



Loving Conqueror: Psychologization of Masculinity in Contemporary Kerala

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ABSTRACT: This paper tries to engage with the shift in the ways in which the idea of ‘man’ and the notion of the ‘intimate’ are imagined in their mutual imbrications in Kerala, South India. It is anchored around the idea, practice and experience of *aadyaraathri* or first night, a privileged moment of heterosexuality in the given culture. The paper treats first night as a distinct vantage point and as a ‘surface of emergence’ to study the contestations and re-negotiations over ideas, ideals and norms of masculinity. It argues that the surveillance around this practice which takes one particular form, the form of psychologization, is constitutive in the making of the gendered (male) subject and the intimate. The paper documents the diagnostic gaze deployed around the practice of first night which creates the figure of a ‘savage man’, who in turn embodies violent sexual impulses. The paper tries to show how the civilizing mission of the psychological discourses in Kerala displaces the violent masculinity with a carefully crafted rhetoric of intimacy which reproduces the mind-body dualism.

KEYWORDS: Masculinity, Sexual Violence, Pop Psychology, Psychologization, Mind- Body Dualism

This paper tries to engage with the shift in the ways in which men and the notion of ‘intimate’ are imagined in their mutual imbrications in contemporary Kerala¹. It is anchored around the idea, practice and experience of *aadyaraathri* or first night, a privileged moment of heterosexuality in the given culture². It is imagined as a self-conscious exploration into the domain of heterosexuality and is believed to be cru-



cial in addressing the “unexamined heterocentricity” (Rich, 1986, p. 24) at the heart of theory. The present paper engages with the practice of first night to foreground the made-up cultural edifice of heterosexuality as an institution. This exercise is homologous to the effect of drag (Butler, 1990) and helps to understand the cultural labor involved in the production of the naturalness associated with heterosexuality.

First night is popularly represented as an intimate experience which unfolds within the conjugal space. The practice of first night emerged in Kerala as an identifiable one in the early twentieth century in response to the legal and structural transformations in the family. Until the middle of the twentieth century, diverse forms of marriage and cohabitation practices existed in Kerala, framed by diverse modes of lineage and inheritance practices. Powerful elements in the traditional society accepted non-patrilineal and non-conjugal forms of lineage and marriage. There were clear legislative moves in favor of modern monogamous conjugal marriage and patrilineal inheritance during the colonial times (Arunima 2003; Kodoth 2001)³. Many discourses around sexuality, virginity, chastity and conjugality converge at this practice, making it an identifiable event of institutionalized intimacy. The cultural premium attached to this event provides a distinct vantage point to understand modern erotic speaking and agency. The present paper is an attempt to track the positions the gendered subject occupies in this speech and to show how the psychological discourses and the ‘pedagogies of self’ offered by these discourses entail the logic of government and graft the relations these subjects have with themselves and their body, desire and pleasure. The paper starts with a discussion on the existing theorizations on Kerala modernity and shows how first night by invoking the sexed body presents a crisis to modern notions which posits interiority and intimacy as a prerequisite of sexual relations. The next section tries to think how or why institutionalized psychology is deployed at the moment of discussions on first night. The paper then documents different sites of institutionalized psychology and argues that this psychology invisibilizes the patriarchal norm and leads to the psychologization of masculinity where questions of love and consent are bypassed with/through a normalized rhetoric of intimacy.

Marriage, Modernity and the Question of Love

Along with the emergence of modern monogamous conjugality surfaced the idea of romantic love in late nineteenth-century Kerala. The matrilineal joint house-

holds went through a series of renegotiations and changes and the intra household arrangements gave way to small patrifocal families. Puthenkalam (1977) traces the trajectories of these changes and observes that by the 1960s Kerala had entered into stable conjugality. Romantic love was a key structuring principle in the production of monogamous family and gendered selves (Arunima, 1997; Devika, 2007; Lukose, 2009). Arunima (1997) analyses two Malayalam novels to show how romantic love formed the rationale for the conjugal couple who anchored a number of changes in the family structure and property relations. The love marriage is presented as being capable of erasing the barbaric promiscuity of the matrilineal past and becomes a civilizing project. In the process love and marriage become synonyms, making marriage the natural and the only possible culmination of love (p. 279). This love was imagined as an *internal force* providing stability to monogamous conjugality (Devika, 2007, p. 68). Devika treats this as an important moment of individuation as this love was 'seeking not the body but the internality of the other' (p. 69). Here love appears as a regulating force which reserves bodily desires for the realization of them in the conjugal relation. She attributes the prominence given to *Anthakkarana Vivaham* (Marriage of inner instruments) in Malayalam novels from the nineteenth century to this notion of love which was circulating along with ideals of stable monogamous conjugality. This should be understood in relation to the emergence of the new individual who is individuated sufficiently to experience and express love. This love was seen as an inner attribute of the mind and other qualities emanating from the mind. This love was also placed in opposition to lust and was more about the mind than about the body (p. 69). Though not addressing the conjugal union directly, modern Malayalam poetry also used the notion of love as an internal force to understand the man-woman couple (Kumar, 1997). In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the discourse on romantic love and the social and community reform presented love marriage as an ideal man-woman union where love was privileged over kinship laws and other social imperatives of match making.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, an equally powerful institution called *arranged marriage* emerged and placed itself against the *love marriage*. Arranged marriage, which was gaining momentum in the early twentieth century, was an institution where everything but love was privileged, and this form of marriage was placed diametrically opposite to love marriage.⁴ In contemporary

Kerala arranged marriage is one of the major institutions (Jones 2010). There is an expanding marriage market in Kerala and the practice of dowry is getting institutionalized (Kodoth, 2008). It reproduces caste and class matrices consciously. The logic of private property cements the conjugal ideal and elevates arranged marriage as one of the major institutions.

The moment of first night undercuts both these ideas of marriages, revealing their inherent fragilities when addressing the questions of love and sexual relations. It reveals an unresolved crisis in Kerala modernity where all of the founding assumptions around individuation and intimacy are caught in the claustrophobic space of the bedroom. As the above discussion shows, scholarship on Kerala modernity suggests the presence of a nascent individual(ism) and an emerging internality as a major requirement in defining the modern subject. This internality is also presented as the locus of desire. Internality acts as the regulating force that defines expressions of carnal desire. For the modern Keralite 'union of mind' as represented in the discourse around romantic love is a pre-requisite of the sexual relation. But first night presents a moment of crisis in this modern narrative. First night and the practice of arranged marriage together creates a moment of institutionalized heterosexuality where none of these requirements are necessary to initiate a physical relation. This paper argues that first night presents a fissure in the discourse of Kerala modernity.

The love proposed by the reformist ethos was devoid of carnal pleasures and bodily exchanges and left no space for an exchange which first night represents. And whenever presented, carnal exchanges were presented as potential sites of danger (Kumar 1997). On the other hand, arranged marriage, by its very definition, lacks the notion of love as a structuring principle. Love is something which is projected upon the conjugal unit with retrospective effect. The culturally available mode of negotiation of this moment of first copulation was that of ritualization. There were some highly codified ways of going about this moment and first copulation was not the duty of the husband. For patrilineal Brahmins this kind of ritualized first copulation was called *Sekam* or *Nishekam* and gods were supposed to copulate with the bride before the bridegroom touched her (Fawsett 1900, 65). Early travel writings on the Malabar Coast such as that of Duarante Barbosa (1866, 184) and Ludo Vico De Varthema(1863) document the ritualized first copulation among matrilineal groups. Colonial anthropology also documents the matriline-

real first copulation which was ritualized through *Talikettu Kalyanam*. This rite was outside the customary marriage where the Brahmin priests, the landlords or men in authority were invited to perform the first copulation (Gough 1952, 1955; Fuller 1976; Moore 1985). To accentuate the crisis, all such rituals and ceremonies are absent in the modern marriage⁵. It can be said that the making of the modern marriage resulted in the production of the bedroom as a modern secular space. The nuptial chamber where ritualized first copulation was carried out was not an everyday space. The arrangement of space and objects allowed invocation of divinity. Such a creation of space might have connections to the way virginity was treated in the culture. Whether there were some cultural taboos operating around virginity and first copulation demands further exploration. Modern marriage doesn't ritually acknowledge either nuptial chamber or first copulation. This paper calls the modern bedroom a secular space to suggest the break from the production of a sacral space of nuptial chamber and also to foreground the presence of state legality and community in constituting an intimate space like bedroom.

The scene of first night offers a condensed moment to observe how the object domain delineated by body, desire and pleasure responds to the structural transformations in the family and in the lineage practices. The account that follows is taken from a modernist Malayalam novel – *Mayyazhippuzhayude Theerangalail (On the Banks of River Mayyazhi)* (Mukundan, 1974) – which is set in a French Colony named Mayyazhi (Mahe) in the mid-1970s. The female protagonist Girija is individuated sufficiently and has entered into a romantic relationship with a person where she almost married him in her mind. When confronted with an individualized Girija and her love affair, the novel takes another route, different from nineteenth century novels which presented a steadfast heroine and her unwavering dedication to love. In the novel Girija is forced to enter into an arranged marriage. And this is the first modern marriage in the family. There is no explicit reference to the transformations in the arrangements of sexual relations in the text; but it provides a detailed description of their wedding night and thus reveals the significance of first night in imagining lifelong monogamy. The text does not recapitulate the wedding scene; rather, it draws its dramatic energy from the wedding night. As mentioned earlier, by the time this novel was written the bedroom was a modern secular space devoid of ritualization and ceremonies to face or negotiate through the first act/instance of copulation. Here the man is not only negotiating

with the individual female subject, but also articulating a series of changes related to the sexual order and his position in it. It shows a man and woman caught inside an exchange that creates the patrifocal small family and a monogamous conjugal couple.

Achu was tired by the time the last guest left. His hands were shivering while locking the front door of the house. Finally that day has come –the day when Achu realizes *Purushartha*⁶. While walking to the bedroom his legs too were shivering. He hasn't seen Girija after coming back to his place. He was busy with the guests. But her face was always in his mind. He was eager to smell Girija's tear-soaked face powder. He wanted to wipe off her tears. It was dark inside. He stood at the door steps hesitantly for a moment. He waited without entering the room. He knows she is angry with him. He has been watching her tears. But he has many resolutions- *I will wipe off your tears with my love. I will burn away your past with my love. I will conquer you with love* . . . He waited for her reply. Moments passed. He entered the room. He could not smell the jasmine flowers and powder; instead could smell varnish. He lighted the matchbox. The coat which carpenter Raman made was vacant (Mukundan, 1974, p. 190)

The narrative places the night and the man at the threshold of a potential relationship which is the culmination of long waiting. The waiting and the fantasies around sexual union place the narrative literally at the doorsteps of an impending amorous encounter. The narrative shows the anxieties involved in imagining a monogamous conjugal unit at the centre, where a man is supposed to conquer his partner with love. The woman's past and memories of a previous relationship appear threatening to the man and are treated as something to be destroyed to ensure her devotion to the conjugal unit. Here love becomes an instrument employed with many purposes, conquering being the most important of them. This deployment of love as a conquering force points towards some of the fundamental questions related to equality, freedom and subjection in marriage. The popular ideas of first night as a moment of *conquer* reflects the sexual privileges or rights men have over woman's sexuality in marriage. Marriage could be treated as a concrete instance that foregrounds the power differentials embedded in heterosexuality. Contract theorists such as Pateman(1988) have treated marriage as a sexual

contract between state and man. Pateman argues that when a man marries, he gains sexual access to the woman's body and to her labour as wife. These rights are clearly sexual in nature and they reproduce a conventional understanding of man woman relationship. The co-deployment of love and conquer together at the scene of first night presents an illuminating moment where both the promise of equality which is embedded in marriage as a social contract and the problem of woman's subjection inherent in marriage as a sexual contract are foregrounded⁷. Continuing with the same fictional construction can help to understand the nature of this love which is imagined as a conquering force throughout the narrative.

He found her standing, outside the house, in the backyard, near the tree, under moonlight. His rock solid hands encircled and lifted her as easy as a baby. The man who took the virginity of many girls in *Mayyazhi*, stormed to the bedroom with Girija in his arms. The door slammed. The night bulbul was singing. Girija's sobbing was audible beyond the closed doors. But when the Church bells of Mother Mayyazhi rang the next morning, one could hear her laughter along with the tinkling of her bangles. There were no marks of tears when she came out the next morning with a broken hymen. Her cheeks were blushed and eyes were drooping. The most delicate sound or movement distracted her. She was ecstatic. The man named Achu had taken away all her sorrows. Girija's eyes were not teary after that. (p. 191)

If this representation reveals the anxieties involved in imagining a successful or culturally desirable conjugal unit, the narrative resolution offered to this anxiety further reveals the cultural logic of first night. A duty which was initially performed by a powerful figure – the gods, the king, the Brahmin or even the white man – is now directly transferred to the 'ordinary' man or the modern husband. Or this night makes a husband modern through presenting him as someone possessing certain rights over the virgin body. It is through recognizing and exercising those rights over the virgin body that the modern husband is born. The successful resolution of first night depends on whether he is able to perform the duty of copulation assigned to him by state legality and community through modern marriage. The legal and juridical authority to initiate sexual relations with a woman is conferred to the man through marriage, but it is not sufficient to provide him with

sensual competence. Here the narrative enforcement of the sexual and sensual pleasure of the virgin bestows him with the legitimacy retrospectively. The narrative starts with the resisting female figure, who refuses to enter the bedroom and whose sobbing can be heard outside the walls and closed doors of the bedroom. But it concludes with the ecstatic figure of the conquered female. What Achu felt after the night is absent in the text. It is through a sensual description of the conquered female that Achu's success as a husband is established. Here first night reconstitutes the masculine by deflowering the virgin.

Through taking away a woman's virginity, the man conquers her and it is this act that gets referred to as 'love' in the text. Here defloration acts as the key structuring principle of love and ensures woman's subjection to the newly formed family. This text, even when it employs love as a major binding force between the heterosexual couples, reveals the nature of this love to be physical. Here love does not shift its locus to the internal, but rather employs the broken hymen as a crucial signifier of the love. This broken hymen and the constitutive role it plays in making and managing the conjugal unit is clearly an unresolved issue in the modern reformist discourse around sexuality, which projects a sufficiently individuated heterosexual couple and their satisfactorily interiorized love. It also provides a glimpse of the nature of love, which in arranged marriage is seen as the binding force. The instrument of love, at least in the discourse around first night, is not the mind or qualities that stem from the mind. On the contrary, it is the physical act, which later gets referred to as love. First night thus becomes the *surface of emergence*⁸ for mind-body dualism to emerge for observation and foregrounds the unresolved moment of modernity. The next section of this paper attempts to understand the presence of psychological surveillance around first night and in light of the present discussion, tries to think through the dynamics of the domain of the intimate that legitimizes the psychological gaze.

Surveillance around First Night and the Psy-Complex

Being a crucial location in the production of modern conjugality where the virgin bride transforms to the chaste wife, first night invites the community's surveillance. In the beginning of the twentieth century this surveillance was carried out

through familial instruments of coaching where dominant ideas around sexual relations were passed onto the bride and the bridegroom. Now the idea of coaching is more regimented where the familial instruments are replaced with community-driven premarital coaching classes. Initially premarital counseling was practiced only among the Christian cross sections of the population. And it was more of a theological initiation into the Christian idea of family. Given the hegemonic conjugal patronage in contemporary Kerala, (Kodoth, 2006) it is unavoidable that this site becomes a major zone of conflict which anchors negotiations around gendering and power. The deployment of psychology in such sites might not be accidental. The rationalizing discourse of modern psychology figures in this scheme as a prominent technology of surveillance and subjection.

Psychology here does not operate as a repressing force or coercive apparatus. Rather, psychology provides a new rationale of government and entails an attention to human individuality. Drawing from Michelle Foucault's notion of government (1991), Nikolas Rose (1998) places the production of the psychological subject in the genealogies of 'technologies of subjectification'. He argues that by providing regulatory systems to codify and calculate human functioning, psychology interiorizes surveillance. Psychology here invents what can be termed as the 'pedagogies of self' and the psychological authority created so is profoundly subjectifying by appearing to be emanating from our individual desires. It provides the conditions under which it is possible to take up the position of the speaking subject and make certain forms of utterances intelligible. Here psychology is treated not only as a system of knowledge, but it is also treated as a discursive constellation where the institutionalized knowledge forms interact with many other dominant categories and networks to create a consensus over the language to describe self. This can be termed as psy-complex where psy-complex becomes the network of theories and practices that include academic, professional and popular psychology (Parker, 1994). It covers the different ways in which people in modern culture are categorized, observed and regulated by psychology, as well as the ways in which they live out psychological models in their own talk and experience.

The pervasiveness of psy-complex in Kerala demands careful attention. Kerala has around 4 percent of India's population and about one third of institutions dealing with mental illness and related disorders (Franke and Chasin, 1994). A psychological culture that understands and relates to life in a therapeutic way ex-

ists here. During the arrival of psychoanalysis or psychiatry in India in the colonial times, it was restricted to urban pockets (Hartnack, 2001). But in contemporary Kerala, (practice of) psychology is not confined to an urban location. Psychological language pervades the commonsense and graft the way people relate to their work place, family and to themselves. This is connected to the pervasiveness of print culture and visual media culture in Kerala. The present paper focuses on print culture. The print culture of Kerala from the nineteenth century is well documented and studies have focused on how print contributed to the making of the Malayali public sphere (Menon, 1994; Ramakrishnan, 2000; Jeffrey, 2003). Arunima (2006, p. 74) observes how print culture enabled “co-existing and intersecting communities: based on language, kinship, faith or caste origin”. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2006) and Navaneetha Mokkal Maruthur (2010) contend that print culture is privileged in Kerala and it intercuts the sexuality debates and Maruthur (2010) argues that print culture “provides an important medium to track the specificities of the sexuality discourses in Kerala and its linkages to regional imagination” (p. 41). Drawing from these analyses, I wish to argue that print culture becomes a major medium for the proliferation of the psy-discourse.

To understand the surveillance around first night and the distinct engagement it has with psy-complex, this paper tries to capture the diagnostic gaze deployed around first night in the major circuits of popular print culture. It engages with self-help books and advice columns as the location of popular print culture, which reproduces the rationale of modern psychology. This documentation tries to analyze how the psychological gaze constitutes first night as a domain that needs corrective coaching and how the correction offered by the discourse psychologizes masculinity and the domain of the intimate. The discussion helps to throw light on how the community's relation to the virginal body and sexual relation becomes an individual subject's 'conduct issues' which demands 'behaviour modification therapies'.

‘First Night Talk’ in Self Help Books

The self-help book is a location where popular print culture and pop psychology converge⁹. It imagines an individual who is completely autonomous, who is self-contained in finding and resolving his or her problems. The diagnostic gaze presented by the self-help book is not an external gaze of surveillance. Instead,

it comes from within the subject, making the subject a detached observer with a distinct psychological gaze. This gaze raises some foundational questions regarding the way in which the modern subject relates to the world. De Vos (2013) argues that self-help books invent a subject who is quintessentially modern and psychologized in the sense that the subject redoubles to the one who acts and the one who observes the acting from an “objective and neutral position from where things can be assessed” (p. 20). He considers this as a quintessentially modern problem and considers this as “an extra subject, a redoubled subject” (p. 21).

The self-help books written by practicing psychologists are a major location of Pop Psychology in Kerala. These books address conjugality as an important site which requires psychological help to meaningfully negotiate through the experience. Self-help books discuss a whole range of issues from family disputes to finance management under the ambit of conjugality. However, there is primacy given to the conjugal unit and the dyadic communication between the husband and wife. The diagnostic gaze falls onto the communications that graft the everyday of the conjugal life while giving special focus to the events that punctuates this every day. First night is one such event and probably the most important event in these books on conjugality and they are replete with questions and answers on ‘how to conduct first night successfully.’ First night is treated as an ‘interpersonal event’ that marks the beginning of the relationship. This is a recurring concern that is addressed by this corpus of writing where first night is presented as a decisive night that could influence the success and endurance of conjugality. When ‘how to conduct a nice wedding’ becomes a general topic that any women’s magazine or lifestyle magazine would be interested in, ‘how to conduct a successful first night’ becomes a proper psychological topic where the professional expertise of the psychologist is warranted.

In one of the early writings which quotes from a psychologist’s case diary, first night becomes the *Agni Pareeksha* (Test of Fire) where it is considered as setting the stage for the “first performance of sexual dissatisfaction that could destroy the health of conjugality” (Nair PAG, 1979, p. 67). The psychologist continues, “Some people inaugurate discord on that night and for some others the discord exacerbates on the first night itself” (p. 64). In a recent writing, first night is described as the ‘dream space where thousands of colors bloom’ (Basheerkutty, 2001, p. 72). It goes on to add:

“For those who await first night after the engagement, the very thought of it gives the feeling of mild electric shock passing through the body, because the experience of first night is really important. There is only one first night in the life of a bride and bridegroom. The experiences of this night could affect the person’s entire post marital life in a positive or negative way. So it is the duty of each bride and groom to make this night beautiful”(p. 72).

An article titled *Vivekapoorvamaaya Samyogam* (Enlightened Union) by one of the most famous psychologists in Kerala, Dr. P. M. Mathew Velloor, which appeared in his anthology of articles *Dampathyam- BandhamvBandhanam* (Conjugality- Bond and Bondage)(2006) shows what happens when people approach first night without proper psychological coaching. It has the subheading *Purushathwam Theliyik-kaan* (To prove masculinity). I present this excerpt for its formulaic narration of the psychological difficulty embedded in first night.

Rajam’s face went pale when she described her experiences during first night. Hate and vengeance flickered in her eyes. Rajam who entered the bedroom with a glass of milk was startled when she saw her husband’s face. He was so tense. The look of a hungry Wolf! She was attacked by him in the next fifteen minutes. Though she hadn’t protested explicitly, she felt insulted. The disgust and hatred she felt on that night left dark shadows in her sexual relation with him. Most of the threads holding together the marital relation broke away. The remaining threads were so slender that they would have broken anytime. Thus after six months, to strengthen those threads, Rajam and her husband approached the psychologist (2006, p. 107).

This representation creates the image of a wild male body which brims with irrepressible sexual impulses. By narrating the story from the female angle, it reconstructs the sexual relation as a coercive one. Continuing with the same text shows how psychological discourse addresses this violation. The metaphor of locked door appears in the writing to suggest the anatomy of the female body linking it with popular notions of female sexuality and penetrative sex. The psychologist says, “It needs love, sense of security and tender approach to open the door which has been locked for years. Wild and aggressive moves will only destroy the lock,

bend the key or tear down the door” (p. 108). The article attributes the violence from the husband to ‘ignorance’ and it is the duty of the psychologist to help the man come out of ignorance and “help the woman realize that it is ignorance of the man that was causing *behavioral maladjustments*” (Emphasis mine) (p. 108).

This discourse normalizes sexual violence as a behavior maladjustment arising from lack of proper coaching. The psychological parlance is employed here to provide corrective coaching. This corrective coaching presents the double register of the body and the mind where the body is the seat of violence and the mind is the seat of love and the taming force. What is more interesting is the way one register displaces the other in this psychological rhetoric. First night being a culturally sanctioned moment of sexual relations, the body takes on a major role in the scene of first night. This body becomes an obstacle to the psychological project of intimacy and what the psychologist demands of the man is the taming of his own crude impulses; as if only a tamed male body would literally be able to embody intimacy. But this renewed focus on intimacy is provided as a psychological technique that could enhance the sensual competence of the man. The instrumental nature of intimacy deployed here is revealed by the dominant assumptions around sexual relations that the discourse reproduces. The man appears as the active agent and woman is the body to be penetrated. Psychology here aligns with the man to execute the legal, juridical and cultural right he has over the female body.

The same anthology contains a number of illustrations where the psychologist P. M. Mathew Velloor himself appears as the psychologist trying to resolve



Fig: 1 *Monster's Cot* Illustration from the book *Conjuality: Bond and Bondage*.

marital disputes. He appears as a fire-fighting cop who is pouring water on the scene of heated debate among a couple (p. 41), as a music composer who conducts a symphony for a married couple (p. 116), as an angel who touches upon a man's head with his magic wand to invoke love (p. 79), etc. The illustration (Figure 1) (p. 18) shown on the left is part of this series of illustrations that appear in the book

and shows the self-perception of the discipline. The illustration shows a woman lying down on a cot, helpless and completely disarmed; a man approaching her with a sharp sword in a violent frenzy and the psychologist trying to stop him from behind by holding on to his sword with a piece of cloth. The psychologist here appears as being engaged in a civilizing mission of controlling and holding back the savage male who embodies crude and violent impulses. The illustration is titled *Rakshasante Kattil (Monster's Cot)*.

First Night Talk in Advice Columns

Here I analyze two texts from locations that are not directly connected to institutionalized psychology. These texts show the proliferation of psy-discourses to the extent that even non-psychological locations are bound to reproduce the psychological gaze. Both texts reproduce the above discussed psychological discourse of 'conduct issues' faithfully. One is a question written to an advice column and the other is an answer given in another advice column; but they did not appear on the same column or even media. The question was posed in a 1989 Malayalam cinema and the answer appeared in 2010 in a popular health magazine. The question asked in the cinema goes unanswered in the cinema; the health magazine does publish an answer but presumes the question. I take these two disparate texts for analysis and combine them to make a single advice column text for their structural specificity complements the lack of the other wherein one misses the answer and the other misses the question. An analysis sensitive to this complementarity might be helpful to show how certain questions and certain answers presuppose each other revealing the contours of certain modes of speech. Together they show the success of the logic of advice columns where even without an answer the subject is healed. It is by seeping into the thought process and grafting the relation one has with oneself that advice columns entail the logic of government. By perceiving a crisis or imperfection in the self and seeking the help of an expert as a corrective measure, one institutes a psychological relation with the self and succumb to the diagnostic gaze. The absence of answer in the narrative is telling of how the subject is healed even without the direct intervention of the expert. Similarly the answer that is given without an explicit question shows the disembodied voice of psy floating in the culture where it could inhabit any

subject at any critical juncture. This voice clearly recognizes and revels in the recognition that the subject is ready to be addressed by the voice and inhabited by the logic of psyche. Keeping this discussion in mind I first present the question and then the answer.

Thalathil Dinesan and Will to Therapy

The question appears as a letter written to a psychologist by the lead character Thalathil Dinesan (Dinesan from here onwards) in the film *Vadakkunokkiyanthram* (The Compass 1989, dir: Sreenivasan). The film was critically acclaimed and was commercially successful at the time of its release. The frequent reproduction and replay of the comic scenes from the film on television comedy shows contributed to the elevation of the film to a cult status. The film revolves around the anxieties of Dinesan (Sreenivasan) regarding entering the conjugal union and negotiating it successfully. The film starts with a 'normal Dinesan' about to enter an arranged marriage. Dinesan desperately attempts to make himself worthy of the conjugal relation and this comes from the self-awareness that he lacks certain attributes of ideal masculinity essential for a 'successful' conjugal life. What accentuates this self-appraisal is the 'extreme beauty' of the girl who is going to become his wife. As the narrative progresses, Dinesan's masculinity crisis intensifies and after marriage he becomes suspicious of his wife and narrative ends where he becomes 'abnormal'. Radhakrishnan (2005) has observed that "the pathological male subject is narrativised in 1990s Kerala, not necessarily as a man with a mental illness, but as man who is *driven to madness* by the modern emancipated women" (p. 292, emphasis mine). While Radhakrishnan's analysis is focused on the 'crisis in masculinity,' my focus is on how the psy-sciences are deployed to address the perceived crisis in masculinity and what are the areas this discourse present as 'areas of intervention'. This analysis treats first night as a moment where the figure of the woman appears as threatening to the man and a successful resolution of the moment is crucial so that psychological expertise is called upon. This analysis tries to show how psy-sciences offer a modern solution to a modern problem.

The cinematic image of Sreenivasan and the nature of stardom associated with this image mediate the circulation and reception of the text under analysis. The stardom of Sreenivasan undercuts questions of caste, subalternity and visual-

ity within the body of popular cinema and it has been observed that Sreenivasan is placed as the other of the mainstream Malayalam heroes (Sanjeev and Venkiteswaran 2002; Rowena 2004). The making of Dinesan also resonates with these elements of stardom associated with Sreenivasan as a film star. Reverting to the 'question' that appeared without an obvious answer – There are many online platforms that reproduce film-based jokes and 'ThalathilDinesan jokes' are an essential part of them. For the purpose of the analysis, I reproduce one such joke here. The actual text of the joke is a letter supposedly written by Dinesan to the psychologist seeking 'psychological help' to face his first night. The text is accompanied by a picture of Dinesan's post-wedding photo, which has cropped upon many such online platforms. It is a common practice to take a studio portrait of a couple shortly after the wedding and this is usually exhibited along with other family photos on a wall, mostly in the living room. It is essential to acknowledge the layers of mediation that produce the new text out of a 1989 movie sequence and make it a widely circulating digital text. Below is a translation of the letter which is circulating on online platforms.

Dear Psychology Doctor,

Sir, I am totally confused. Please write on women's psychology as early as possible in your weekly. Because my marriage is fixed. The girl, who is going to be my wife, is extremely beautiful. The thought that I am going to marry a girl whom I don't deserve, upsets me. I have lived my life so far as per the valuable guidance you have provided through the weekly. Thank you for that guidance. First, let me tell you a naked truth. Doctor, I am not at all handsome. I am dark. I am not tall. So, I can conquer this beauty, who is going to become my wife, only through a psychological approach. I have to win a space in her heart. I have to do it on the first night itself. Please advise me on all known techniques for that. I don't smoke and I don't use alcohol either. I have the habit of saving. I think these are the qualities that have attracted the girl's family. I don't see any other reason for them to like me. I am asking you as if you are my elder brother. Is there any technique to increase height? Is there any technique to increase facial beauty? I haven't used any creams yet. What is your opinion about *Vicco Turmeric*? Does that make you fair? I kindly request you to answer all these queries and save me from this difficult situation¹⁰.

The letter shows Dinesan as someone who perceives himself as lacking in certain ideal attributes of masculinity. This self-perception needs an extended analysis. The letter places Dinesan firmly in the marriage market and what is perceived as being valuable in the market reveals some of the aspects that could contribute to the making of the ideal masculine figure. The letter shows that 'character' and money management skills are valued highly in the marriage market. It is observed that the logic of arranged marriage reproduces class and caste matrices and helps to control the boundaries of the community and private property (Karve, 1993). The self-presentation or self-perception of Dinesan clearly reproduces the institutional logic behind arranged marriage. The next concern is 'character'; for men it is always connected to abstinence from drinking and smoking and for women it is their readiness to take up subservient gender roles and premarital sexual inactivity. Here Dinesan is an ideal bridegroom with respect to the priorities of the family and he is aware of that status. He perceives certain shortcomings in comparison with the extremely beautiful girl who is going to become his wife. What is to be noted here is the self-perception splitting the subject in two – the one who looks upon oneself, and the one who becomes the object of that gaze. This is the diagnostic gaze and it is through internalizing this gaze that the solution foregrounded to the problem becomes a psychological solution. As pointed out by De Vos this splitting or doubling of the self is integral to the psychologized relations one institutes with oneself. De Vos (2013, 9) argues that "the subject is hailed into a kind of proto psychologist position from where it, together with the experts weighs up its psychological double".

The anxieties and concerns around first night expressed in the letter reproduce the formulaic narrative around first night. The letter presents the popular idea that the man should conquer the woman and that too on the first night itself. What pushes Dinesan to seek 'psychological techniques' that would help conquer his partner is his perceived lack of physical attractiveness. Though the letter and the concerns remain unanswered in the text of the film, psychological advice columns now employ Thalathil Dinesan to invoke a masculine subject who is in need of psychological services to equip him to face and negotiate conjugality. The same subject produced by the psy-complex is re-deployed in the psy-discourses to gain authority. For instance, a recent article that appeared in *Mangalam* weekly on doubting syndrome (*samsayarogam*) is titled *Thalathil Dinesan I vitokkethann eyundu* ("Thalathil Dinesan is around here")¹¹. The article belongs to the genre of

popular psychological writing and it starts with recounting Thalathil Dinesan and moves onto what appears as expert psychological talk. The return of Thalathil Dinesan in popular culture and the way he is invoked in popular psychological writing shows how the diagnostic gaze creates a pathological subject and how the pathological subject is later deployed to justify or lend meaning to the psychological intervention. This is the circularity of the discourse, where psychological discourse first creates a domain of pathology and a pathological subject through the diagnostic gaze and then the pathological subject is presented as a problem which needs psychological subjection. The focus is not on pathologization per se, but on the splitting and doubling of the subject where one becomes a proto-psychologist and internalizes the psychological ideal and perceives pathology in oneself. This could be seen as a high point of psychologization. The psychological discourse not only creates a rationale for its intervention, but also reaffirms the psychological authority as the indisputable one. In this move of self-validation, the psychological presents itself as the *only* problem and psychology presents itself as the only answer or the authentic way to tackle a problem.

Prescriptions: What is it to be a man?

One of the sample answers to the question aired by Dinesan, which has been echoing in different circuits in Kerala for the past two decades appeared in *Mathrubhumi Arogyamasika*, one of the popular health magazines in the Malayalam language.¹² Its focus clearly is on the ambivalent moment in first night – the sexual act. This discourse provides the prescription for ‘what is it to be a man in an intimate encounter’ and in this process reconstitutes both masculinity and the domain of the intimate in a single turn. The entire discussion is made possible through reifying the popular or the dominant idea of first night that it is about sex. But it is precisely this idea that psychology debunks in the process of establishing a diagnostic gaze. The psychological language escapes from being designated as a complex know-how by exercising the expertise to affirm human ethical virtues. For that, it has to first create room for its expertise and this is created through the deployment of a language that urges individuals to relate to themselves in a rational scientific way offered by psychology.

The article that follows appeared as a box within a larger article with the title

'Sex –the founding stone of conjugality'. The layout of the page clearly represents first night as a subset of problems marital therapists usually encounter in relation to conjugal sexual relations. But this box layout also suggests the distinctness of this moment and justifies the special treatment given to it. The tone of the article is one of advice. It is not the usual advice column that presents a letter and an answer to the problem presented in the letter. It has been observed that such advice columns present two different voices to make the voice of the expert more authentic where the confessional tone of the letter grant the therapist the authority to speak (Wilbraham, 1997). Such texts also work with the careful production of unidimensional and seamless flow of meaning. In the given text such a letter is not present, but the assumption is that the text is a response to a question which is present in the culture and this contributes to the authorial voice of the expert. The advice draws parallels between the game of cricket and first night. Sports and sex share one of the most popular double entendres in language with cricket being the most popular sports form in India, the psychologist invokes cricket as an easy and intelligible way to invoke the affective spectrum ranging from anxiety, suspense and exhilaration, which is common to both sports and sex. A specific focus is given to the aggressive, violent and competitive nature of sports and the attempt of the psychologist to invoke this analogy to displace it later as a popular misconception.

Men usually think marital sex is like twenty-twenty cricket¹³ where one is supposed to strike in the initial overs to win the game. But experts of psychology think this is not the right attitude. As per their opinion, first night is like test cricket where one should know the opponent, know the pitch and anchor oneself at the crease, to slowly build the innings. Most men close the door to first night with half anxiety and half excitement. Most of them have been given the advice that one has to establish dominance over your mate on the first night itself. Such people will never succeed. First night is not just about jasmine flowers, grapes, milk and intercourse as it is portrayed in films. *First night provides the first opportunity to conquer your partner's mind* (Emphasis mine) ("First Night is Like Test Cricket", 2010, p. 41).

The article starts with the popular idea that first night is all about sex. But the psychological or therapeutic authority is established by adopting a rhetorical stance

that sounds like it is debunking this very idea. Psychological discourse, which privilege mind over body, poses itself against the popular discourse on first night centered on the female body and the sexual act. It shifts the locus of action from body to mind. Here one can see a shift from the 'broken hymen,' the crucial signifier of a conquered female body, to more abstract mental attributes. The mind-body dualism does not leave the discourse and priority is given to conquering the mind as opposed to the popular belief of conquering the female body. It is interesting to note that conquering as a metaphor does not disappear or change. What does change though is the idiom of conquer. The article goes onto explain how to conquer the mind.

The bride and bridegroom will be exhausted by the time they reach the first night. Not only that, they might not have had a chance to familiarize and to get to know each other. In such a situation, initiating a sexual relation could even create the feeling of rape within your partner's mind. Sexual act must be attempted only after creating mutual understanding and intimacy. What would be beneficial is to take first night as an opportunity to open up the mind, to talk and to know each other. This night should be spent to create a hearty, soulful relationship (p. 41).

'Conquering the mind' and not just the body (or perhaps the body is conquered through the mind; one is reminded of the frequent invocation of cricket as a 'mind game') here becomes a careful psychological act that can be attained through creating 'mutual understanding and intimacy', 'opening up the mind', 'knowing each other' and through 'creating a soulful relationship'. This conquering is more authentic, legitimate and acceptable. Intimacy is deployed here as a prerequisite to all the exchanges that can be termed sexual or erotic that might happen on first night. This is a conquering that does not appear to the woman as conquering. The rhetoric of intimacy makes the conquering less visible. The irrational and impulsive male body is displaced through the deployment of psychological language. The sexual act is reconstituted here as coercive and displaced with a modern notion of intimacy and experientially particularized sexual encounter, where the locus of experience is not the body, but two sufficiently individuated minds that understand and touch each other only after adequately knowing each other.

This knowing happens through opening up the mind, which in turn can be done through talking. This narrativization of self becomes a necessary prerequisite to create the relation. The paper does not suggest that this 'will to discourse' diffuses consummation as an idea. Rather it reaffirms the power relations embedded in the sexual act with the deployment of carefully crafted psychological language. Intimacy grants the authority to "deflower" a woman, not the law directly¹⁴. The law here takes the form of intimacy and through the deployment of this normative intimacy the act upon the female body is sanctioned. It is through the deferral of this act that the performance of masculinity is reoriented around the axis of abstract mental attributes. This 'psychological hermeneutics' reinvents the domain of intimate where abstract mental attributes and the ability to create intimacy defines the successful man and the success of the night. The psychological hermeneutics recast the domain imagined conventionally to be mediated by body and carnal pleasures. It creates a savage man, creating a space for its civilizing mission in the process, displaces the savage man through psychological expertise and gives birth to intimacy.

It is illuminating that the key term that connects the two independent texts analyzed here in their mutual complementarity is 'conquer'. Dinesan's letter asked the 'psychological techniques' that can be used to 'conquer' the bride/the virgin/the future wife and this piece of advice clearly delineates those techniques. Conquer as a signifier and as metaphor represents anxieties that animate both the texts –anxieties around unbound female sexuality and the need to first conquer and then control it. Dinesan's letter represents a moment that has the potential to fall out of the domesticated scene of sexuality. And this fear of losing control over a threshold situation makes him think of conquer. The resistance shown by 'conquer as a concept' to yield to the intimacy rhetoric offers some valuable insights into the psychologization of the domain of the intimate and why this psychologization is problematic. The discourse of psychology works at the slippage between love and consent; sometimes collapsing the distinction between the two and sometimes keeping these two separate. It sometimes posits love as an instrument for eliciting consent and sometimes posits love as consent, confounding the two idioms of speech. This consent cannot do away with the power differential involved in the exchange; it rather reproduces the same through providing the *techne* for conquer. This psychology which lacks the ethical impetus to create the conditions for

love that go beyond the conquering impulse could only cover up conquer with the rhetoric of love. The linguistic or narrative construction of this form of masculinity and intimacy shows the psychological 'foldings' through which gendered subjects relate to themselves. The subject of desire is here referred to as a psychological entity where the 'autonomous self' comes as a regulatory ideal that defines the affective relations. The 'pedagogies of self' offered by psychology forecloses an ethical engagement with the self and produces the psychologized subject who interiorizes surveillance.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely indebted to Dr. Anup Dhar, my doctoral supervisor, for his critical insights and sustained encouragement. This paper draws from my doctoral work and I wish to acknowledge CSCS, Bangalore and Manipal University for their support.

Endnotes

- ¹ Kerala situated at the southern end of Indian subcontinent, is one of the 29 states in India. The princely states of Travancore and Kochi and parts of Madras Presidency, which were under the direct control of the British colonial administration, were merged in 1956 to form Kerala bound by the language, Malayalam, which was spoken by the majority of people.
- ² 'First Night' is the literal translation of the Malayalam word *aadyaraathri* which denotes the wedding night. It is the night following the publicly conducted marriage rite when the marriage is expected to be consummated. It is a pan-Indian practice and the name varies slightly region-to-region. The present paper focuses on the practice as it is observed in Kerala.
- ³ This shift has connection to structural transformations in the family, legal and juridical changes imposed by colonial courts and social and community reform. Colonial courts which followed English contractual marriage and patrifocal family structure presented matrilineal arrangements as promiscuous and barbaric. The social and community reform also responded to this reading of matrilineity and argued for a legal abolition of matrilineity that would give way to new marriage system that is in alignment with English contractual marriage or Vedic marriage where both these forms involved exchange of a virgin from one family to another. The main points of contestation were the easy solubility of alliances, lack of culturally validated ways of acknowledging biological fatherhood, lack of property rights for men (Kodoth 2001, p. 371). The legal moves along with reformist

interventions were successful in presenting matrilineal arrangements as primitive. The colonial court made a series of legal interventions in the beginning of the twentieth century which prohibited matrilineal alliances and gave validity to new marriage practices in the matrilineal communities and introduced land as formal property that could be inherited. Matriliney was legally abolished in Kerala by The Joint Family System (Abolition) Act, 1975 by the Kerala State Legislature.

- 4 Whether they are actually two different notions of marriage is not the question addressed here. CarollineOsella(2012) stresses the need to look at the two as two representational fictions that are placed against each other.
- 5 Modern marriage here represents the state sanctioned marriage which is similar to Vedic marriage –Kanyadan- in the rituals, in post marital residence and in property relations. This marriage came into practice in the early twentieth century in Kerala and resulted in the making of small patrifocal families out of matrilineal joint households.
- 6 *Purushartha* represents the battery of four principles guiding ethical conduct namely, *Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha*. This can be considered as a culturally available prescription around the ‘conduct of conduct’.
- 7 This article documents the deployment of this formulation in more than one site and tries to account for the tenacity of the concept of conquer in the concluding discussion
- 8 Foucault describes ‘Surface of Emergence’ in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) as the discursive field in which an object arises first for observation, description and analysis. He terms this ‘first surfaces of emergence’ (p. 41) and later modifies it to ‘planes of emergence’ (p. 42).
- 9 Pop psychology as used here suggests a particular psychological language which finds its space in the circuits of media production and adopts a scientific tone while trying to explain the concepts and *techne* of psychology in a way accessible to laypeople. In this writing Pop Psychology is not treated as simplistic, superficial or pseudoscientific; rather it is treated here as an ideological position available for psychology to inhabit. Jan De Vos (2015, 250) argues that pop psychology and self-help books are “adjacent parts of psy-complex [which] use and reinforce mainstream psychology”.
- 10 The letter can be accessed from many online sources. I have accessed it from <https://ml.wikiquote.org/wiki/വടകംകുറംകൊഴിയന്തം> (Accessed on 2014 November 11). The translation of the letter has tried to be as faithful as possible to the Malayalam phrases and tone of the original letter, as I think it is crucial to throw light on the self-description of the subject.
- 11 <http://www.mangalam.com/mangalam-varika/166104>
- 12 *Mathrubhumi* is one of the leading publishing houses in Kerala with the legacy of having been part of the nationalist movement and freedom struggle. *Mathrubhumi* daily and literary weekly are their major publications The *Mathrubhumi* health magazine is a recent addition which started publishing in 2000.
- 13 Twenty 20 cricket is a recent addition to the sport of cricket. When compared to Test Cricket, Twenty 20 is packed in a shorter time slot and is more aggressive. The game

encourages higher strike rates and there is compulsion on the batsman to keep a higher strike rate from the very beginning of the game. In test cricket, initial overs and sometimes an entire day is spent to 'know' the character of the pitch and the bowler and this obviously results in a lower strike rate. In the analogy strike rate represents the cultural assumptions and compulsions around sexual intercourse.

- ¹⁴ The law here represents the patriarchal norm. Here I wish to reinvolve the understanding of marriage as sexual contractual that gives legal rights for a man over a woman's sexuality. Indian legal system reaffirms this patriarchal right in Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code where it says that sexual intercourse by a man with his wife, who is 15 or above, is not rape even if it is without consent. Recently the Supreme Court rejected a plea to criminalize marital rape and upheld the legal right a man has over a woman's sexuality in marriage (Sinha, 2015). So here Law becomes both the patriarchal value system or 'Law of the Father/Man' and the concrete laws represented by the Indian Penal Code. The psychological discourse around first night invisibilizes this work and force of law through a rhetoric of intimacy.

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