him to discover his own self consciousness. Thommi finally begins to exist for himself; his work of setting up a home in the encroached territory transforms him from being a servile to an independent being made overt by the final shot of the film—the libaratory running by Thommi accompanied by an upbeat musical background. Moreover, Thommi's interaction with Saroja helps him see the futility in searching for an ideal home as he recognizes Bhaskar as a similarly alienated Other. This recognition is a transformative experience of learning for the Kudiyan that helps him move from dislocation within the contexts of the politics of home. In *Vidheyan*, this mutual recognition makes the desire for home a liberating act for the Kudiyan. If migration is the process of losing one's root and thereby the self, then in *Vidheyan*, the self surrenders to the possibility of re-recognition in and through the desire of being home.

Thus, in conclusion, while *Vidheyan* problematizes the desire for home as intersecting with class in Dakshina Kannada by offering us an instance of transgression where the Patelar and Kudiyan succeed in resisting the roles assigned to them by ideology, it also allows us to see that the desire for home both ensures slavery and undermines it in a complicated formulation of power. The possibility of freedom portrayed in *Vidheyan* is paradoxical; it presents moving away from "familiar, safe, protected boundaries" as a way to a greater freedom from slavery as it simultaneously enmeshes the Kudiyan further into servitude (Martin 196). By way of Patelar-Kudiyan relationships, the film disrupts the Patelar's self-certainty and the Kudiyan's bondage so



as to assert how home opens up possibilities for destabilizing and resisting class structure as a total system of domination.

## CHAPTER 4

**Unfair Resistance: White Subversions in *The God of Small Things***

The White termites on their way to work.  
 The White ladybirds on their way home.  
 The White beetles burrowing away from the light.  
 The White grasshoppers with whitewood violins.  
 The sad white music.  
 All gone.

- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997)

Race produces unconscious effects, and as a hybrid structure located somewhere between essence and construct, it determines the destiny of human bodies. It is our ethical and political task to figure out how destiny comes to be inscribed as anatomy, when that anatomy does not exist as such.

- Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, "Deciphering Whiteness" (2000)

A white boat-spider floated up with the river in the boat, struggled briefly and drowned. Her white egg sac ruptured prematurely, and a hundred baby spiders stippled the smooth surface of the green water, before being swept out to sea. To Madagascar, to start a new phylum of Malayali Swimming Spiders.

- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997)

*The God of Small Things*, written by Arundhati Roy, tells the story of Ipe family through the eyes of Rahel, as she realizes that their lives have been controlled by and subjected to Kerala's color coded norms. *The God of Small Things* has inspired articles and books offering intense

discussions exploring questions of caste, untouchability, and loss in contemporary Kerala, along with discussions of how the text succeeds in *writing back to the empire* through linguistic appropriation and abrogation. *The God of Small Things* and Roy gained a cult-like following after she won the Booker Prize in October 1997. Roy is the second Indian novelist, after Salman Rushdie, to have bagged the prestigious prize. The Booker citation claimed that “the book keeps all the promises that it makes” (Krishnakumar 7). *Newsweek* described Roy’s novel as “a banquet for all the senses we bring to reading,” while the *Pioneer* found it a “sad story, told very hilariously, tenderly, very craftily” (Batra 7). According to the *Daily Telegraph*, “it is a rare book that so effectively cuts through the clothes of nationality, caste and religion to reveal the bare bones of humanity” (Batra 7). John Updike found the text to be “a novel of real ambition that must invent its own language and this one does” (Batra 7). However, the scale of the novel’s global success was not immediately reciprocated back home in Kerala, where it was condemned by left-wing critics and politicians for its scathing criticism against Kerala’s Marxist group. Also, religious groups in Kerala protested against the explicit portrayal of incest and “cross-caste relationships” in the novel<sup>45</sup> (Mullaney 70). While discussions have generally revolved dis/approvingly around Roy’s mapping of Kerala on to the larger national palimpsest through her twin protagonists, reviews in mainstream media as well as from academics rarely seemed to consider the increasingly radical disruptions of whiteness in the text. These disruptions include the deaths of all the major white characters (Kari Saipu and Sophie Mol) and the routine integration of authority within color lines. Remarkably, in Roy’s Kerala that gets often referred to as *God’s own Country* (symbolizing the utopian representation of a divinely sanctioned locale), whites are featured as being

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<sup>45</sup> A conservative lawyer, Sabu Thomas, even sued Roy for “obscenity” in the final chapter of the novel where the Brahmin and the Untouchable make love. The family of Kerala’s leading communist political guru, E.M. Namboodiripad, has also sued Roy for slander, claiming that the character Comrade Pillai caricatures Namboodiripad himself (Friedman 126).

unable to survive. The text begins with and revolves around the arrival of white Margaret and Sophie Mol to Kerala. One of the primary causes of the subsequent tragedy in the Ipe family is also depicted, as Rahel points out, as the result of the appearance of these white characters in Kerala: “it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenam” (*The God* 33). After her arrival, Sophie Mol quickly becomes the center of attention in all of Ayemenam. However, Sophie coded as the next generation-white figure also dies while the local Estha and Rahel survive; in fact, Rahel is even credited with the final word in the text “Tomorrow,” that anticipates a future in which she can thrive and overcome the tragedy of her household (*The God* 321). These disruptions are not accidental and one possible explanation lies in Roy’s reliance on critical race theory to dislocate the white hegemonic hold in Kerala, an interpretive lens not commonly used to study *The God of Small Things*. But before going any further, I will pause to provide a brief overview of whiteness studies and its conception as I understand and apply here while illustrating through few instances the contemporary obsession Kerala has with whiteness.

#### **4.1 Contextualizing Whiteness**

From a global perspective, in whatever way one looks at the concept of race, it is clearly an elastic category that cannot be precisely defined. Peter Childs and Patrick Williams in *Post-colonial Intersections* argue that during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the concept of race was a widely used method of distinguishing between people, and that during the same time period race “arose as a nation, inventing or imagining communities” (192). Other commen-

tators such as Benedict Anderson argue that racism has roots not in ideologies of nationhood but in those of class, “above all in claims to divinity among rulers and to blue or white blood and breeding among aristocracies” (149). David Goldberg and Ato Quayson find it useful to think of race as a discourse in its own right that “intersects with other discourses, such as class, nation, culture, and ethnicity, to different degrees at different phases of its use” (84). It is easy to recognize race as an elastic category that cannot be accurately defined and that it can be manipulated because of its lack of specificity. Hence the claim by Robert Knox, by the mid nineteenth century, in *The Race of Men* that “the physical and mental qualities of a race are naturally manifested in its civilization, for every race has its own form of civilization” (2). Defined in this way, it becomes increasingly easier to observe how race came to reinforce discourses of civilization and nature. Fryer notes that in 1900, Lord Roseberry had blatantly concluded that race is the only important factor, asking “What is Empire but the predominance of race?” (72). Philosophical explanations of the significance of race as a basis of exclusion can be found in the writings of Hume, Kant and Voltaire. Hume likens learning by Africans to that of parrots, Kant insists on the natural stupidity of black people, and Voltaire declares that whites, *Negroes* and albinos are totally different races (Goldberg 33).

Race was thought to define culture, nature, behavior and ability during the heyday of colonialism. In the nineteenth century, race was used to justify slavery, excuse commercial exploitation, and bolster arguments maintaining the need for patriarchal imperialism. James Mill declares in *The History of British India* that Indians “did not just lack but were incapable” of representative democracy and went on to recommend that the Indian government should submit to the benevolent direction of the British Parliament (24). It was therefore the duty, or burden, of the civilized race to educate and lead the savage. Through the discourse of race, colonialism became

not simply justifiable but morally important, *fixing* both blackness and whiteness as normative functions. Edward Said argues that being a white man became a “particular mode of being-in-the-world necessitating identifiable judgments, gestures, and thoughts” (226). Henry Louis Gates writes that popular usage of race had “inscribed differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, celebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth” (5). Although such simple delineation of racial categories along lines such as color and physiology must obviously non-neutralize whiteness, it is not until recently, or more specifically after the colonial overthrow of the British Empire, that whiteness has become a key area of theorization. Cheryl Herr describes one of the objectives of whiteness studies as “redirecting the academic gaze from racism to the way in which the center constructs the margins, to the way in which the center constructs itself” (122). Ross Chambers calls this blindness to constructions of whiteness “blank whiteness” (186). Even though one assumes that the term postcolonial refers to societies and states that were once colonized, its use for countries such as Ireland and Australia is always seen as a debatable issue rather than an obvious choice. Chambers ponders the elusiveness of Australian postcolonial whiteness and claims that:

the system encompassed two mythic (or incompatible) categories, blank whiteness and absolute blackness, each of which is held to lie outside the sphere of examinability. One is the unexamined “norm” and the other is unknowable “other” (or extreme of otherness), and between them lies the pluralized area of the multiple categories that come under scrutiny, constituting the knowable others of whiteness as the domain of the examinable. (193)

In the case of Australia, whiteness was “spectacularized” recently in the form of Australia Day (also known as Invasion Day) celebrations marking the making of a white nation where there had merely “before been another dark continent, a continent dark in the senses of an unknowable, pagan land inhabitable only by savage creatures” (Hill 4). According to Chambers the celebration functioned to obscure the constructedness of whiteness: by reifying white Australia, whiteness becomes walled off from events or assertions that might subject it to scrutiny. Richard Dyer in *White* explains how concentrating on the racialization of the margins has functioned to keep attention fixed on “others” as the problem needing explanation, and needing to come in line with the center (34). The center in this dynamic, constructs itself as the norm, the unproblematic point of reference by “looking with such passion and single-mindedness at non-dominant groups” (Dyer 44). This has had the effect of reproducing a sense of the oddness and exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human.

Although scholars such as Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Appiah focus on portraying whiteness as a “tacit norm,” little has been mentioned about the recurring performative nature of power by whiteness that once gave and continues to give it global supremacy (Appiah 35). George Orwell reveals the performative nature of whiteness in *Shooting an Elephant*, when he describes how a colonial *Sahib* is compelled to murder the elephant in question for no other reason than to make a show of white decisiveness and authority in front of the local population. Such a spectacle of white identity is necessary in the colonial setting, because as Satya Mohanty says, the white figure “must be seen in order to command respect and fear in the subject race” (312). By contrast, the local people are portrayed as not worthy of being sensational in any discourse as they are expected to renounce their heroism for the sake of their conceptual white

counterparts. Such a parade of whiteness by the colonizer during India's imperial rule contextualized whiteness as a referent that inspires human progress. It is remarkable that six decades after the end of colonial hegemony, whiteness in the form of white cultural and ideological apparatuses, such as a national language, religion, education system and government infrastructure, repeat altered power performances within the Indian subcontinent, and more specifically, as exemplified by *The God of Small Things*, within the state of Kerala.

Gayatri Spivak, while commenting on the nature of globalization, also refers to the dynamics of "spectacularization" of whiteness (Hill 4). Spivak claims that what "shows" may not reveal anything of importance, from "the agent's point of view," although "the gaze directed her way nonetheless interprets only those markers it is able to see" (86). Of course, this gaze of the Other will be interpreted through ideological filters pertaining to specific cultural and temporal milieu. In an interview with Angela Ingram, Spivak states the relevance of whiteness in context of location. Spivak claims that in Bengal, her class/ caste as a Brahmin *shows* and she is deferred to on that basis; in Britain her class is less obvious; and in the United States she is simply a brownwoman with out any privileges of an upper caste member because her caste doesn't *show*. Even within India, caste *shows* differently in different parts of the country. For example, a person of the Kshatriya caste in Bihar may not receive the same privileges in Kerala. Spivak is confident that in the United States, outside the academy, she would be forgiven for any views because "they would be irrelevant in the white world of men" (89). Spivak asserts the function of the "spectacle of whiteness" in the interview with Angela Ingram as she claims that "it really depends on what one does with being white which is much more interesting; because being white you have to do more if you really want to be politically correct" (85). Spivak distinguishes whiteness from other politically unstable positions, such as homosexuality, in her conversation



with Ingram when she states that “whereas I can have an alibi, although born a Brahmin, upper class, senior academic in the United States, highly commodified distinguished professor [...] I still have an alibi. My skin. And you don’t” (86). When Ingram responded with a claim that being a lesbian could be an alibi for her, Spivak amusingly suggested that since homosexuality doesn’t *show* naturally, Ingram ought to wear a T-shirt announcing her sexuality, which in turn would move her to another pigeonhole altogether! But for our purpose, what Roy has accomplished through her text, as we shall see in the next few pages, is to also explore the color coded relationships—its functions in Kerala, its dominance within social exchanges and the resistance it meets (and needs) by various subjectivities within and outside Kerala. But let me first pause to illustrate the manner in which whiteness functions as a hegemonic tool specifically in the cultural context of Kerala so as to decipher Roy’s use of whiteness as a tool of oppression.

## **4.2 Unfair Kerala**

The concept of whiteness as a cultural hegemon interestingly intersects with interrogations of resistance within the social and cultural milieu of Kerala. Melissa Steyn describes whiteness as “an ideologically supported social positionality that is accrued to people of European descent as a consequence of the economic and political advantage gained during and subsequent to European colonial expansion” (121). Steyn is of the opinion that the privileged position was originally facilitated by the construction of race, of the phenotypes, which acted as a marker of the entitlement to this privileged position. In the Kerala setting then, whiteness can be viewed

as a shared space in which the psychological, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of this privileged positionality are normalized as a referent. One of the reasons for whiteness to remain as a part of the postcolonial Kerala is that the few white settlers who refused to leave colonized countries, such as India upon its independence sustained the white values of the colonial regime. The privilege of being white did not essentially or irrevocably come with the kind of concessions that it now enjoys in Kerala, but as with other colonial cases, it has been at the expense of those who are not white, or white enough.

Whiteness is spectacularized, played out aloud, encoded and articulated, in every walk of life in contemporary Kerala. It's no secret that Kerala's touchstone for its standards of beauty is largely governed by whiteness. Upper caste *Namboothiries* and *Nairs* in Kerala ally themselves to Europeans by claiming an Aryan heritage because of their comparatively fairer skin tones. Conspicuously, children among so called Other Backward Castes (OBC) and Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (SC ST) are given names such as *Karutha*, which translates from Malayalam as Black. Before going on to look at specific cases of whiteness and its hegemonic hold over Kerala, I should add the proviso that by focusing on the general reception and response to whiteness in Kerala, I am not suggesting that all men and women from Kerala, or for that matter from India, are seeking whiteness without resistance. I would then be operating within a deterministic model of subjectivity. Neither am I making assumptions that they all respond to whiteness in the same way. In fact, later on in this chapter, we will find an instance of resistance to such color identification in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

In an interview with David Barsamain, Roy discusses how her relatives in Kerala segregated her on the basis of her color: "growing up in Kerala was a nightmare for me because I was the worst thing a girl could be: thin, black, and clever. No looks, no dowry, no good" (*The Shape*

33). Exaggerated and bounded differences between the white referent and its other shades continue to both solidify and amplify essentialized markers of difference in Kerala. Contemporary Kerala's unfair obsession with whiteness is best exemplified by the dizzying assortment of fairness products that adorn its supermarket shelves and the equally alarming portrayal of whiteness as the ideal stain in the media. The processes entailed in the color coding of bodies takes the desire to be to be white to fantastic levels among subjects in Kerala. Markedly, the bodies of both men and women are subjected to this process. In fact, according to a research conducted by the Media Research Users Council (MRUC), sixty eight per cent of users of fairness cream in India are men (Marur). Mainstream movie superstars, such as Sharukh Khan, endorse skin-lightening creams such as *Fair and Handsome* for men. Even remote villages in Kerala spot dozens of *Beauty Parlors* that promise to make skin fairer with bleaching treatments. The beauty business in Kerala is thriving and even well educated members of the Kerala society get seduced into this scam, especially when popular media interpellates them to conform to having a *Fair n Lovely Facial* at the local beauty saloon! Sociologist Shiv Visvanathan says that "by projecting fairness as a quality that all ethnic groups want, we evade the charge of being racist. Now companies have gone a step further by disassociating fairness from the female gender. It is the first unisex colour" (Marur). Malayalee men and women subject themselves to harsh beauty treatments and bleaching creams in the quest for attaining whiteness. Kerala's cosmetic market continues to be saturated by potions packaged to *improve* one's complexion. Products that flood the market such as *Ponds Flawless White Visible Lightening Daily Cream*, *Olay UV Whitening Crème*, *Fair and Lovely Fairness Crème* all point to the desire of the majority to equate beauty to being white. For example, a television commercial that celebrates a fairness crème clearly privileges white skin by presenting a young woman getting rejected at a job interview. In the same commercial,

a few frames later the same young woman uses the given whiteness cream which results in her skin becoming “three shades lighter on the ‘Fairness Meter’” in just four weeks, which in turn lands her the same job based on her *new* credentials (Marur). Such a capitalistic whiteness—capitalism based on the production and consumption of white hegemony and the marketing of packaged versions of whiteness—is at the cutting edge of contemporary Kerala’s economic market. The above discussion may pass as being trivial but I hope it succeeds in aptly illustrating and depicting the living reality that my project wishes to examine through Roy’s text.

Within the dynamics involved in the interaction between white and non-white, it is important to note that the differences between the white privileged signifier and its other are accentuated in every walk of life in Kerala. In *The God of Small Things*, even Kochu Maria, the Ipe family servant internalizes whiteness to have a superior aesthetic value as made explicit when she admires the white Sophie Mol. Kochu Maria *naturally* assumes that the white Sophie Mol will be a much more magnanimous employer than the local Rahel. When Rahel claims that she wishes to live in Africa, Kochu Maria responds by claiming that “Africa is full of black ugly people and mosquitoes” (*The God* 175). Such a production of difference, in this case made obvious by an acknowledgement of Sophie Mol’s superiority in comparison to anyone from Africa, is internalized by almost all the members of Kerala society (irrespective of class, caste, gender as exemplified by Kochu Maria here), validates that whiteness relies upon difference for its supremacy.

Typically, Kerala’s people are shades darker than their north Indian counterparts. This often gets the South Indian Malayalee stereotyped as the *Kaloo* (Black, used derogatorily) in popular culture<sup>46</sup>. Kerala’s obsession with whiteness is also flaunted in major newspapers that

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<sup>46</sup> *Kaloo* in Hindi (कालू) can roughly be translated as Black in English

carry matrimonial advertisements articulating specific signifiers of whiteness. In these matrimonial advertisements, aspiring brides and grooms proclaim their skin color that range anywhere from *extremely fair* to a *wheatish* complexion in hopes of finding a suitable spouse. Besides being a source of amusement (e.g.: fair, slim, homely, 32, never been married before, PhD in sociology girl, looking for suitable alliance from a never been married before male!), these matrimonial advertisements that usually appear in the local newspapers every Sunday, with its conspicuous reference to fairness, actually lends an unfair currency in legitimizing whiteness as the normalized referent by establishing it as the universal object of desire. Such a desire, as played out in popular media in contemporary Kerala, is made visible by Roy in *The God of Small Things* as she discusses the discrepancies in Ipe family's favorable reaction towards the marriage of Chacko to white Margaret, whom he meets at Oxford, as opposed to Ammu's marriage to the non-white Bengali Baba. After divorce and fathering his daughter, Chacko is welcomed back to Kerala, given a factory to run, and also provided with a secret passage to the house for his hidden sex life with lower caste/class women. Noticeably, unlike Chacko, his sister Ammu is kept at home as a young girl. Ammu upon seeing that marriage was her only escape runs away to marry a flunky. In time, Ammu returns home after a divorce and is "walled up in a form of modern sati" (Friedman 120). While Chacko is privileged for his relationship with things white (Oxford, Margaret, Sophie), Ammu gets expelled from the family circle because of her love affair with the untouchable, "dark as a slab of chocolate" Velutha (*The God* 205). The failure to interpret *The God of Small Things* within the framework of whiteness ideology speaks not just to what Tani Diance Sanchez terms as "colorblindedness" but also to an inherently deep cultural disinterest in academically addressing racial issues in Kerala<sup>47</sup>. However, a reading of *The God of Small*

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<sup>47</sup> Sanchez defines the nature of colorblindedness as "promoting ideologies attributing economic

*Things* through the interpretive lens of white hegemony and patriarchy yields logical, illuminating, and historically situated results. These results address Roy's resistance to whiteness and her success in making white oppressive power play visible within the local space of Kerala. Roy's novel, in this light, is shown to challenge whiteness and to suggest possible routes into social change, human relationships and new understandings of what it means to resist that which does not overtly appear to be oppressive.

#### 4.3 Subversions of White Normalcy in *The God of Small Things*

*The God of Small Things* is also concerned with challenging white *normalcy*, the workings of hegemony and ideological domination. Roy sets her novel in Ayemenam, near Kottayam in Kerala as she reveals multiple realities by telescoping past and the present in a realistic portrayal of the life at Ipe home in the 1960s through the eyes of Rahel, Estha's twin sister. Roy claims that in *The God of Small Things* that "her fiction is an inextricable mix of experience and imagination," and it is in Kerala that she developed her literary and intellectual abilities unconstrained by the rules of formal education (Batra 13). The text begins with the arrival of Margaret and Sophie to Ayemenam from England and how by being white, they *naturally* become endearing figures among the majority of the Ipe family members. Nevertheless, through Rahel's narrative, the text very quickly narrows in on Sophie and Margaret's out-of-placeless in Kerala and questions seemingly unrelated core assumptions. For example, Rahel lays open Margaret's suit-

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and social inequality to everything except white racism or a colonialist past" (103)

case from England to us and describes how it is packed with a variety of medications, “quinine, aspirin, broad spectrum of antibiotics,” that will not, ironically, help her child survive on her trip to Kerala (*The God* 252). Rahel tells Velutha that Sophie Mol is so “delicate that if she gets dirty she’ll die” (*The God* 200). Through her white characters, Roy challenges the Ipe family’s, and by extension, our assumptions about the world and what we consider normal.

Rahel, who has returned to Ayemenam after twenty three years of agony that resulted in the loss of her mother and its subsequent effects on her personal life, narrates the tale of the *small things* to us. The *small things* that Rahel describe are really things that are generally missed out, glossed over by history and its various representations. The “Cost of Living,” significantly the title of the text’s last chapter, as Rahel finds out is that small things are often crushed by the larger hegemonic machinery operated in the name of societal norms. Roy’s success, however, rests in making visible the operations of power that comingles the historical and geopolitical, which gives precedence to *big things*. In the text, Rahel does not find the answers through conforming to what society requires her to do, i.e. continue a life of patriarchal subservience in Kerala. Instead Rahel exerts her independence by moving away from the oppressive environment and moreover, it is never made clear to us if she finds any answers at all. All we know for certain is that she is able to narrate the story to us, that she has reclaimed her muted twin, signifying her voice. Roy’s concern does not seem to be in providing solutions or even moralizing but to make visible the gods of domination that rule over Kerala’s socio-political and cultural scene.

What Roy’s protagonist’s narrative succeeds in exposing is the *Heart of Whiteness* of Kerala. In the initial pages of the text, Rahel connotes that there is something hideous that remains masked in all of Kerala’s utopic representations—in its schools (that still cling to colonial British

influences made visible by characters such as Comrade Pillai's children who comically recite verses from Shakespeare), its churches (where Baby went religiously to seduce the Irish priest, Father Mulligan), and even its police (who ends up torturing innocent Velutha). Tying in with Kerala's continuous fascination with colonial ideology and Margaret and Sophie's out-of-placeness is the figure of Kari Saipu<sup>48</sup>. That Kari Saipu's whiteness is the symbol of his alienation, rather than the site of his privilege or power is apparent throughout the novel. Kari Saipu, "the black sahib," the English man "gone native," described as "Ayemenem's own Kurtz" is represented as lacking in presence, a ghostly colonial vestige, death like owner of the legendary history house at Ayemenem (*The God* 51). Significantly, Kari Saipu who assimilated so well to the Kerala culture that he even "spoke Malayalam" did not survive in Kerala; rather he ends up "shooting himself through the head" (*The God* 51). This inability of her white characters to survive in Kerala brings to light one of the most salient aspects of Roy's critiques in how *The God of Small Things* refutes the *naturalness* of racialized constructions by exposing the relationship between commonly accepted stereotypes and exploitation.

Colonial ideology is patently color-conscious. In an article entitled "Globalization of Dissent" Roy refers to the ways in which racism plays its part in the construction of imperial powers. Roy validates the continuing role of white hegemony in once colonized counties:

Racism plays the same part today as it did in colonial times. There isn't any difference. I mean, the only people who are going to argue for the good side of imperialism are white people, people who were once masters, or Uncle Toms. I don't think you're going to find that argument being made by people in India, or people in South Africa, people in former colonies. The only ones who want colonialism back in its

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<sup>48</sup> *Kari* in Malayalam refers to Black and *Saipu* is a reduction of Shaib.



new avatar of neoliberalism are the former white masters and their old cohorts—the ‘native elites’—their point men then and now. (*The Shape* 127)

Texts on colonial Kerala, for instance T. Damodaran’s *Kala Pani*, depict how the central local characters lose their childish innocence and, through a number of terrifying experiences, become forcibly aware of colonialism, whiteness and its horrifying effects. Their predicament corresponds to Roy’s white characters’ (Kari Saipu, Sophie, Margaret) move into Kerala and their understanding of how they, by virtue of mental constructs, support and keep alive the conditions for white privileging. Whereas in colonial narratives the condition of local people is gruesomely brutal, both physically and mentally, what is precarious in Roy’s depiction of white characters existence in Kerala is the conceptual world they occupy (both within themselves as well as in the minds of Kerala’s population), their idea of who they are and the rules of existence. The ways in which white discourse, mainly through the façade of the colonial past, is promoted in the setting of *The God of Small Things* through a variety of ideological state apparatuses such as the church, police, the school and so forth, is revealed to be compromised and deceptive. Roy constructs her text in such a way that it becomes a reference to Louis Althusser’s theory that individuals live in ideologies, in distorted mental worlds that work to situate and name individuals as particular types of subjects. This misrecognition is part of a representation that disguises our “real condition of existence,” as Roy’s characters, both her white and local, discover (Abraham 135). In an interview with Abraham, Roy argues that “the book is not really about what happened, but about how what happened affected the people it happened to and about their real conditions” (Abraham 90).

Like the non-white Ipe family members, Roy’s white characters too face the daunting task of trying to understand and exist outside, within, and around the colonial system that they

now experientially know is faulty. For example, Margaret's visit to Kerala sets up some of the racial assumptions that she uses comparatively in her assessment of the local Malayalee population. Roy tells us that Margaret's father "disliked Indians, and that he thought them as sly, dishonest people" (*The God* 228). Margaret's travel to India and the *preparations* she takes for the trip as "you may never know," all explore the anxiety of Margaret's relationship with India and the stereotypes associated with it (*The God* 252). Yet, Margaret, though divorced from Chacko, cannot fully sever her ties to India especially because of their child, Sophie. The answer for the Ipe family survival, primarily suggested through Rahel, doesn't lie in the imported colonial white culture in which they have been reared. Instead, Roy suggests recognizing how whiteness had succeeded in masking local subject formations and culture as the route to liberation. The moments in the text where Ammu, reared in patriarchal and whiteness ideology, recognizes Velutha as representing the history and culture of local Kerala metaphorically functions to be only instance of happiness for her:

As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. He moved so easily through it. As she watched him she understood the quality of his beauty. (*The God* 317)

The suggestive representation of Velutha as being quintessentially local and the resulting satisfaction it gives Ammu as she embraces him signals Roy's suggestion to explore Othered and local ideologies, ones that do not enforce white ideals. As a member of Pappachi's household Ammu is tied to systems and white ideology but her choice to recognize Velutha is celebrated by the author. Roy also suggests the performative nature of whiteness allegorically through the local art form of Kathakali. Philip Zarilli describes that in Kathakali, the "actor-dancers create

their roles by using a repertory of dance steps, choreographed patterns of stage movement, and an intricate and complex language of hand gestures for literary speaking their dialogue with their hands as well as using face and eye movement to express internal states” (58). Roy argues that for the Kathakali dancer in “painted mask and swirling skirts the body is his soul” which is “planed and polished, pared down, harnessed wholly to the task of storytelling” (*The God* 230). Just as the characters of Kathakali are identifiable to the viewers by their color *codified make-up*, in drawing upon the structure of Kathakali in the design of her novel, and by constantly referencing it in her text, Roy throws light on the performative nature of whiteness in this context as she challenges and subverts bounded racial identities and the set rules of authority that accompanies them.

No doubt, the presence and presentation of white characters in *Ayemenam* calls to question the general perception of equity apropos the historical context in which Kerala functions in this text. By naming the untouchable *Paravan* white (Velutha), Roy succeeds in being subversive not only in giving visibility to whiteness but also in providing agency to this subaltern group. Kathakali is native to Kerala and is a highly stylized dance-drama usually based on the Mahabharata, Ramayana and *puranas*<sup>49</sup>. The most interesting aspect of the Kathakali performance is that the local spectators are already familiar with the story that they go to watch. Roy appropriates this technique of retelling a familiar story of love and loss to construct her text and, as Mullaney claims, “this sense of being mesmerized by the performances of stories one already knows becomes the basis for the construction of *The God of Small Things*” (56). Therefore at a cursory glance, Roy’s story might appear to be a retelling of love and loss but at a closer exami-

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<sup>49</sup> Kathakali, literally translated to mean story-play, enacts epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana along with narratives of cosmic history based on Hinduism called puranas.

nation, it becomes evident that Roy while using familiar tropes actually succeeds in gaining our attention to the ways in which white characters lack the ability to survive in Kerala.

The text does not deny white creativity or insights; the fascination that the twins have for *The Jungle Book*, their inherited attachment to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, their fascination with *The Sound of Music*, and their ability to use and love the English language allude to this. Nevertheless, it is within and through Rahel's narrative, structured like the ancient art form of Kathakali that we get a glimpse of white productivity, which in turn reflects the centrality of localizing resistance for the powerless and raises the possibility of local ideology as a historical, tangible catalyst for acquiring agency. While *The God of Small Things* begin with the celebrations and performances associated with the arrival of Margaret and Sophie, by the end of the text Rahel's voice is the only remaining one in Ayemenam that is capable of creativity. This is unmistakably Roy's suggestion that Rahel can be seen as a model that subverts and resists whiteness, and that social reform and agency, of speaking out, may also begin with nonwhite Othered subjects, not with whites as inspirational saviors as depicted in countless colonial texts.

Kerala society's hegemonic colorblind world synchronizes with the deceptive world created by Pappachi for the Ipe family. Pappachi, Reverend John Ipe—Rahel's grandfather, like Chacko after him, serves white hegemonic English idealness in Kerala. Oxford educated, Pappachi was as Ammu tells us, "an incurable British CCP, which was short for *chhi-chhi poach* [which] in Hindi meant shit-wiper" (*The God* 50). Pappachi "was charming and urbane with visitors, and stopped just short of fawning on them if they happened to be white" (*The God* 171). Pappachi even refused to believe his daughter when Ammu confesses the reason for her divorce being the attempted rape of Mr. Hollick, her husband's English boss who "suggested that Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be 'looked after'" (*The God* 41). Rahel tells us that Pappachi's refusal

to accept his daughter's testimony is "not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn't believe that an Englishman, *any* Englishman, would covet another man's wife" (*The God* 42). Roy explains, through Chacko, that such a foreknowledge of whiteness for Pappachi is a result of Anglophilia:

Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was 'Anglophile.' He made Rahel and Estha look up *Anglophile* in the *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*. It said: person well disposed to the English. Then Estha and Rahel had to look up dispose. It said: (1) place suitably in particular order (2) bring mind into certain state, (3) do what one will with, get off one's hands, stow away, demolish, finish, settle, consume (food), kill, sell. (*The God* 51)

Chacko explains to the twins that Pappachi's particular brand of "Anglophilia" meant that Pappachi's "mind had been brought into a state which made him like the English" (*The God* 51). The syntax of the phrase *had been brought* underscores the conditioning effect of white hegemonic grasp over Pappachi and over many other Macaulay's minutemen like him that served British Raj. In fact, India is still unable to shake herself off from such a colonial hangover. Indeed Macaulay could not have found a more dedicated disciple than India's current Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, who thanked "British imperialism for everything India is today"—ironically, at the top of his list was all the machinery of repression put in place by a colonial regime—the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the police, Rule of Law (*The Shape* 176). Clearly, Pappachi is a victim of the colonial project that ensured the production and proliferation of white hegemonic discourse throughout the Empire. By discourse, I refer to the structure of thinking that dominates how the British white power imagine colonial brown subjects and their relations with them. One such structure is the stereotype and Roy's depiction of Pappachi as the stereotypical Macaulay's

minutemen with the designation of the “Imperial Entomologist,” wearing a “three piece suits and the gold pocket watch” everyday in the sultry heat of Ayemenem work well to mock and establish the ridiculousness of Pappachi’s desire to mimic/conform to the hegemonic discourse of white law (*The God* 45). Pappachi’s dress and behavior evokes the theme of artifice in the proliferation of the white law.

The motif of distorted images, depicted through the near blind Mammachi, comments on our actual state of being and the façades of misrepresentation. Inconsistencies surface in the ways in which Mammachi deals with her son, Chacko. Mammachi is portrayed as the “blind mother widow with a violin,” for whom “inside her head it was like a room with dark drapes drawn across a bright day (*The God* 159). Pappachi’s mistreatment of Mammachi and her failed marriage did not provide her with a mental vision to understand and accept Margaret as Chacko’s wife but she “hated Margaret exactly for being Chacko’s wife” (*The God* 160). Yet, Mammachi tells Margaret on her arrival that she is “sorry that [she] can’t see” Margaret as she is almost blind (*The God* 165). This courtesy is a privilege that Margaret receives from Mammachi, unlike Chacko’s other women, simply because she is white. While Mammachi was known to usually pay off Chacko’s women, she realizes that Margaret, being white, was “a different kettle of fish altogether” (*The God* 161). Also, Mammachi is a victim of patriarchy and a perpetrator of its ideals. Ammu and Chacko, though born to Mammachi, live out different destinies. Chacko is sent to Oxford, England for his education that produces a brief marriage with the British-born Margaret. Chacko is continuously supported by Mammachi to fulfill his “Man’s Needs,” at the risk of ruining the family name while Ammu is punished for marrying a man she loved at that time. Rahel tells us that Mammachi’s vision was distorted after a cornea transplant following which she could “only see light and shadow” (*The God* 165). Mammachi’s distorted

vision also corresponds to her uneven display of affection for her grandchildren wherein she is seen to clearly privilege her white grandchild Sophie over Rahel and Estha. Roy deliberately disfigures Mammachi's vision as Mammachi is never able to internalize the reality of her existence: that the difference she perceives between Sophie and her other grandchildren, and the *civility* she displays to Margaret whom she really hates, is based on her biased internalization of white hegemonic codifications. The racial parallels are obvious: white supremacy depends upon maintaining illusions that blinded subjects accept without resistance.

*The God of Small Things* seems to understand the dislocation its readers will face when discovering the depths of socially constructed illusions and the vitality of radically challenging Othered epistemologies and ontologies. Subjects who begin to understand that racial perceptions are a part of a knowledge system based on human exploitation are like Rahel when she begins to discover the truth about the space she occupies in Kerala society. Like Rahel, the readers can no longer trust given assumptions about what is presented as norm. To gain this knowledge, Rahel's ideological sense of self must be disrupted, she should move to critiquing and writing about it, much like anyone who questions rather than accepts racial platitude about meritocracy and culture. Through Rahel, Roy urges her readers to begin a quest to determine their actual locations and identities<sup>50</sup>. After the death of Sophie Mol, at first, Rahel finds it difficult to accept that her life assumptions (imparted by the Ipe family's history of the privileging of whiteness) are false and proceeds to move away from Ayemenam to get married to a white American. Rahel simply "drifts into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge" (*The God* 19). Rahel's decision is comparable to anyone proselytized by white ideology. However, soon Rahel's eyes begin to deceive her unhappiness because Larry tells her that

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<sup>50</sup> Giroux Henry discusses how narratives can act as a source of education in "The Discourse of Racial Identity: Towards a Pedagogy and Politics of Whiteness"

“they behaved as though they belonged to someone else,” and tapered to fluctuate between “indifference and despair” (*The God* 20). Larry, her husband, was “exasperated because he didn’t know what that look meant” (*The God* 20). Larry’s thought processes—his obsession to decipher what Rahel’s looks meant and his conclusive verdict of attributing it to being “a sort of despair from the country that Rahel came from”—reveal the goals of cultural discourses and the acceptance of unspeakable/unknowable existences of subjects (*The God* 20). For Rahel tells us that what Larry saw “was not despair at all but an enforced optimism” (*The God* 20). This misrecognition/misrepresentation illustrates the accepted *naturalness* of racialized constructions. After the divorce, Rahel worked for a few years in New York before realizing that she must return to Ayemenam to reclaim and refashion Estha, her muted twin. What Larry misreads as despair is in actuality Rahel’s optimism to return to Kerala. Rahel’s physical return from the white west facilitates her emotional and psychological revisitations not only of her family history but it also enables her to reopen Kerala’s colonial and postcolonial histories to new scrutiny.

*The God of Small Things* also parallels academia’s critical goals of revealing the relationship between cultural discourses and the acceptance of unspeakable rules/laws. Henry Louis Gates notes that such texts serve to “indict both those who enslave and the metaphysical system drawn upon to justify their enslavement” (ix). Contemporary Kerala’s obsession with whiteness and lives subjected to violence and social alienation based on color hegemony gets visibility in *The God of Small Things* as the result of the domination by *big things*. Though it never is made explicit as to what exactly Roy refers to as *big things*, it is easy to infer that these *big things* are what make up the social structure of Kerala, which include its *matrices of domination*. Patricia Hill Collins defines “matrices of domination” as an “extensive system of control” that is “historically specific, overarching social organizations where oppositions originate, develop, and are



contained” (251). Ideological apparatuses like schools and churches in Kerala are allegorical of these structures and are characterized by their complete indifference to the needs of local population. They represent both hegemony and ideologies of racism, castism, classism, genderism, and exploitation born in colonialism. As enforcers and guardians of white hegemony, these apparatuses proliferated with British colonialism in Kerala and continue to exercise its power even after Independence. Oppression based on gender, caste and class together with nexus formed between the local police and politicians like Comrade Pillai, while the church makes distinction between the original Syrian Christians and the untouchables converted to Christianity all find its place in Roy’s text. Although these ideologies are deadly, the text celebrates subjects who choose to collide with it, subjects who are fully aware of its nature and purpose. For example, the text contrasts the Ipe patriarch’s subservience to white ideals with that of his daughter Ammu, who challenges the family norm through her resistance. In Ammu, Pappachi’s wife-beating, white-fawning “cold, calculating cruelty” provokes an acute consciousness of injustice and rebellion (*The God* 172). Ammu’s subversive affair with a man named white (Velutha), who in actuality was “as dark as a slab of chocolate,” and their subsequent tragic ends represent the reality that genuine social change also requires a conceptual conversion, that mere appropriation of names will not blindfold the *big things*—the love laws, that dictate “who should be loved and how much (*The God* 205). Particularly, the text resists the rules set by Pappachi’s colonial obsequiousness that determine social arrangements within the local context of Kerala. Moreover, Velutha’s association with the Marxist party and its ensuring hypocrisy made evident through Comrade Pillai’s betrayal of one of its valuable card carrying members all go to imply the façade under which real Kerala operates. Pillai uses Marxism for personal gains rather than for the workers belonging to his party. Roy’s disgust with party politics is barely concealed in her portrayal of

Comrade Pillai, Chacko's deceptive stances and the freedom with which the police are allowed to unleash barbarism on the underprivileged. Comrade Pillai is a caricature of the local politician, who like the white colonial master, is an epitome of all the unpleasant, deceptive aspects of a degenerate political tradition which is nothing more than a means of self promotion, maintaining one's hold over the citadel of local power by playing one against the other. The cruelest irony is that Pillai belongs to a party that represents workers interests and exists on the pledge to protect its members from all kind of socio-economic exploitation. Pillai's leadership, as that of many others, rests only on slogan raising and noisy marches challenging society's inequalities. Pillai wins his battle with Paradise Pickles without any struggle; he wins it using the imperial strategy of dividing and conquering. Both Pillai and Pappachi are part of the *big* Ideological machinery that continues to serve white hegemony in Kerala. *The God of Small Things* seems to suggest that both blindness and collusion are ingredients needed to maintain fictions of white supremacy, as they are double-edged swords precluding change of the larger hegemonic systems that victimize us all.

#### **4.4 Countering Stereotypes: Validating Local Worldviews and Indian english in *The God of Small Things***

Unlike the historically privileged Chacko and his father Reverend Ipe, who could chose to understand or deny the disingenuousness of white oppression, many others have not had the option of ignoring Kerala society's ideological determinants. The most positive consequence of this awareness is the development of oppositional, subjugated knowledge. Such cultural and intellectual standpoints are alluded to in *The God of Small Things* through the depiction of Velutha,

who by virtue of being an untouchable is the first *real native born* citizen of the land<sup>51</sup>. The creative and gentle Velutha, portrayed as being without a mother and denounced by his own father Vallya Pappan, is comparable to the character of *Karṇa* in Mahabharata, appropriately featured by Roy as the particular Kathakali performance that Rahel and Estha witness in the text. Both *Karṇa* and Velutha are freedom fighters and must be disrupted from their station in order for them to discover their true identity. They both have their lives rooted outside the normative boundaries followed by other characters. Velutha must fight a double edged sword—that of local oppression which dismisses him in the name of caste along with the colonial effects of white laws internalized by the likes of Pappachi.

Indeed, one of the main reasons for seeing Velutha as a pivotal character in subverting whiteness and the ensuing political debate about who really counts in Kerala is the way in which Roy deploys the concept of *small things* and the whole ideological significations that resonate with it in *The God of Small Things*. The naming of Velutha, the untouchable outcaste paravan, as white is really Roy's way of providing agency to the "small voices of history" as it clearly enables her to make visible the strangeness/unnaturalness of Kerala's fascination with whiteness (Guha 3). For in Velutha, we find a representative of the subaltern untouchable caste (Paravans) being associated, through the trope of naming, with the most powerful signifier—that of whiteness, in this world of color-coded power relations. Velutha, unlike any other character in the text, has an identity based on a different expanded knowledge, experiences and information. Velutha is the most industrious, talented and creative character in *The God of Small Things* and, in a major disruption of social norms, Ammu finds herself being attracted to the outcaste. Roy explains that as Ammu "watched him [Velutha] she understood the quality of his beauty. How his

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<sup>51</sup> Many sociological theories allude to the Dalit untouchable group as the original people of Kerala and others as immigrants who later established the Varna/caste system.

labour had shaped him...Had left its stamp on him. Had given him his strength, his supple grace” (*The God* 316). As a young boy, Velutha would come with his father, Vallya Pappan to the back entrance of the Ayemenam House as outcastes were not allowed into the house. As outcasts, they had to follow strict rules:

Mammachi remembers a time when Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan’s footprint. They were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed... It was a little like having to sweep away your footprints with a broom. Or worse, not being allowed to leave any footprints at all. (*The God* 124)

Velutha was an unusual, “unsafe” paravan (*The God* 24). Velutha’s life is rooted in an organic nonwhite reality as he makes possible, as Saldivar says, a “qualitative cognitive reorientation through his beauty and his labor” for Ammu and her children (Needham 361). Velutha (since the age of eleven), Roy emphasizes could make intricate toys, “tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts” (*The God* 71). He would bring them for Ammu, holding them on his palm (as he had been taught) so she wouldn’t have to touch him to take them (*The God* 72). Apart from his graceful carpentry and toy-making skills, Velutha “mended radios, clocks, water pumps. He looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house” (*The God* 72). Years later, Velutha’s creative engineering skills are used at Ammu’s family’s business where he reassembled “bottle-sealing machines” and maintained “new cannery machines” and automatic fruit and

vegetable slicers (*The God* 72). Velutha, the untouchable Paravan, is the god of small things (Needham 391). In his creative existence, Velutha reveals an enormous ability to create culture and society for everyone around him. He has a vast imaginative and cognitive life of experiences that the *coloniality of power* in Kerala has denied him as a Paravan<sup>52</sup>.

A further sign that *The God of Small Things* values subjugated knowledge surfaces in the novel's employment of Indian english. Although Rahel, the narrator of the text, is proficient in Standard English, it's precisely the subversion of this linguistic norm that disrupts the assumption of aesthetic creativity as uniquely white. Unlike the contrived nature of the language and demeanor of the quintessential Macaulay's minutemen Pappachi or even the *read aloud* cultivated style of Chacko's *proper English*, Rahel's narrative disrupts the idea of Indian english as inferior and also challenges its understandings as measured by standards of white superiority (*The God* 52). *The God of Small Things* focuses on language through word play and linguistic games deployed by the twins to renegotiate their space and place in the world. Rahel and Estha fittingly discuss *The Tempest* from Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, an abridged version of the plays written for children and taught in schools of Kerala until very recent times. Some of the modern readings of *The Tempest* have focused on the symbolic relationship between Prospero and Caliban: the Prospero-Caliban relationship is an expression of the master-slave relationship, one of subjugation and imperial authority. Historically, the metaphor of Caliban suggests a denuded self-indictment of a mind that accepts slavery and subjugation as conditions of disenfranchised existence. The Prospero-Caliban analogy clearly defines the socio-historical context of

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<sup>52</sup> Anibal Quijano discusses the concept of coloniality of power to argue that "modern regimes of power" are characterized by what he terms coloniality, which, as distant from colonialism, is not simply defined by a "formal redomination between empire and colony but primarily defined by global and national/cultural hierarchies (gendered, racialized, sexualized) that are articulated differently in time and space" (Saldivar 363).

the Indian struggle for independence, sharpening the sensibility of the reader toward the disproportionate and imbalanced use of crude power in human relationships. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and the writings of George Orwell are an expression of a collective moral guilt about the British colonial rule. Where as Caliban, according to Coleridge, for example, is "all earth" and lacks "the moral sense" (Raysor 120). The problem, as Auden sees, is with Prospero's failure "to impose order on his world" (Clark 29). Mulk Raj Anand thinks that Caliban, "sulking, despairing, and yet dependent but with a desire for revenge" is "yet to grow as a rebel" (Verma 74). Coleridge, Auden and Anand explore the crisis of a postcolonial identity through Caliban: can a subaltern respond to an evolving consciousness of equality and the linguistic structure emerging from such an evolution? Spivak points out the gap between "British self-representation and the Indian self-evaluation" and claims that understanding of non whites can occur only when the West is conquered by the very people it feels it is conquering (Verma 89). The Caliban function in *The Tempest*, as Roberto Retamar argues, articulates the dilemma of a colonized people induced to take on a new language: "You taught me language; and my profit on't/ is, I know how to curse" (32). Thus, for Caliban, just as it is for Roy and her Rahel, the advantage of this new language is that it allows her to express and represent her own condition by subverting the set rules of white linguistic norm.

The evidence of a tension between a given language (Standard English) and its received form (Indian english) in a postcolonial space is illustrated in *The God of Small Things* by numerous instances—Estha and Rahel's love for Kipling, Baby Kochamma's fondness for Shakespeare, the numerous allusions to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Chacko's sensational citations from *The Great Gatsby*, Latha's perplexed recitation of Walter Scott's "Lochinvar," and Lenin's zestful but confused rendering of Mark Anthony's speech from *Julius Caesar* are all examples of

how English language gets hybridized and disseminated through literature. Making visible such *interracial* transgressions help to identify racist assumptions of Western culture developing in isolation, and it being unique and pure. In *The Discovery of India*, Nehru mentions two sides of the English mind with respect to the relationship between the West and India, one that gave India Shakespeare and Milton, and the other that manifesting itself as commercial imperialism, virtually looted India, that helped build the empire (287). Cynthia Vanden Dreisen's essay in *Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary* argues that the similarity between Roy's devices for making English language seem strange and those strategies of abrogation and appropriation "through which the postcolonial writer more generally attempts to interrogate and remake the language of the colonizer" (64). Bill Ashcroft et al., in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice of Postcolonial Literatures* describe abrogation and appropriation as correlated practices. Abrogation includes a "refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, and its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage" together with the appropriation of suppositions of traditional and fixed meanings (45). Roy's text tears apart Standard English as she constantly subverts the traditional rules of grammar and syntax, discards standard punctuation, alters capitals, invents neologisms, introduces typographical devices, peppers her text with anagrams, puns, acrostics, and palindromes. In attempting to make her twins recognize and assert their place in the world through subverting linguistic traces of white hegemony, Roy telescopes words together (furrywhirring, suddenshudder,sariflapping), exchanges syllables between them (readly dead), read words backwards (*nataS in their seys*), split them apart (Lay Ter, Bar Nowl) and coins new words (hostling, stoppited, bursty). In the case of reading backwards, Roy is careful to let her reader know that the book *Estha and Rahel* reverses was given to them by Baby Kochamma's white friend, Miss Mitten. Used to Shakespeare and Kipling, the twins were "deeply offended"

at Miss Mitten's underrated gift of *The Adventure of Susie Squirrel*. They mark their protest by "reading it aloud to her, backwards *ehT serutnevda fo eisuS lerriuqS./ enO gnirps gninrom eisuS lerriuqS ekow pu*" (*The God* 58). Rahel and Estha describe the nuances of English language to Miss Mittens and exemplifies "how it was possible to read both Malayalam and madam I'm Adam backwards as well as forwards" only to find that Miss Mitten's impression of people in Kerala speaking Keralese (and not Malayalam) to be a "Highly Stupid Impression" (*The God* 58). In this case, what Rahel and Estha attempt to articulate is the peculiarity of their own emplacement in the world by making visible Miss Mittens' ignorance of the space she occupies and thus radically undermining the intellectual curiosity of whiteness. This disruption relates to the assumption structuring knowledge as uniquely white.

Rahel and Estha's adept use of English disrupts another deeply held, but rarely overtly articulated, racist assumption—that western culture/ wisdom is unique and pure. Along with the dislocation of Standard English, Roy successfully employs strategies of appropriation as well to "make language speak for all the local context and experience and to bring it under the influence of the vernacular tongue" (Mullaney 65). According to Ashcroft et al., appropriation is "the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language" (21). This is evident in the way in which Roy disperses Malayalam words in her text which allows her to "inscribe locality and difference" in her text (Mullaney 65). Mullaney claims that the publishers of *The God of Small Things* in the United States wanted Roy to provide a glossary or rework the Malayalam words in the text which she duly refused on the basis that the non Malayalee reader be forced into what Ashcroft et. al. describe as "an active engagement with the horizons of the culture in which these terms have meaning" (15). Roy's linguistic strategies function as a tool of resistance to whiteness not only by appropriating and then positioning English in a new context but also by giving



the hybrid form currency and thus employing it as an everyday spectacle to be witnessed in the contemporary *postwhite* world. Roy's Rahel and Estha refashion and remold white culture to speak (strike) back to power. Dreisen, argues that "the manner in which the twins deploy language games, such as the way they read backwards is a powerful subversion of the established order: they read the word as they read the world in oppositional mode to that ordained by the powers that be" (9). Rahel and Estha assert their presence especially in front of the two white members in their family, Margaret and Sophie. Word constructions such as *Finethankyou* and *Lay Ter* cluster the pages of the novel during Rahel's and Estha's initial meeting with their white cousin and aunt. Moreover, Baby Kochamma's direct comparison of Sophie to Ariel in *The Tempest* and Sophie's unfamiliarity with the text is noteworthy in this context:

"D'you know who Ariel was?" Baby Kochamma asked Sophie Mol. "Ariel in *The Tempest*?"

Sophie Mol said she didn't.

"In a cowslip's bell I lie"

Sophie Mol said she didn't.

"Shakespeare's *The Tempest*?" Baby Kochamma persisted. (*The God* 138)

Sophie Mol's unfamiliarity with Shakespeare and Baby Kochamma's assumption of Sophie's fluency with the Bard has strong ties to how knowledge is structured as uniquely white. If basic Western intellectual discourses result from bi-directional interaction between races and nations, then there is no actual legitimacy to an entire modern educational system promoting itself, and rationality as primarily and organically white. Indeed, culture can be understood as hybridization, where the notion of purity becomes just another function of Western hegemony. The new status that English language enjoys in contemporary India is in effect, whiteness without privi-

lege, a whiteness made visible as a subverted performance of the past colonial legacy. Scholars of whiteness studies such as Alfred J. Lopez claim that “if whiteness has been made to see itself, or more accurately to see itself as others see it, have seen it, it has now reached a moment of crisis” for no longer is it able to portray itself as either benign or “normal” (in the sense of constituting a norm) and thus whiteness must now reckon with its own history of aggression and hegemony (14). Roy’s movement towards rendering whiteness visible is to challenge its invisibility and its unspoken claims to an essential superiority in linguistic aesthetics.

#### **4.5 Comparative Perspectives in *The God of Small Things***

Roy’s Ayemenem disposes yet another ingrained understanding of whiteness—that white people are central to human progress and the pursuit of divine utopias. Roy’s text alludes to the ideological view that the local populations have a unique insight. Unlike Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* or Kipling’s *Kim*, Roy’s text positions locals and females at the center of its existence rather than its periphery. Although the early Kurtz in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* is a staunch advocate of progress, the Marlow-Kurtz conception of progress undeniably falls within the ideological framework of commercial imperialism. In an extended analogue, one might argue that the two discourses on India represent the involuted aspects of imperialism, one in which India is perceived as the citadel of wisdom, the exotic symbol of the spiritual east, and the other in which any non-European place is a savage and backward location to be redeemed by various European ideologies of progress and by evangelicalism. Consistent with global reality, Roy depicts a sam-

pling of both white and non-whites that live in Ayemenem—not just groups of Keralites or whites alone. Both white and non-white younger generation of the Ipe family—Rahel, Estha and Sophie Mol are all loving, intelligent, caring beings to each other and can be viewed as Roy’s hope for the future. The trio forms a defensive tripod, each supporting the other against adult/moral supervision:

About a week after Sophie Mol arrived, a week before she had dies, she had performed unfalteringly under the twins’ perspicacious scrutiny and had confounded all their expectations ... she revealed herself to be human. One day the twins returned from a clandestine trip to the river (which excluded Sophie Mol), and found her perched on the highest point of Baby Kochamma’s Herb Curl, “Being Lonely,” as she put it. The next day Estha and Rahel took her with them to visit Velutha in Saris.

(180)

This suggests unions not normally depicted in postcolonial texts. Chacko, the embodiment of white cultural capital and pretensions is compelled to choose between his own selfish needs and acquiescence into the trio’s demands. Their interactions are not reflections of stereotypical childhood fantasies enacted; instead they exude the essence of a creative, diverse humanity whose strength is a passionate, fiery hope for the future. Unlike the adult members of the text, they radiate an immediate vibrancy and enthusiastic life force in their play. Also, Kari Saipu, the white male subject of Ayemenem, does not initiate any changes in Ayemenem but it is the local Velutha who at first learns from the Oxford educated Chacko, finds his place, and then attempts to fight in concert with the local Marxist group against the forces threatening them all. Accordingly, dirty roads and places of Kerala and exhibition of strong emotions shout unpretentious humanity. Conversely, Kari Saipu’s house that gets converted to a hotel chain with its mani-

cured lawns and technologically engineered illumination suggest enormous amounts of energy spent in maintaining contrived appearances and spaces. It is a clear contrast to Velutha's house, where light comes from the kitchen fire—a natural and a direct source of energy. Conversely, the hotel has no integration of natural light sources; only artificial lighting for its dark interior places, suggesting a comparative imbalance between knowledge rooted in experience and abstracted cold florescent epistemologies.

Roy's text is presented as a stark contrast to some of the common representations normalizing nonwhite community as lawless and frightening. Two texts that constantly get referenced to are E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. *A Passage to India* illustrates the uneasiness experienced by white characters in Chandrapore. The text's local hero, Dr. Aziz, is humane, but his representation is telling. Aziz is depicted as being eager to impress his white friends, and is a connoisseur of Western culture. For all the token discourse on how colonialism initiated the present uneasiness between Aziz and the other white characters, ultimately Aziz is helpless and victimized, and remains horrified as the remnants of white colonialist forces leave his land. Almost every white presented is empathetic and good, risking life and limbo to help the natives around them, affirming whiteness as preferable, fair, just. Also, true to whiteness conventions, the text infuses many Indians, such as Hamidullah and the Nawab, with Anglo culture. Hamidullah is educated at Cambridge and is the epitome of representing what an English education can do for an Indian. Aziz himself is an active agent in the colonial society's attempts to control its dark Others, overdetermined as savage. *The Tempest's* nonwhite world parallels *A Passage to India's* hellish native ruled civilization. It takes the reader into a terrifying island where the only human inhabitant is a non-white. Credited with a scant 180 lines, Caliban is an Othered character and is full of flaws that propel him into his existing slavery. The

white Prospero, sent into this dark universe, is actually performing a service in taming Caliban by eliminating savagery and bestial vices from the Island. True to whiteness conventions, again, other races are moral deviations from an implied white ideal and evil expresses itself as a demonic, lawless Other threatening white existence.

The twist on conventions in *The God of Small Things* becomes blatant and obvious within these contrasts. Rather than reinforcing the white/non-white stereotypes, the interaction of the younger generation of the Ipe family members—Rahel, Estha and Sophie Mol, represents a conjoined commitment to each other. They play freely, share and communicate, often transforming Ayemenem into a vibrant site of life. Yet, Roy's narrative cannot progress, however idealistic it may seem, without the death of Sophie Mol. This moving away from whiteness is not merely a backdrop to Roy's text as she searches for answers but it *is* the answer for postcolonized Kerala. The choice of Sophie Mol, a seemingly white child (Sophie is Margaret and Chacko's daughter and thus is half white) as a pivotal character does not necessarily negate a disruptive interpretation of the text. Realistically, Sophie Mol is perceived as white since she is "made in England," "her pale skin the color of beach sand," and as symbolic of whiteness, she is indisputably granted special privileges (*The God* 137). Nevertheless, these advantages do not translate into the expected narrative formations of privilege and survival, but into an ultimate negation of self – white death. As a signifier of whiteness, Sophie's special privileges are in part authority; such authority can and must support dismantling of the system. This is suggested in the character of Kochu Maria, who openly idolizes Sophie as the one who will save her: "See her?" Kochu Maria said when she got to Rahel with her tray of cake. She meant Sophie Mol. "When she grows up, she'll be our Kochamma, and she'll raise our salaries, and give us nylon saris for Onam" (*The God* 175). Kochu Maria hopes that the white Sophie will free her from her current existence.

Kochu Maria is testimony of the helplessness felt when interacting with people immersed in whiteness. Those afflicted with whiteness will not believe in non-white values unless an authoritative white endorses or appropriates marginalized viewpoint. Sophie differs from the other white characters in her spontaneous, pure, unadulterated interaction and affection for the twins. Sophie initiates a friendship with the twins and helps in setting up “a home away from home in the back verandah of the History House” (*The God* 250). Sophie Mol “convinced the twins that it was essential that she go along” with them to “heighten the adults’ remorse” (*The God* 276). In alluding to interracial cooperation as necessary for postcolonial transformations, Sophie Mol, Rahel and Estha jointly function as interlocking role modes working toward a transformed Kerala society.

#### **4.6 Rejecting Whiteness**

A break away from whiteness paradigms surface most clearly in the depiction of the injustices that Rahel calls History (most often, though inconsistently, with a capital H). Significantly, the history Roy critiques is also the dominant history represented by those with the power to represent. For instance, take the case of colonial representations of India where, in texts like Parkinson’s *East and West*, British colonization is avidly defended as a means of advancing modernity and progress. Parkinson’s criticism of American naïveté in promoting democratic idealism in the East is also an example of imperialistic self-representation. Contrary to this type of assertive logic are the subaltern representations in Roy’s portrayal of the history of small

things, of the often glossed over consequences of power play in History's empire building agenda. In satirizing the white submissive mentality of Pappachi and in defining mercantilism and evangelicalism as the pillars of the British empire in India, Roy attempts to self-consciously detail the dilemma of history writing/making as she often interrupts her narrative as "only one way of looking at it" (*The God* 33). The novel's sense of history as an overwhelming, impersonal force, whose imprint is most starkly visible through its effects—its obliteration of those who do not live in accordance with its values and dictates—receives its most sustained treatment in the chapter, *The History House*. Here, History "appears in live performance" with the policemen, who were "only history's henchmen," its instrumental players, "Machine guns in their minds" (*The God* 293). The name *History House* serves as a reminder of the oppressive nature of three hundred odd years of white history and its effects in India. Yet what Roy advocates through the novel's privileging of "small drama and fine detail of social existence lived at its lower depths" is to disclose an alternative perspective that while history's story is one of unrelenting oppressiveness and closure, focusing on "traces of subaltern life in its passage through time can counteract, operate in resistance to, such closure" (Guha 36).

Initially, Chacko is introduced to us as the Oxford returnee, relishing the superficial extravagances of life while pretending to be a man of the masses in Kerala. With his cultivated and exaggerated "Read Aloud" voice, love of fine food and sampling of languages, Chacko's embodies another concept of whiteness—that of adopting eurocentric notions of refinement and culture as the ultimate standard of human behavior. Western cultural capital is traditional basis for Othering and assumes its social products are the results of advanced intellect. However, Roy quickly disposes of Chacko's acquired *refinement* as his ennui, his pretentious Marxist sentiments, and his inability to take control of his life or the family business unfolds in the narrative.

Roy's commentary on non-white allegiances to whiteness ideology is made clear through Chacko's unquestionable subservience to Marxist ideology and the subsequent destruction it entails in Ayemenem. The brutal murder of Velutha, the only card carrying Marxist member, and the ineffective responses from Chacko and Comrade Pillai to save him serve as reminders that, as bell hooks mentions, "the system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy is not maintained solely by white folks. It is also maintained by all the rest of us who internalize and enforce the values of this regime" (xii). Pappachi, Chacko, Baby Kochamma and even Kochu Maria accept white norms as superior and live in a setting surrounded by whiteness. Mammachi's imported violin and violin stands, Pappachi's expensive suits and cufflinks, and dressing tables made in Vienna are all liberally sprinkled through out the narrative that describes the Ipe family home. European artwork adorns the walls and Pappachi's old Plymouth purchased from an Englishman gets referenced substantially, further suggesting links to whiteness, the start of British colonialism under the guise of trade, and the perception of whiteness as endowed with superior humanistic attributes. Even though the text is set in postcolonial Kerala, most of the Ipe family members continue to ascribe to white values. The local subjects struggle within an environment shouting whiteness representing those that have learned to value themselves only as imitators of whiteness. They show how domination and power is diffused throughout culture regardless of how one is racially classified. In this setting, Rahel fights with the weapons available to her—the English language. Audre Lorde suggests that the effectiveness of using the tools and words of the West in attempts to contest white systems of domination may be doubtful (22). However, Rahel's use of Indian english reflects the various arenas of ideological and hegemonic struggles. The use of Westernized tools in fact may be necessary steps in the route for human liberation.



The allegorical message in this resistance suggests the dislocation of whiteness cannot be avoided in the Kerala's journey to freedom.

One of the most radical challenges to whiteness appears in Roy's depiction of Christianity in *The God of Small Things*. As the religion that attempts to fight the evils of untouchability, Christianity is at first represented as a benevolent order that works for the benefit of the untouchables in Kerala. Roy tells us that when the British came to Malabar a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas (among them Velutha's great grandfather) converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of untouchability. As part of the proselytizing that took place in colonial Kerala, these converted Christians were given a little food and money and they came to be known as the Rice Christians. However, it didn't take them long to realize that they had "jumped from the frying pan to the fire" (*The God* 71). The Rice Christians were made to have separate churches, and conduct their own services with separate priests, and they soon recognized that the white imported religion was not a benevolent one of humanity, as they were made to believe, rather an enslaving one just as the one they thought they had escaped. The Ipe family was also Christian but unlike the Rice Christians they belong to the Syrian Catholic sect of Christianity. Kerala is distinctive for its relatively large Christian population, about twenty per cent, some of whom are Syrian Christians who claim direct descent back to the hundred Brahmins supposedly converted by St. Thomas the Apostle in the first century of the Christian era. A largely conservative group known for generations of in-breeding, the Syrian Christians have traditionally formed the social and economic elite of Kerala (Freidman 118). Roy's narrative depicts how the Syrian Christians kept the caste system alive and considered themselves to be superior to the lower caste Christians. Baby Kochamma wonders how Ammu could have an affair with Velutha: "How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed, they have a particular

smell, these Paravans? ” (*The God* 75). The distinctive smell assigned to the lower caste Christians is a good example of the ways in which segregation was exercised in the name of religion in Kerala. Rahel’s comment on Baby Kochamma’s reaction, that Baby Kochamma “preferred an Irish-Jesuit smell to a particular Paravan smell” represents Ipe family’s relationship with whiteness (*The God* 75). As a Syrian Christian, Ammu is expected to conform to marrying other upper caste Christians, preferably someone white as Chacko had done. They form a metaphor of a group who arrogantly and horrifically blend cultural concepts, religion, and logic to exploit others. Pappachi, Chacko, Baby Kochamma and even Mammachi frequently allude to their affinity to whiteness, to their superior minds and dismisses the locals as “mostly sweeper class” (*The God* 132). Chacko speaks of a minority that could undermine the system, but his solution for the underprivileged offers no liberation or freedom, only continuing cycles of slavery. However, Ammu and Rahel reject these rules imposed by Syrian Christianity. Ammu’s disillusion and confusion in being reared in a household that idolizes anything white is materialized in her transgressive behavior especially when she elopes to marry a Hindu. With regard to the circumstances that underpin Ammu’s and Rahel’s refusal to be interpellated, Roy is working with what has become the virtual common sense of much contemporary liberal and progressive dissident thought. Speaking of the “failure of interpellation” as consonant with the possibility of change, Ismail notes how “disidentification with one’s given social location must be read as a crucial first step in the production of a new and alternative identity” (226). Rahel’s final return from New York underscores her realization both of the hegemonic pressure as well as the possibility of choice when confronting whiteness paradigms. Rahel’s return and Ammu’s resistance suggests an alternative model not only for Kerala’s Syrian Catholics but for any group of people who make their cultural, gender, or race constructions a force all must reverse.

#### 4.7 Merging Gender and Racial Critiques

Critiques of the interlocking relationships between gender and race characterize major parts of *The God of Small Things*. The novel depicts male characters dominating the scene. Strong and forceful male characters like Pappachi and Chacko, who are alike in desiring whiteness, give orders that reflect white ideology. Local males, like Valya Pappan, work in subordinate roles, and consistent with white patriarchal constructions, women are relegated to the domestic front. Mammachi, though adept and shrewd with business skills, is never given a voice and is “beaten by Pappachi every night with a brass flower vase” (*The God* 34). This initially seems to be a conventional patriarchal beginning. But by the end of the novel, the text actually succeeds in being subversive as Rahel returns to reclaim her muted twin, allegorically her voice. Similarly, the only major white male character, Kari Saipu is depicted as far from being the stereotypical white male tower of strength, but as being trapped in Kerala, unable to resist the social forces he doesn’t understand.

Rahel’s return is preceded by a time of great sorrow and doubt for her. Rahel has visited the land of whiteness America, found the white ideals instilled in her by Pappachi inadequate, and then decides to return to Kerala. Rahel’s stay in New York can be read as a metaphor for the uncertainties and vagueness of maneuvering in intellectual territories within whiteness that takes her through conceptual terrains that require non-Western moorings or newly created postmodern understandings. After Ammu’s death, Rahel leaves for New York and is hopeful that her life

with Larry (read: white) will be a happy one but soon she learns that she remains unsatisfied. New York proves to be the place where Rahel realizes the enormity of the tasks of reclaiming her voice and the price of ideological separation and isolation. Rahel “blank eyes” indicate the confusion and vagueness after she realizes that hegemonic powers are overwhelming, committed to destruction, without mercy (*The God* 45). Rahel’s questions are our questions: How does one proceed forward in the struggle knowing the truth of the past but not the path to resist? Is resistance a lost cause? Can an individual challenge a system alone?

White Sophie Mol’s presence in Kerala and her interactions with Rahel and Estha alludes to white feminists who can be the logical starting point for white transitions into larger understandings. Critiques of white masculinity proliferate throughout *The God of Small Things*, as Kari Saipu loses his mind and must be guided by his Malayalee wife. At the heart of the plot, Kari Saipu is removed from the scene, a clear commentary on the inability of whiteness to survive. His constant self-questioning shows his primary task is to understand his role, not to direct and guide the local population. He, as the symbol of whitenesses’s future in Kerala, must in the end make a willing, deathly sacrifice. The physical appearance of women, as narrated by Roy, address contrasts in local and white femininity as opposed to Womanist constructions. Ammu is depicted as being sensuous and her affair with Velutha undeniably associates her with sexuality, but her quiet, almost demure persona suggests a spiritual purity traditionally associated with white woman. Naturalized in most women characters of the text are ethnic markers such as curly hair and olive skin. This places local female standards of beauty on par with white ones, not as merely mimetic. Unlike white Margaret, Ammu is not depicted as the traditional type of wife, subservient and loyal. Social version of traditional femininity is dramatized even more when Roy describes Ammu’s life in Assam:

She was beautiful, young and cheeky [and quickly became] the toast of the Planter's club. She wore backless blouses with her sari and carried a lame silver purse on her chain. She smoked long cigarettes in a silver cigarette holder and learned to blow perfect smoke rings. (300)

These inversions more than anything else call attention to the problems of routinely assigning psychological and physical characteristics to any single gender or racialized group. It also calls attention to variance, to the ways group members routinely don't fit stereotypes. What is also telling is the way the text portrays all its women as resisting social norms. White Margaret marries Chacko, divorced Ammu finds love in an outcaste, Baby Kochamma decides to live out her life as a spinster, Mammachi sets up her own business and finally Rahel exerts her voice to narrate the tale. All these women are contributors to the crucial struggle for female empowerment.

Another interesting merger of gender and racial critique is found in the text's life and death choices. When viewed through the phenotypic selection, the narrative shows the survival and reproduction of white people are not privileged over that of nonwhites. This is a direct inversion of colonial ideologies that reward white women for their affiliations and alliance to white men with survival. Margaret and Joe, the only white couple in the text, do not survive as Joe is killed in an accident. Margaret appears to be nurturing and spends her time in taking care of Sophie, aligning her to concepts of white womanhood as Madonna-like and spiritually pure. She is depicted as being extraordinarily pale, with strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes. In control of her own life, Margaret exercises power over the choices she makes in deciding that her relationship with Chacko was not successful. As an employed woman, she is able to take care of her self and her child after Joe's death. Margaret embodies Richard Dyer's notion of white women positioned between privilege and subordination. Sophie's death and the lack of presence of white

women in authoritative roles and positions do not signal a feminine version of white power structure. Margaret never enjoys a lasting union with Joe and Sophie's death contrasts with Rahel's survival and her subsequent reclaiming of her voice. Dyer alludes to the metaphorical significance of happy endings, of unions, in his descriptions of white women and what they signify. Dyer says white women are symbolic of home; reunion with her is allegorical reward for and the purpose of successful imperialism and colonial efforts (34). In killing the prominent white males in the text, Kari Saipu and Joe, and their inability to survive with their love interests suggests that such an imperialistic understanding, however tragic, should end in death. Margaret is the only white subject that survives her days in Ayemenam but it is clear that her subjectivity is no longer based on fictitious and exploitative hierarchies as she returns to England.

#### **4.8 "Tomorrow"**

"Tomorrow" is the word that closes *The God of Small Things*. Rukmini Nair claims that in a tragedy there is no tomorrow whereas in a fairytale "tomorrow always hovers around the corner" (17). Although Roy's text needn't be assessed as a fairytale, the evocation of future through *tomorrow* at the end of the text encourages a deeper analysis of the term's contextual significance. *Tomorrow* is the promise Ammu and Velutha elicit from each other during the thirteen nights they transgress the love laws which dictate "who should be loved? How? And how

much?" (*The God* 22). Thus *tomorrow* supports an interpretation of character complexity along with a narrative disinterested in pat answers.

In *The God of Small Things*, whiteness symbolically dies with Kari Saipu and Sophie Mol, and Rahel reclaims her voice, but Ammu's eventual mental deterioration and Velutha's death shows that the local culture is not given absolute agency. Patriarchy, as depicted by the policemen, survives as does the continuance of the Western-based civilization, signified by Rahel's narrative voice employing the English language, albeit a dislocated one. The survival of English suggests white culture, as opposed to white supremacy with its syntax and texture shaped into a new hybrid existence. Comrade Pillai, with his imported white political ideology, also lingers, but as a threat that has lost its former bite. This is signified when he is presented as "slapping himself all over to get his circulation going" (*The God* 15). His altered behavior patterns and continuance suggest the threat of glorified systems of cultural and racial ideologies may still resurface and dominate with perhaps new racial or ethnic sources. Western media invasion through television—Hulk Hogan and Bam Bam Bigelow—dispersing a world of white abstract ideas and mental constructions also survive and, presumably, the likes of Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria chose to reside there. What changes, however, is knowledge and choice, the possibility of a neo-ideology outside the dictates of "love laws," as represented by Rahel's creative output that commemorates the death of Sophie Mol. Rahel's text is narrated through the eyes of a child and respects Sophie Mol's "choice to be human;" to join the twins in their rebellion against adult rules (*The God* 180). Sophie's death suggests that privilege is not the most worthy or life sustaining human goal.

Roy's phenotype selection signifies the important role of color in structuring Kerala's system of domination. The interpretive gaps seen in academic commentary speaks to the effec-

tiveness of colorblindness as a cultural norm, as well as to the continuing vast conceptual divides between white and nonwhite ideologies and experiences. These conceptual divides underscore not just academic interpretive failure, but detail why contemporary white dominating assaults on nonwhite psyches are trivialized and go mostly unrecognized and misunderstood in postcolonial Kerala. With little mainstream cultural impetus for making whiteness and its narrative assumptions visible, Roy's text offers a unique starting point for academics, encouraging local writers in particular, to develop a critical eye to develop a *twin-consciousness* that incorporates a location's total racial history. Like Rahel who leaves Kerala, travels to the world of whiteness, and then returns to reclaim her muted self, contemporary readers can begin by making culturally sophisticated choices. By redefining themselves as a part of a multicultural global reality, they can decide to travel back and forth between constructed norms in a common fight that will enable the subaltern to find her voice. Ironically, the optimistic and promising nature of the concluding words of the text—*tomorrow*, with its allegorical doorways into ideology, history and larger systematic oppression, is undoubtedly color coded and is intrinsically linked to our contemporary culture.



## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

The words sung in the next room are unavoidable. But their passionate intelligence will be studied in you

- John Ashbury, *Fragment* (1969)

Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The “*they*,” which supplies the answer to the question of “who” of everyday *Dasein*, is the “*nobody*” to whom every *Dasein* has already surrendered itself in being-among-one-another.

- Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (1927)

Kerala has the highest life expectancy, the lowest infant and maternal mortality, the best public health facilities, the highest literacy, the best performance in almost all educational indices, the best gender ratio, the best record in female education, health and empowerment and the lowest total fertility. With such a record of performance in areas regarded by outstanding thinkers as crucial to the quality of life, Keralites must surely enjoy the most satisfying lives among all people. Right?

- Ashok Guha, “The Kerala Conundrum” (2010)

Not long ago, Amartya Sen—eminent philosopher and Nobel economist, placed Kerala on a pedestal when he privileged its unique position among the so-called Third World countries. Sen claims of India that “we live in most diverse country, and in many spheres our records are extremely disparate. In respect of certain variables like average levels of literacy, life expectancy, infant mortality etc. conditions in India are enormously adverse compared with China, and

yet in all these respects, Kerala does significantly better than China” (Kuriyan 70). Such a utopic representation of Kerala (propagated usually as the Kerala Model), as I have noted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, usually based on statistics and results from random samplings of data, often ignore differences within the group and as such must be questioned. Given that imaginative literature has the ability to mirror real life conditions of a social group, this study of *My Story*, *Vidheyan* and *The God of Small Things* argues that in every sense Das’s, Adoor’s and Roy’s Kerala exists outside of all its paradisiacal representations. Obviously, all the three texts I have chosen are set in Kerala; however, my aim has been to expose the locational heterogeneity and the not-so-utopic *differences* contained within this local culture by investigating the unstable functioning of various ideologies of caste, color, class and gender. The goal of my concluding chapter is to reemphasize the theoretical thread, which is the inherent heterogeneity found even within local oppressions and its resistances that mirrors in *My Story*, *Vidheyan* and *The God of Small Things*. My analyses of *My Story*, *Vidheyan* and *The God of Small Things* call for a re-examination of the generalized conditions of the postcolonial nation while also urging a local evaluation of *differences within*, instead of the conventional amalgamated assessments we find in what is considered typically as postcolonial writings.

In Chapter 2, *Engendering Resistance: The Unethical and Unstable Subject of My Story*,” I examined the specific interplay of power within the local context by studying the ways in which the upper caste Nairs of Kerala obscure the violence imposed on its women, often in the name of defending castist ethical norms against outside forces. In this section, I showcased how gender and the geopolitical intersect with caste to prove that feminine subjectivities within Nair caste system are not unitary. Furthermore, I argued that gender formation in Kerala is always mediated through the differences that exist within the institution of caste. Moreover, I depicted

the ways in which Kamala Das challenges the objectifications and identifications allocated generally to women from the Nair caste in *My Story*. Das resists the father/daughter relationship prescribed for her marriage by Nair patriarchy, while she also succeeds in defying the codes set for an ethically good Nair woman by writing about her sexual life with a calculated unreliability, thereby subverting the typical role assigned to an autobiographer.

Thus, is Das's brand of resistance unique to the local Kerala situation? To recapitulate what I have discussed in Chapter 2, the upper caste/class status of the Nairs in Kerala has inflicted a clash between gender and caste identity in a particular way, leaving women who challenge caste codes open to the charge of being unethical. In these cases, women are assailed for discarding age old traditions of caste norms if they attempt to resist the hegemonic and oppressive conditions. Such women are also often branded as being too *modern* or westernized and of imitating their western counterparts. Writers such as Das are considered potential threats that rupture the purity of the Malayalee Nair women. By way of example, I would like to reflect upon an incident that took place during my own college days in Kerala to elucidate how even the local women can contribute towards this negative discourse on Das. As the student governing body chairperson of a small women's liberal arts institution the late 1990s in Trichur, Kerala, I was given the opportunity to select the chief guest for the college's Annual Arts and Literary festival. As a budding feminist, my obvious choice as guest for the event was Kamala Das. However, the institutional authorities at once denied my request claiming that they were not interested in bringing *immoral* women to campus. They claimed that Das was *unpredictable* and too modern and that they did not want to deal with the negative publicity in the local press as it would affect the college's credibility as an ethical institution! That the College Board finally agreed to have Das as our chief guest is a different story, but my point in narrating this incident is to under-

line the sentiment that even among some literate women *within* Kerala, Das is considered an unethical woman. I would like to emphasize that it is precisely this charge of immorality that obscures ways in which many women's experiences within the local milieu "have shaped and informed their [resistant] politics" (Narayan 10). Aware of the history and aftereffects of dissent in a patriarchally driven Nair society, aware as well for the need to challenge the hegemonic tools that have maintained a façade of privileging its women, Das is unique in continuously engaging with the problematics of women from Kerala, often exploring and exposing them through the power of her narrative subtleties. Das's clever manipulation of textual integrity and her resistance to provide the *Truths* of her life contribute significantly to exploring the instability of subjecthood within this context to underline that the subject is simply an effect of language, whereby exposing the myth of the constructed nature of an ethically good Nair woman. In fact, her commitment to the causes of local women is so grounded that in spite of numerous offers from Western universities, Das preferred to live out her life within the edges of the very society that deemed her immoral. By resisting the homogeneity attributed to the typical Nair women, what Das seems to have accomplished is to draw our attention to power relations *within* the local milieu of Kerala and to the interaction of its various politics—especially concerning caste and gender in its specific dynamics *internal* to Kerala.

This attention to the local is also what sets Adoor's *Vidheyam* apart from the other moviemakers of Kerala. While Das's concern mainly revolves around gender and caste oppression, Adoor explores class relations and the notion of home as the signifier of power as it plays out between the empowered and the powerless. However, like Das's *My Story*, the film succeeds in exploding the constructed nature of domination that struggles to fit subjects into a certain formed discourse where often the underprivileged is denied any agency to overcome class subjection.

Adoor problematizes a specific historical place (the liminal zone between Dakshina Kannada and Kerala) at a specific time to apply the Hegelian dialectic, whereby the slave-Thommi is able to achieve self-actualization. Adoor most emphatically registers Thommi's self-actualization visually at the end of the film, when after years of being enslaved by Bhaskar he suddenly recognizes his *self* as independent from his Master, as existing for himself. The Patelar-Kudiyan relationship the film depicts focuses on the alienation caused by the idealizations of home in a feudal and class-conscious setting. Thommi concedes to Bhaskar because Bhaskar provides him with a space to set up his home in Ichillampadi while Bhaskar remains powerless outside his home province. Both master and slave are subject to the imagined comforts of home and Thommi's movement (through work) from the fringes of Kerala's social borders to locating himself actively within the life of his master ensures *Vidheyana's* success in registering resistance during subject formation in the context of Patelar-Kudiyan relationships unique to Kerala. Actually, by the end of the film, the Master and Slave participate in moving outside the norms set for them by ideology (they share the same seat, eat the same food from a single bowl) and this helps them in meeting each other in a world outside the class roles prescribed for them. Though only for a brief while, Thommi and Bhaskar do concur in the acknowledgment of their mutual displacements inside the alienating system of class domination. Undoubtedly, Thommi succeeds in this Master/Slave battle as he gains a sense of new self-certainty that he demonstrates by throwing away Bhaskar's gun (one of the primary apparatuses that helped make Bhaskar's power visible). Emancipation of self-consciousness is depicted through each of their dislodgment from the familiar territory and comforts of home.

The search for selfhood exemplified by Thommi in his desire for home in *Vidheyana* parallels Kerala's own struggle to free itself from the legacy of feudalism and other hidden agendas

of class oppression. In spite of its remarkable political and economic advancements, beginning with the 1957 electoral win of the communist party headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Kerala remains as a state of paradoxes. A recent article by Ashok Guha, carried by *The Telegraph*, suggests that while Kerala has achieved tremendous economic and political growth, it is also a state with the highest rates of suicide, drug addiction and alcoholism in India. Guha claims that “instead of living in idyllic happiness relative to all other states, the population of Kerala brims over with a seething discontent with their lives that far exceeds the levels of dissatisfaction reached in any other state of the country” (Guha). Perhaps this is the reason why there are so many immigrants found around the world from Kerala. Guha argues that the “Malayali migration overseas or even indeed to other states, far exceeds, in per capita terms, the outflow of other linguistic groups from their respective homes”. Guha goes on to claim that the people of Kerala are in “desperate flight from their homeland, that paradise of inclusiveness, good medical care, excellent educational facilities and gender equality, not only abroad but also to other states where similar facilities do not exist”. And it is precisely this unique and “almost surreal juxtaposition” between the modern and the feudal, the progressive and reactionary, the utopic and dystopic that Adoor succeeds in problematizing through *Vidheyan* “pointing to a fundamental schism within the state” (Ganguly 9). *Vidheyan* is distinctive in depicting class oppression and resistance in Kerala as Adoor is able to examine the psychological struggle of its immigrant population, through Thommi, as they try to construct home as a meaningful site of class privileges. Adoor succeeds in questioning the ethical basis of the *Kerala Model*, which is primarily supported by the financial remittances of migrant workers toiling in other parts of India and abroad, often in highly exploited conditions. Adoor seems to advocate that this desire for *being home* both facilitates oppression and resistance. Certainly, *Vidheyan* interrupts not only the Master-Bhaskar’s

self-certainty but also Slave-Thommi's oppression so as to envisage how home opens up possibilities for accepting and resisting class structure. Adoor's film seems to imply that for Thommi, the Kerala immigrant, alternatives are still available; one of which is in realizing that the search for a stable home is simply an illusion that ensures what Martin and Mohanty claim to produce "the repression of differences even within oneself" (109). In *Vidheyan*, mutual recognition takes place when shared displacements are recognized by Master and Slave. Thommi and Bhaskar frame Patelar and Kudiyan as agents who have the potential to rearrange, if not drastically reshape, the fixed roles of lord and slave in a feudalistic setting. *Vidheyan* conceives of both Patelar and Kudiyan as reframing themselves against the atrocities of feudalism when an unconventional mode of recognition occurs between them through the unraveling and unlearning of their conception of an idealized home. Mutual recognition suggests that dislocation from learned privileges enable likelihood of a libratory potential for both master and Slave *within* the social space unique to the Patelar-Kudiyan context.

Finally, Roy's *The God of Small Things* also succeeds in exposing Kerala's biased color consciousness as her protagonists challenge the general assumptions of local normativity. Roy, like Das and Adoor, refutes the *naturalness* of subject constructions based on ideology. While *My Story* challenges Nair caste rules that encourage gender oppression and *Vidheyan* confronts class subordination within the Patelar-Kudiyan relationship, Roy also defies the privileged color codes that circulate uniquely within Kerala. Moreover, the inability of Roy's white characters to survive in Kerala explores the relationship between generally acknowledged stereotypes and exploitation. Roy successfully juxtaposes Pappachi's white-subservience with Ammu's white-resistance; but it is Ammu's recognition of Velutha, the local untouchable, as the one who can provide her with happiness that gets privileged by Roy. Significantly, Roy's *God of Small*

*Things* is none other than the local born and bread Velutha. That Roy names her untouchable-outcaste-paravan protagonist as Velutha/white is indeed her way of endowing agency to the local subaltern. It is through this trope of naming that Roy relates the racialized Velutha with whiteness; obviously the most powerful signifier within Kerala's color-coded power relations. The evocative depiction of Velutha as being local and the ensuing contentment he is able to provide Ammu as she claims him indicate Roy's suggestion to investigate resistances within local ideologies.

Also, as I have discussed in Chapter 4, the unique brand of language used by Roy generally labeled as Indian English can be viewed as Roy's assertion of the hybrid language structure developed in postcolonial India, but it can also be looked at as a unique means by which Roy registers her protest and difference from white linguistic hegemony. Certainly, the Malayalam words integral to the novel's understanding are liberally scattered throughout the text and obviously do not hold any meaning for a non Malayalee. Roy's ability to mould a new hybrid vocabulary aids as a means of protesting difference and marginalization. As I have suggested in Chapter 4 "Unfair Resistance: White Subversions in *The God of Small Things*," language is undeniably an important means of registering resistance here. For a long time, in the early part of twentieth century, language was considered an important means which defined deviant behavior. Kira Hall says that "scholars have supported theoretical claims about the interplay of language, gender, and society by referencing the speech patterns of 'the linguistic deviant' – the speaker who fails to follow normative expectations of how men and women should speak" (228). Women and homosexuals neatly fell into this group since they did not follow the normative, modes of spoken language as defined by white males. In the context of Roy's text, I would like to emphasize that this unique deviance from the Standard English helps not only in cementing



the instability of a white ideology and its offshoots as being the norm but it also succeeds in making visible the differences that exist within Kerala's color coded power relations.

Then, *My Story*, *Vidheyam* and *The God of Small Things* do not present oppression as a constant and uncomplicated condition of the postcolonial nation from which opposition and resistance unavoidably advances. Instead, what Das, Adoor and Roy accomplish is mapping a range of revolts and defiance against, and at times in complicity with, the dominant and prescribed norms governing local instances of Kerala's socio-cultural, economic, religious and geopolitical normativity. However, to claim that these issues—that of caste, class, gender and color—are uniquely Keralan would also falsely imply that there is a *real* Kerala experience that is common to its entire people. Conversely, the only commonality among the three texts I have chosen for my study here, besides the fact that they are all set in Kerala, is that they all explore the instability of various subject positions that speak to a refusal to be identified with a prescribed subjectivity. Also, as I have mentioned elsewhere in this dissertation, my project should not be misread as an impulse to construct all of the Keralan subjects as a politically cohesive and subversive group as it will falsely elide the dissonances that exist within this naturally diverse group. As a matter of fact, what I hope I have been able to explore and expose here is how various discursive practices seek to name and rename human experiences as an amalgamated totality, even when it sets out to challenge such a norm. However, by identifying Kerala as the common thread that runs through these texts, I hope I have been able to track not only the overlaps but also the differences *within the local* that in turn highlight the complexities of any mode of representation. Undoubtedly, the mutual theme of subjugation that yokes the texts I have used here not only exposes a not-so-utopic locale that helps in destabilizing critical celebrations of cohesion and consistency, but it also reveals that an examination of the local depicts subjects as en-

gaging in a perpetual negotiation between oppression and resistance, commensurability and disavowal; which in turn, aids in recognizing the immense difficulty of defining any category, let alone the subjectivities of local Kerala.

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