Vol 2

Women in pre- and post-Victorian India:

The use of historical research in the writing of

fiction

by

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This work is dedicated to both my grandmothers,

Devaki Amma, and Saroja Iyengar.

A deep regret that I could not spend much time with my paternal

grandmother, Devaki Amma (Achchamma), is probably reflected

in my novel. Memories with her are few, but they will last

forever.

For my dear Ammamma, Saroja, who has always lamented the

lack of formal education in her life: this doctorate is for you.

Abstract

This practice-based creative writing doctorate supports the creation of a novel that is in part, historical fiction, based on research focusing on the discrepancies in the perceived status of women between the pre-Victorian and the postmillennial periods in India. The accompanying component of the doctorate, the analytical thesis, traces the course of this research in connection to the novel's structural development, its narrative complexity and its characters.

The novel traces the journey of two women protagonists – each placed in the 18th- and the 21st-centuries, respectively – as they reconcile to the realities of their individual circumstances.

The introduction to the critical thesis gives a brief synopsis of the novel. It also explains the rationale behind the approaches used in the novel, and in adopting a post-postcolonial and progressive voice throughout the fictional work.

The first chapter in the critical thesis demonstrates how findings from the primary and secondary research have been applied to inform the writing of the novel. It also explains the influence of the Indian oral narrative tradition and its related approaches on the creative process with regards to the novel.

The second chapter briefly surveys traditional assumptions about the liberal attitudes to female sexuality in ancient and pre-Victorian India through literary examples. It

identifies possible reasons for the changing status of women in contemporary Indian society, specifically in Kerala, which forms part of the settings in the novel.

The third chapter in the thesis examines Ambilli's process of self-acceptance or making peace with her past trauma. It draws on the Indian notion of karma, the folktales and storytelling tradition of south India, which believes in the philosophy that stories are one of the means by which women can reconcile to reality.

The fourth chapter elaborates upon the narrative devices used in the novel; its metafictional element and the inspiration for it.

The thesis concludes by analysing the process of the writing practice and places it within the context of the aims of the research subject: the changing status of women in India over the past three centuries with regards to their sexuality. Finally, the study contributes to contemporary literature by bringing to light some fascinating aspects of the public role of women in ancient and pre-Victorian India as well as some lesser-known historical incidents, and re-interpreting these in the novel in an engaging and informative narrative.

Acknowledgements

In the Indian culture, real acknowledgement is conveyed by the act of bowing down to touch an elder's feet. This would be the teacher's, in this context. The teacher then reacts by gently touching the student's head, thereby, completing the 'circuit'. Bowing down symbolises a shedding of the student's ego; by 'blessing' or acceptance of the gesture, the teacher becomes a selfless giver of positive energy. Thus, the receptor becomes the giver, the giver becomes the receptor. One lamp lights another.

For me, this kind of acknowledgement has always felt much more deeper and significant than to simply utter an English: 'Thank you'. With this in mind, I proceed to acknowledge the three main teachers I've had the privilege of studying with: supervisor, mentor, and confidante, Anne Karpf, without whom this project would have remained but 'an idea'. Anne's calm reassurances and patience in re-reading my novel along with the many thesis drafts have been a firm anchor throughout the eight years of this part-time study, during which I also delivered my second child, and relocated four times (between fifteen houses) across the two home countries of India and the UK. Thank you, Anne, for not giving up on me when I almost did. Peter Wilson's invaluable and prompt feedback helped bring focus to the various elements of my novel before his retirement in 2011. Martin Murray's

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opportunity, for seeing me through this course and my (often, fiery) lows, for

the air-miles, and for everything else, my loving husband, Praveen: I bow to

touch your feet.

Contents

Introduction

When a second-generation female migrant in multicultural Mumbai is brought up by loving but over-anxious parents who don't permit her to mingle with boys of her age, and consider the word 'sex' as taboo, the girl is unable to act in accordance with her own moral values. The protagonist in my practice-based element of the PhD, the novel, is Ambilli, and represents such an outcome of overprotecting children against the unknown in a new city. Her naivete and ignorance cause her to be betrayed by her best friends, one of who sexually violates her early in her career and leaves her emotionally tormented for over six years for having let it happen. Despite marriage to a young man 'too nice', and a home in faraway London, she finds herself increasingly suffocated by feelings of her shame, and comes back to Mumbai determined to resolve and confront her past all by herself. This forms the central focus of the story.

The novel begins in contemporary India; interspersed between third-person narratives that take the story forward are the protagonist's often-introspective journal entries, anecdotes or stray accounts from her childhood, and flashbacks, all of which are irregularly arranged and yet build towards the revelation of the traumatic episode in her past. Although Ambilli's quest for redemption is initially directionless, her journey is helped when she meets a childhood friend, Madhu. The latter – in complete contrast to the protagonist herself – is outspoken, has walked out on her marriage to a former lover, and is not the kind to harbour regrets.

The first section of the novel informally ends with the protagonist accompanying

Madhu as her research assistant to Mysore where she (Madhu) is learning about the life of women in ancient India – part of my own doctorate study. In the second, shorter segment, the protagonist begins to write a story set in the late 17th- and 18th-century-south India, supported by the above-mentioned research material. Like the narrative treatment in the first part of the novel, Ambilli weaves together flashbacks, first-, second- and third-person narratives, and real and made-up characters to create a metafictional novel in the historical fiction (henceforth called HF) genre.

The female protagonist of this HF novel, Paarvani, is a devadasi's daughter and a royal dancer in the palace of the Wodeyars that is ruled by Tipu Sultan (1750-1799), and is trained in the art of seduction. However, she is unduly tricked in a power-game by the ambitious Jamaal, Tipu's *killedar* or commandant-in-chief, and blames herself for a mass massacre in her village and the death of her best friend. The HF traces 18th-century-Paarvani's escape route from Mysore (in Karnataka) to Malabar (north Kerala). Through her journey - narrated by 21st-century Ambilli - readers can observe the contrast in the status of women from the communities of south India: specifically that of the traditional Nairs and the orthodox Namboothiris, and how their customs have been affected by external events in history spanning over 300 years. Another example of the transformation in social attitudes and practices concerning women which forms the spine of the novel can be found in the changing function and role of the devadasi. In a way, the novel is an illustration of the effects of British imperialism on female sexuality in India, where it has been pushed to the unconscious. Although not made entirely explicit in the novel, the HF content is an attempt as to how this can be consciously retrieved.

In the process of writing the fictional Paarvani's story and seeking redemption for her, Ambilli (who belongs to the Nair community) begins to be healed of her own past trauma and is eventually reunited with her husband. The most significant aspects of the novel are thus – its use of history in the protagonist's HF, female sexuality in India, and its use of different narratives.

Approaches used in the Novel

i) <u>The use of historical research</u>

This practice-based study spans the period of 1600 CE to the present day, and applies relevant findings in the HF element of the novel. Historicity in the latter, for example, concerns the effects of one ruler – Tipu Sultan, and the rise and spread of his reign – and confines itself to the states of Karnataka and Kerala in South India. Facets of this history (such as the exodus of Namboothiri brahmins to the south of Kerala [Logan, 1887, Vol-1 pp 452-3], the mass massacre of the Mandyam Iyengars[1] [Sampat, 2008] by Tipu Sultan in 1783, and his fanaticism, for example) have survived only as oral legends[2] (Logan, 1887; Pargiter, 1922, pp 2-4) in the affected communities and have so far been unavailable to the larger Indian population.

As a non-historian, I found the above revelations made during the course of the research journey to be shocking, all the more so because they are not mentioned in standard academic texts. This has prompted the use of a revisionist approach to history in the HF novel, and is guided by alternative perspectives, such as the literary or psychoanalytic, over prevalent historical narratives. Moreover, the contrast between what was

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[1]See Research notes: Interview with M A Narasimhan, one of the direct descendants of the Mandyam Iyengars.
[2]*Ibid*

considered 'normal' or routine with regards to female sexuality in 17th- and 18th-century India and the strict social conventions common to the contemporary Indian woman is portrayed by the characters of Paarvani and Ambilli who are set 300 years apart and are each made to endure a betrayal in the context of their individual time frames. Through their reactions to the given (fictional) circumstances and the process of their reconciliation, readers are presented with a picture of the impact of history on the evolving morality issues in India.

ii) <u>Postcolonialism, *post*-postcolonialism</u>

My novel, *Memoirs of a Taboo*, is the story of a 21st-century woman, Ambilli, and how she deals with the trauma of sexual abuse and betrayal by one of her best friends. While contemporary and urban Mumbai, India's IT-hub Bangalore and, briefly, London, form the backdrop of Ambilli's story, her creation of the 18th-century Paarvani as the protagonist of her own novel introduces elements of metafictional narrative as well as history: the novel within novel draws on lesser-known historical research about the life of devadasis, courtesans, and the escape of Namboothiri brahmans and Hindu families from Tipu Sultan's army to the south of Kerala through portrayal of certain incidents and fictional characters.

The novel is thus a work of fiction that deals predominantly with the changing status of women through the past 300 years in south India. In doing so it naturally engages with some pre-colonial and colonial facets of life through characters in Malabar and Mysore, as well as certain postcolonial and *post*-postcolonial aspects of the cities of Mumbai and Bangalore, through Ambilli's family and friends.

This chapter forms a part of the larger thesis in discussing the application of historical research in the creative context of its subject, that is the novel, *Memoirs of a Taboo* (henceforth, *MOAT*). In view of this, interrogating the vast and complex area of postcolonialism lies beyond its scope. Nevertheless, this chapter intends to engage with the relevant use of the term, *postcolonialism* and attempts to justify its features and its limitations with regards to English writing in the Indian context, as well as with reference to my own novel. With regards to usage of the hyphenated *post-colonial*, and

postcolonial, in order to avoid confusion, the hyphen is applied to denote chronological time as *past* the colonial period, whereas postcolonial is used as the conventional term for a category or body of study, for example, postcolonial literature.

The chapter is divided into three sections: In the first, I begin with the concepts of colonialism and postcolonialism and discuss the representation of colonial and postcolonial writing in the context of India, and Indian writing in English in this regard. This is followed by a brief subsection focussing on some of the consequences of stereotypes in postcolonial representation. Section two explores the reasons we need to go beyond postcolonialism, postmillennial and post-postcolonial writing, alongside the new *Indianness* as depicted in postmillennial fictions by Indian English writers. Finally, section three contains a brief overview of the contemporary Indian political context and how it has been used as a background in the novel.

I

Colonialism and Postcolonialism: Some definitions, representations, and consequences

Colonisation is defined by the Oxford dictionary as "The action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area" (*OED* 2018). For the sake of this discussion we will assume this 'area', or country, is occupied by indigenous peoples who already maintain certain traditional belief systems and enjoy a self-sustaining, secure livelihood. Colonisation then, often exercised through the use of military force by the dominant imperial power,[3] involves the presence of colonial

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3   Imperial power (relating to *authority to command* or rule), often confused with colonising power, is
     that which is exercised by the dominating or ruling empire, through use of military force and
     colonisation over a certain country.

settlers who seek partial or complete political control of the country in question by economic, behavioural or linguistic exploitation of its occupants. In response, colonised people often resist or aim to overthrow certain policies or actions of the colonisers through violent or non-violent protest.

Many definitions of *colonialism,* however, do not explicitly consider the mental occupation of the coloniser over the colonised people, confining themselves to the physical occupation of their land. Horvath, for example, defines colonialism as a 'form of domination' that interestingly, is sought by the (politically) power-hungry: "the control by individuals or groups over the territory and/or behaviour of other individuals or groups" (1972; p 46). Boehmer defines it as the consolidation of imperial power that is manifested in, "the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands" (1995; p 2). This process of domination or control by the colonising power can permanently alter or complicate the social structure, culture, education, and economy of the colonised nation. Furthermore, and not surprisingly, the psychological impact of colonialism on the identity of generations of native individuals is perhaps the most damaging of the effects of colonisation as it appears to continue even after the eventual exit of the coloniser.

Before we move on to this *post*-colonial period, however, it will be interesting to observe the colonisers' perspectives about their experiences as settlers in the territories they occupied. As this study focusses on the Indian context, we will look at some of the colonial literature and their representations of Indian imagery in their works.

Indian imagery in colonialist writings

Most imperial narratives from the late 1600s to early or mid-1900s – in the form of travelogues, works of fiction or non-fiction[4] – translated or written generally by white Europeans and Anglo-Indians, embodied colonial interpretations and 'attitudes *in response to* the culture and also the struggles of the colonised' (Boehmer, 1995; p 22 [*author's emphasis*]). Through their translations, it appeared, though briefly, as if the colonising West was in fact, favourably influenced by the pre-colonised East. For example, until the second half of the 18th-century, the earliest recorded transaction between Western and Indian writing remained the 5th-century *Panchatantra* tales translated, "from Sanskrit through Middle Persian, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew and Latin in a number of modern European languages, including Czech in 1528, and through Italian into English in 1570" (Trivedi, 2007; p 122).[5]

Around the late 1700s, prominent orientalists such as William Jones, Charles Wilkins, Warren Hastings, H T Colebrooke and others continued to be amazed by the wonders of ancient and Vedic India through a thorough study of the classical Sanskrit texts, and attempted to re-discover her 'glorious history (buried) in a cloud of fables' (Jones, 1788, cited in Singh, 1996; p 67).

And yet, on the other side and just a few decades later, there also existed colonial works of fiction such as *On the Face of the waters* (Flora Annie Steel, 1896), *Kim* (Rudyard Kipling, 1901), *A Passage to India* (E M Forster, 1924) and *Bhowani Junction* (John

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[4] *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, by Abbe J A Dubois ([1816], [1906], 2000), for example; *Malabar Manual*, by William Logan ([1887], 2004); *Voyages to the East Indies,* by Fra Paolino Da San Bartolomeo (1796).

[5] In this book, Trivedi has also pointed to evidence of other ancient texts such as the *Upanishads*, translated to Persian under the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh in 1626, followed by its selective translation into French along with the *Bhagvatam* by Maridas Poulle and Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron in the 1780s; a manuscript of the 2nd-century BCE *Yajurvedam* as seen by Voltaire in 1760.

Masters, 1954), among many others. As for the orientalists, the audience for these fictions seemed to be not Indians themselves, but either Anglo-Indian readers resident in India, or indeed the British in their own distant country who received, through these works, a heavily generalised flavour of the exotic.

My secondary readings about Western scholars on colonial literature set in the Indian context seem to suggest that the political, cultural, spiritual, mystical or even 'magical' landscape of the country, including its 'dark natives', provided colonial fiction writers with a kind of creative licence, or an escape for their literary imagination. What they could not freely express in their own country on account of Victorian morals, such as homosexuality, women's sexual desire, etc, they could conveniently transpose into their writings set in India.

The author and academic, Benita Parry, for example, in her study of India in the British imagination ([1972], 1998), mentions Flora Annie Steel's writings as showing 'a greater surrender to wild fantasies', and alleges that 'all her fiction carries the conviction that Indians are slaves of sexual passion'. As Parry goes on to illustrate, the hero, in Steel's *On the Face of the Waters,* finds himself unable to understand the desires of Indian womanhood: "Their eternal cult of purely physical passion, their eternal struggle for perfect purity and constancy, not of the soul but the body, their worship alike of Sex and He who made it, seemed incomprehensible" (Steel, 1896; p 172, cited in Parry [1972], 1998; p 113). Thus, the 'light' fictions set in India that were written by Victorian women novelists appeared to be both fantasy and nightmare.

These attitudes were not particular to British women. In *Orientalism*, Said recognised

the stereotypical and patronising response to oriental writings by Western men as well.

In reference particularly to Gustave Flaubert's experiences and travels, he asked: "Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate...Nevertheless one must acknowledge its importance as something eliciting complex responses, sometimes even a frightening self-discovery, in the Orientalists" (Said, [1978], 2003; p 188).

Colonialist writings also included tales of expansion, adventure and travel involving actual treasures of 'gold and ivory, cinnamon and ginger, parrots, and exotic beasts' (Boehmer, 1995; p 15).

In her critical study on imperialism and textuality, Boehmer also remarks on the abundance of generalised oriental metaphors and similes, of 'marvelous and unintelligible realities, for fancy and escape, childlike imaginings and sudden transformations, opulence and sensuality' (*ibid*, p 45) in the tales from the *Arabian Nights*, itself a compilation of complex origins pointing to India or Persia. For many European writers - including Wordsworth (*The Prelude*, 1850), Thomas Carlyle (*Sartor Resartus*, 1833), John Ruskin (*Sesame and Lillies*, 1865), and many of Charles Dicken's novels, among others - the *Arabian Nights*, she notes, served as an Asian reference point in order to understand what was beyond their imagination.

In effect, colonial fictions showed India as merely an exotic backdrop to tales of passion and improbable adventures, of the consequences of interracial unions, of Anglo-Indian life and 'the Indian problem' (*ibid*, p78). Moreover, the imagery in these works typically

projected 'energizing myths' of the British Empire as a racially and morally superior

military power on which the Sun would never set (*ibid*, p 23). Its colonised natives, by

contrast, tended to be represented as the 'white man's burden' (Kipling, 1899), in need of

urgent rescue and reformation.

However, as resistance against the British in India grew towards the late 1800s onwards,

seemingly nationalist English-language narratives by Indian writers gradually appeared

on the literary scene to attempt to repair or correct the supposed above

misrepresentations to make an identity of their own, and also to reflect upon their

experience of being ruled by the colonisers. The term '*post*-colonial' may have come to

mark the end of the colonial period. But, given the overriding impact of the English

language in India (also a remnant of the colonial encounter) in the several fields

interlinking Indian education, literature and politics, the question remains whether one

can really mark an *end* to the colonial period at all.

Postcolonialism

Defined as the 'political or cultural condition of a *former* colony' (OED, 2018 [emphasis

mine]), the term postcolonialism might be thought to mean a complete disconnect from

the colonial past,[6] and perhaps even a return to (or a re-adaptation of) the original, *pre*-

colonial status, despite an acknowledgement of a changed culture. But given the number

of years spent under colonial rule, it is evident from the Asian and African experience

that this is too simplistic a formulation. For example, despite seventy years of being an

independent country, India as a postcolonial nation continues to carry remnants of the

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[6]   This point has also been mentioned by Jaidev in '*Na Aane Wala Post-colonialism*' in, *Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, 1996; p 177.

power imbalance that the British left behind; its collective psyche is unable to separate the effects of the colonial 'superior' past from the memory of its present.[7] Consequently, the label 'postcolonial' continues to externally impose itself as a prefix onto so many dimensions of Indian life, be it postcolonial literature, postcolonial music, postcolonial art or even a postcolonial diaspora away from its home. This means that all kinds of cultural and historical developments in India are still seen in relation to the colonial experience, even if they have little to do with it. The term postcolonial is thus as aggrandising as the colonial project itself was.

Postcolonial writing: Western definitions, Indian opinions

Postcolonialism has been defined as the effects of colonisation on culture and society. In the literary context, John McLeod (2000) states that this involves one or more of the following:

> " -   Reading texts produced by writers from countries with a history of colonialism, primarily those texts concerned with the workings and legacy of colonialism in either the past or the present.
>
> -   Reading texts produced by those that have migrated from countries with a history of colonialism, or those descended from migrant families, which deal in the main with diaspora experience and its many consequences.
>
> -   In the light of theories of colonial discourses, re-reading texts produced during colonialism; both those that directly addresses the experiences of Empire, and those that seem not to" (McLeod, 2000; p 33).

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[7]   This point is further exemplified later in this section under the subhead '*The deep reach of colonialism and postcolonialism as reflected in the novel'*.

Overall, much of postcolonial writing is said to reflect 'all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day' (Ashcroft et al, 1989; p 2), and constitutes:

> "[the] discussion about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy and linguistics, and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these come into being" ([1995], 2006; p2).

Despite the usefulness of such a definition, it is interesting to note that the majority of postcolonial theories and definitions have been written by contemporary Western authors and academics. Equally striking is the fact that they have been dominated by a single Western narrative about the political and socio-cultural implications of their own colonial rule.

I have searched for a definition of postcolonialism from an Indian perspective, that is by Indian academics writing in English, but have failed to find one. Instead of discovering new, experiential definitions from the other side of postcolonialism that I had anticipated from Indian critics, I found only their reasons for dissatisfaction with the term, as, for example, gaining 'an unproblematic acceptance' in Indian universities "perhaps even more readily than many other concepts because it is supposed to involve us directly" (Mukherjee, 1996; p 3). In her essay on the subject, Meenakshi Mukherjee further pointed to the erstwhile blanket label of 'Commonwealth Literature', which

included all writing from Australia, India, Canada, Nigeria, Kenya, Trinidad, Jamaica, and Barbados and so on, but which excluded the mother-country, that is, British literature. "As academics (of Commonwealth writing) we used to be furtive creatures, lurking in the margins of English departments, most of which had a concealed hierarchy that 'privileged' British literature" over the former. Postcolonial writing by contrast possibly appeared to be free of 'such centralist undertones', and *lifted* the status of the writer or academic belonging to any of these countries, into "confident global intellectuals...who are redefining the notion of the text" (*ibid*, p 7).

While I did not find myself agreeing with some of Arun Mukherjee's responses to Western critics, it was clear that the imbalance in theories of postcolonialism was also not unnoticed by the handful of other prominent Indian scholars such as Jaidev or Harish Trivedi interrogating the postcolonial with reference to India.

Arun P Mukherjee has voiced his 'uneasy' disagreements with Western postcolonial critics on two fronts. Firstly, that postcolonial works from the many hundreds of diverse 'Commonwealth' countries from around the world were reduced to just "six texts" in Ashcroft's *The Empire Strikes Back*, which were further categorised into three common 'shared themes and recurrent structures and formal patterns'. Ashcroft refers to these themes as sharing: "psychic and historical conditions across the differences distinguishing one post-colonial colony from another...the theme of exile ...and the ubiquitous concern with place and displacement in these societies" (1989, p 29). Considering that the British colonial era began only around the 16th-century in India, perhaps Mukherjee's concern is that Ashcroft's themes neglect the pre-existence of the ancient Indian civilisation. Its many cultures, religious beliefs, and customs, for

example, have successfully filtered through and survived the interim four centuries in India, and continue to prevail and colour the writings of the post-colonial age.

In fairness to the authors of *The Empire Strikes Back,* the book also analyses almost twenty texts from various postcolonial countries in several categories of textual strategy and thematic parallels. However, its characterisation of the three most salient features of post-colonial writing as: "the silencing and marginalization of the post-colonial voice by the imperial centre; the abrogation of this imperial centre within the text; and the active appropriation of the language and culture of that centre" (1996, p 15), does raise some questions for Mukherjee. According to him, to frame all the writing that comes from India after the departure of the colonisers within these features appears to be too generic. He reminds us that the many 'resistances' in the Indian context are not only against the imperial rule or the Empire but also struggles against patriarchy, the socio-political context and the rise of fundamentalism, caste and class hierarchies, colourism, and so on. As against this it might be argued that patriarchy and the rise of fundamentalism are cultural forms and political developments not unrelated to colonialism – indeed, their intersections might prove the most fertile areas to explore.

Mukherjee's second problem with Western theories of postcolonialism concerns the singular terms of 'colonised' or 'oppressed'. For example, the coloniser in the Indian context could also be an internal or 'homegrown' oppressor, such as the upper castes or class and the various hierarchies of the lower classes. Examples of struggles in such novels include Mulk Raj Anand's sweeper-protagonist Bakha in *The Untouchable* or the lower-caste character of Arundhati Roy's Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. To

understand the circumstances or divisions within India as represented in these novels, the preoccupations of postcolonial theory are of only limited use. Indian authors don't invariably think about 'postcolonial' self-identity. Their decisions about plot or character are just as likely to be driven by aesthetic or dramatic considerations.

In his essay, *Na Aane Wala Post-colonialism* (1996 [The post-colonialism that is not going to arrive]), Jaidev analyses Hindi novels from the 1950s onwards whose stance is more ideological, hopeful, and in keeping with the Hindu Indian beliefs or traditional concepts.[8] Set just after Indian independence in 1947, the message conveyed in the Hindi novel *Andhere Band Kamre* (1961; [Dark, closed rooms]) by Mohan Rakesh, for example, is that there is a dignity, culture, and beauty in being poor; a rich man must question himself if the riches are accumulated at the expense of the poor or the nation. Questions are also raised in the novel about the "amount of modernity, development and individualism that we truly, legitimately require and the point beyond which these become a trap for the individual, a malaise for the nation" (Jaidev, 1996; p 179). Individualism, a prominent aspect of Indian English postcolonial novels, is discouraged as a Western import. However, in later Hindi novels published from the 1970s onwards, Jaidev finds contrasting sentiments: the post-colonial, post-independent dream, he suggests, of novelists' faith in "practices based on idealism, justice, change of heart and activism...necessary for dismantling the colonial structures" (*ibid*, p 178), was over. In these new fictions, such as *Raag Durbaari* (1968) and *Na Aane Wala Kal* (1968; [The tomorrow that will not arrive]), *Ek Chithda Sukh* (1979; [A scrap of happiness]), *Bimal*

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8   For example, excessive indulgence in the senses of lust or desire (*kama)*, anger (*krodha)*, excessive greed (*lobha*), excessive covetiousness (*moha*), intoxication (*mada*), and competitiveness (*maatsaryam*) are believed by Hindus to be the six enemies or obstacles in the path to salvation, or *dharma* (right conduct).

(1982), themes of simplicity and innocence are replaced by corruption and fraud; the protagonists see themselves as victims; Anglo-Indian and English flirts are adored while virtuous Indian wives are despised. In addition, the poor began to be portrayed either as invisible, as saints close to achieving *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of life and death), or as a national curse. In effect, Hindi novelists, according to Jaidev, began to write about two conflicting Indias (pp 180, 181). Jaidev's essay thus expresses concerns about a 'distorted modernity' and admits that it is not possible to think of a 'genuine' post-colonialism in the face of such attitudes.

This raises the question of whether and how post-colonial fiction written in Hindi and other Indian languages differs from that written in English, and whether it can still be classified as post-colonial merely on the grounds of the date of publication.

Is the Indian 'postcolonial' limited to Indian English writing?

With contemporary India claiming to be the world's second-largest English-speaking population (*BBC*, 2012), it appears highly probable that unless a work of literature is translated into the language of its colonisers, however indigenised– like the ancient epics (*Ramayana, Mahabharata*), and stories from the *upanishads* based on mythology and folklore often weaving into one another (*Kathasaritsagara* [Ocean of Stories], plays written by Bhasa, Kalidasa, and many others), or presented in a new English-language novel – the Indian regional past will continue to remain elusive to successive generations of Indians increasingly schooled in the English-medium educational institutions.

To further understand this, we will look at some regional/vernacular-language novels from culturally (and geographically) variant parts of India that were published during the colonial and postcolonial period. With respect to Ashcroft's definition of postcolonial literature as reflecting 'all the culture affected by the imperial process *from the moment of colonization to the present day*' (Ashcroft et al, 1989 [emphasis added]), only two among these seven titles directly or indirectly address the effects of the British empire:

Yamuna Paryatan (1857; Marathi/West India, [Yamuna's pilgrimage]) by Baba Padmanji Mulay, implores the need for widow remarriage through the plight of the protagonist, Yamuna, an upper caste young 19th-century Hindu widow who eventually converts to Christianity to escape from her circumstances. Rabindranath Tagore's works, such as *Gora* (1909; Bengali/East India, [White man]), explores questions of Indian identity and nationalism in the face of British rule. The underlying theme in Tagore's *Jogajog*[9] (1929; Bengali, [Relationships, or connections]) is that of rivalry between two Bengali households: the Chatterjees and the Goshals, and also of marital rape. The Hindi novel *Godaan,* from central India (1936; [The donation of a cow]), by Munshi Premchand, is also about caste segregation and the tragicomic-sequence of events that transpire when a simple villager, Hori Mahato, desires to buy a cow.[10] Kerala's Vaikom Mohammad Basheer, a Gandhian, is highly respected and known for his novels depicting humanity and love. His novellas, *Ntppuppakkoranendarnnu* (1951, Malayalam/south India [My Granddad had an Elephant]) voiced the folly of

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[9] The novel '*Jogajog*' was translated into English in 2006 by Supriya Chaudhuri for The Oxford Tagore Translations. In a review of the translation in *The Hindu* ('*An uneven relationship*', 2006), the latter has acknowledged the challenge in translating the title itself, which has no equivalent term in English. "The word may be rendered as contact, connection, or even communication in one meaning; in another it clearly implies coincidence... It would be useless to speculate as to which of these meanings was foremost in Rabindranath's mind when he chose the name." (Biswas, 2006)

[10] *Godaan*, or the act of donating a cow (to charity) is an important Hindu ritual, and symbolises the wish to attain divine blessings before embarking on one's final pilgrimage.

superstitions arising out of illiteracy in [his] Muslim community, while the semi-autobiographical *Mathilukal* (1965; Malayalam, [Walls]) was about a tender love that blooms between two prison inmates - a male (jailed for his involvement in pre-independence struggle against the British) and female (life-imprisonment for murdering her husband) – both of who only speak to each other on either side of a huge wall, and never get to meet. U R Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* (1965, Kannada/south-India; [Tradition]) – a popular novel about the irony of a south-Indian brahmin who is excommunicated for marrying a prostitute. The brahmin's eventual death sees no one volunteering to perform his last rites, thereby the entire community is contaminated by his dead body. Of these above titles, not all have been translated into English and are thus, lesser-known among the contemporary, English-speaking Indian generation[11]. More significantly, only two of the novels (*Yamuna Paryatan,* 1857; and *Gora,* 1909) adhere to Ashcroft's conditions as appearing to be driven by a rationale to change social attitudes in the face of British rule in India. These novels point to the limitations of Western definitions of postcolonialism: while the term has some explanatory value in helping us understand the experience of colonisation, it is ultimately reductive and cannot contain and the range and richness of these texts. Should, indeed, the label of 'postcolonial writing' be attached to all these works merely because they fall into the *timeframe* of the post-colonial era?

A similar problem obtains with Tharoor's English-language novel ironically entitled '*The Great Indian Novel*' (1989). The novel, a well-received satire, recasts the story and characters of the *Mahabharata* (pre-colonial elements) in the 20th-century, from the

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[11]   *Godaan* and *Mathilukal* were turned into successful Hindi (1963), and Malayalam (1990) films, respectively.

nationalist freedom movement until the 1970s in independent India (colonial as well as postcolonial elements). While Tharoor's novel was seen as ahead of its time, it enjoyed tremendous international success owing to its literary humour and intelligent style. Nevertheless, and except for the (English) language in which it was written and first published, it still cannot truthfully be called a postcolonial novel as it does not engage with, for example, the 'silencing and marginalization of the post-colonial voice, or the abrogation of the imperial centre within the text' from Ashcroft's typology. Instead, it makes active use of Indian mythology and oral narrative style to make a commentary on the contemporary Indian democracy during the time. Perhaps then we need a redefinition of what constitutes the postcolonial novel from India: would it be more helpful to see it as a novel that is made *accessible* to the English post-colonial*ist* reader?

While the answers could be varied and outside the purview of this thesis, it would be worth investigating, with regards to the introduction and assimilation of the English language into the Indian cultural ethos, the theory that Indian writers writing in English are more self-conscious knowing that their works will be read and interpreted by another culture. After all English, in Indian postcolonial literature is a 'borrowed pen' (Boehmer, 2013) and not the Indian author's mother tongue. Indeed even I sometimes found it difficult to articulate and translate certain intrinsic Indian socio-cultural expressions in *Memoirs of a Taboo*, despite being literate in English and barely in my native and other vernacular languages. The stories of the merchant and his camel (*MOAT*, p 180) and the king and the green mangoes (*ibid*, p 134) – oral narratives from the *Upanishad* and folklore, are some examples that were made accessible by their English picture book avatars.[12]

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[12]   The *Amar Chitra Katha* series (launched in the 1970s) are known to be India's first fully illustrated

The next subsection thus examines textual differences in some translated works of Indian-language literature to illustrate how language and cultural background of the reader complicates the notion of postcolonialism.

Lost in translation: English, and the bi-lingual author

The introduction of English education and literature to Indians in the early 1800s – in order "to make them a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (Macaulay, 1835) – resulted, according to Homi Bhabha, in an ambivalent colonial identity that was 'almost the same, but not quite/not white' (1994, p 92). In the foreword to his novel, *Kanthapura* (1938), the author, Raja Rao had already expressed this dilemma: "The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up – like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians" (Raja Rao, 1938; vii, *Kanthapura*).

A look at Kamala Das' self-translated autobiography illustrates this further. Das (1934-2009), who came from a Nair matrilineal family, was known for her bilingual, fearless poems and bold stories depicting the problems of women's sexuality and the quest for

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picture-books that retold folk-tales, legends, history, and mythology stories. Although initiated to fill the gap in traditional knowledge in the face of English language schools and targeted at children, the comic books enjoy a wider age-range of readership to the present day.

identity in the light of the colonial breakdown of the matriarchal system in Kerala. The book is feminist and postcolonial on two accounts: firstly, because it belongs to the 'autobiography' genre which, as we have seen earlier, relates to Western concepts of 'individuality' or notions of the 'self'. The search for identity or the 'confessional' tone in an autobiography addresses 'the fetters imposed on the female artist' (Boynton, Malin, 2005; p 467) and serves as a form of emotional release. Secondly, apart from her stories of a 'broken womanhood', and the 'hypocrisy and cruelty' of men through her failed marriages, Das records in her autobiography experiences of 'torture' through racism that she and her brother experienced in a British school in Calcutta during the pre-independent years.

Called *My Story* (1988), the autobiography was first published in Malayalam in 1973 as *Ente Katha*, and still remains a bestseller in India despite the outrage it provoked among many readers. Although Das has translated the book from Malayalam to English herself, there are visible differences between both the texts. This loss in translation is inevitable, owing to some of the cultural, social or linguistic aspects of the Malayalam language that are untranslatable into English, and which therefore have to be conveyed in a way that is familiar to the Western readership. For example, in the Malayalam text, Das ruminates about a widow. The author's feelings of awe and respect upon seeing her sitting in the courtyard are compared to the refreshing feeling (of *unmezavum, kautukavum;* closely translated as excitement, awe or pleasure) on watching a beautiful cinema. By contrast, in order to convey to the Western reader about widows in India who usually tend to be clothed in white[13], she reduces her poetic expression to a single

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[13] This could also be a stereotypical image of the widow as portrayed in Indian films. Besides, in Das' Kerala where the *kasavu* saree is traditionally worn by a large majority of the women, white and off-white sarees with a gold-zari or coloured-cotton border is extremely common.

sentence, using the metaphor of Grimm's fairy tale character, Snow White: "The widow, wearing plain white, flitted about like an aging snow white in the garden where roses of several colours grew." On another occasion, she likens her *Nalapat* house to Shakuntala's *Kannvasramam* (the hut or *ashram* belonging to sage Kanva where Shakuntala, Kalidasa's protagonist had taken shelter) in the Malayalam version. The reference to Kannvasramam uses merely two words ('*kannvasramam pole'* [like kannv*asramam*]), which instantly captures in the Indian reader's mind the entire story of Shakuntala, the metaphor of the house and what it means to Das on an emotional level. The graphical description of the palatial house in the English text takes up almost two paragraphs[14] and is devoid of any deeper meaning. Thus, in a supposedly postcolonial novel, the nuances and differences between the Indian language of origin and the translated English version, ironically, affects its own postcoloniality.

In the revised addition to chapter 35 in *Memoirs of a Taboo*, the retired professor and Indian-language translator Madhav Tripathy justifies this argument when he tells Madhu that he finds it easier translating an Indian-language text to another Indian language 'as the reader knows the context already', rather than to English: "If you were to describe the *champa* flower for a Hindi reader, or say, the *raatrani* for that matter, for example, you would call it *champa,* or *raatrani.* Correct? But, if I were to use the image of these beautiful flowers in English, the nuances of what it makes me feel, the mythological stories they bring to my mind, the endless comparisons to pining lovers

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[14]   "The house though not large by local standards, had an inner courtyard and a temple situated inside the main hall which opened to the south. There was a gatehouse which had a steep staircase...a portico supported by pillars...a hall where the men sat down to eat their meals, a dining hall for the women of the house, the servants' quarters, three small bed rooms on the ground floor, three bed rooms on the first floor...and an attic. To the south of the house was the snake shrine...the Sraddhapura, house built for cooking food for the dead on their anniversaries, and the coconut estate where after each cremation a tree was planted in memory of the newly deceased. There was a bathhouse near the pond...to lie in the sun with its mouth open to trap the dragonflies." (Das;1988, pp 11-12)

and gods...where do I begin?" (*MOAT*, p 184-5).

The bi-lingual author, and the postcolonial Indian English novel

It is entirely plausible that every Asian or Indian writer is at least bi-lingual or has the ability to understand multiple languages, thus imbibing the various differences in the cultures and socio-political undertones of those languages. In my experience as someone who can understand six Indian languages, write in three and converse in at least five of these, I find it almost effortless to flit from the context of one language to the next, regardless of whether the subject is a poem, prose or an anecdote. However, transposing these 'authentic' Indian socio-linguistic and cultural contexts to a work of English is undoubtedly challenging. Considering this, it is interesting to observe the use of English in the work of a bi-lingual Indian writer in order to make it accessible for non-Indian readers. The following paragraph briefly looks at some postcolonial Indian English writers and their treatment towards depicting 'Indianness' in their novels using a few excerpts, as well as pointing to examples from my own work, *Memoirs of a Taboo*, which is the subject of this study.

Stories by the author, R K Narayan (1906-2001), for example, largely ignore the presence of the British (despite references to a British-run school [*Malgudi Days*, 1943], or 'absent' characters such as the portrait of Mr Noble lying forgotten in the attic [*The Vendor of Sweets*, 1967]), and depict the quiet mannerisms of (South-)Indian culture and traditions, without ever justifying them or being overtly 'patriotic' or nationalistic in tone. Unlike Narayan, however, most post-independent Indian English writers such as Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, Rohinton

Mistry, Salman Rushdie and many more, perhaps subconsciously began to emphasise – by writing in greater detail – the Indian geographical and cultural setting or *context* (sexual orientation, race, colour, caste, tradition, etc) in their stories so as to mediate them to a Western readership, simultaneously maintaining postcolonial characteristics and themes such as nostalgia and communal politics.

Anita Desai demonstrates this by devoting an entire chapter to the description of the geography, history [or lack of], and social life in the town of Mirpore in her novel, *In Custody* (1984). She describes the dilapidated small mosque of marble and pink sandstone built by a nawab escaping the British after 1857, and how it was difficult for anyone to discern beneath 'the shacks, signboards, stalls, booths, rags, banners, debris, and homeless poor of the bazaars'. Readers are also given an idea of the socio-political environment around the mosque, which was considered Muslim, while the rest of the area outside it, Hindu. "The Hindus slaughtered pigs in their own quarter, the Muslims took to slaughtering buffaloes in place of cows, realizing that the latter would have been tantamount to suicide. The few Christians of the area ate the meat of both and attended the one small, whitewashed brick church set in a cemetery shaded by dusty neem trees" (Desai; 1999, p 14).

Desai's protagonist Deven, a teacher of Hindi literature, is portrayed as indecisive, often pessimistic and lacking in self-direction as he feels trapped in his economic and familial circumstances, even though he also makes no effort to change them. His struggles result from the conflicts of interest between the languages of a dying Urdu in post-partitioned, postcolonial India, and his futile efforts to keep it alive, as against the more commercial Hindi that is taking over the north of the country.

In Rushdie's '*Midnight Children*' (1981), the author explains Indian cinema (to the Western reader): "In those days it was not permitted for lover-boys and their leading ladies to touch one another on screen, for fear that their osculations might corrupt the nation's youth ... but thirty-three minutes after the beginning of *The Lovers* the premiere audience began to give off a low buzz of shock, because Pia and Nayyar had begun to kiss – not one another – but *things*. Pia kissed an apple. Sensuously, with all the rich fullness of her painted red lips; then passed it to Nayyar; who planted, upon its opposite face, a virilely passionate mouth. This was the birth of what came to be known as the indirect kiss – and how much more sophisticated a notion it was than anything in our current cinema; how pregnant with longing and eroticism!" (Rushdie, 1981, 1995; p 142, 3). The book begins with the protagonist being born on the first day of independent India in 1947, and much of it is set in the following 1960s and 70s. Rushdie's justification for Indian screen couples not touching or kissing each other directly 'in those days' is clearly targeted at the Western reader who is used to Hollywood on-screen romance or love-making. Again, his allusion to a sexuality that is *forbidden* is emphasised when he refers to the (Indian) 'premiere audience' that is visibly scandalised by the cinema scene.

According to Jyotsna G Singh, the 'naturalistic' vignettes as those in Narayan's, Rushdie's or Anita Desai's novels succeed in contextualising Indian realities along with its many diversities and divisions 'within British literary and intellectual conventions' using the English language. It also serves as a reliable tool of shared knowledge, to fulfil the political function of emulating the English novel as a genre 'with its strong

sense of realism' (1996; p 163). At this point, it can be suggested that, by including details such as the above-mentioned examples that would be superfluous to the Indian reader, the postcolonial Indian English writer is reaching out to global marketing opportunities unlike the vernacular or regional Indian writer. A the same time, postcolonial Indian writers writing in English were therefore able to connect to a wider circle of international readers, sharing the landscape, politics, culture, the riches and poverty, the culture – indeed, the simplicity and complexities of their country.

This approach is also evident in my novel, *Memoirs of a Taboo*, which opens with a description of the crowded railway station, detailing the number of carriages in the train, the type and class of commuters occupying the ladies compartment, and so on – information that would be superfluous had I been writing the novel in a vernacular language such as Hindi or Marathi, as most readers from Maharashtra would be already familiar with the Indian railway system. Indian readers would also be familiar with the archetypal image of the multi-tasking and very reliable *ayah* 'with a tobacco-stained mouth' and 'octopus-like hands', escorting up to seven children at a time to and from school, telling them stories to keep them together, yelling at autorickshaw drivers who brought their vehicles too close to them' (*MOAT*, p 33).

One other important aspect of Indian English postcolonial writing is the creative freedom it has lent the writer to lament or push (the reader) towards 'nationalist' causes. Desai's concern for Urdu in *In Custody*, for example, is seen at various points in the same novel by a number of characters including Deven's friend and Urdu magazine publisher Murad, the Urdu poet Nur, Deven, and others.

In my novel, Madhu – on more than one occasion – takes an identical approach supporting a need to remember the forgotten devadasis who once enjoyed a high-profile status in ancient India: "At what point did the sex – which was a seldom-mentioned activity necessary to fulfil their physical needs as well as to promote them as artists – turn into a source of lust, labelling [Devadasis] as prostitutes?" (*MOAT*, p 108). Through her many conversations with Ambilli, Madhu also echoes the idea that adopting a new language (English) means, by extension, forgetting one's own, and reminds the postcolonial reader of the importance of knowing one's roots before plunging into the rapid 'mimicry' and camouflage of Westernisation that has taken over the nation in the form of English: the desire to 'whiten' brown skin. "Today we are fast losing the use of our own regional languages, along with our ancient literature and culture, to English....We've got top cosmetic brands competing in the international fairness creams' market...Krishna, Vishnu, Ram...all our gods are dark. The beautiful Draupadi...was dusky as well! Everyone seems to have suddenly forgotten where we've come from..." (*MOAT,* p 133). The first drafts of *Memoirs of a Taboo* were completed in early 2012. Curiously, the recent emergence of global campaigns against 'colourism' on social media, such as '#Darkisbeautiful' or '#unfairandlovely', and in India the current campaign to re-imagine the Indian gods and goddesses with dark skin (*BBC*, 2013; 2018), thus suggest that some common nationalist causes and postcolonial struggles are still not over.

Apart from the rationale of nationalism, and the thousands of words spent in demonstrating and also perhaps, 'performing' Indianness to Western culture, some of the classic, 'postcolonial' realist themes employed by a majority of the prominent English-

language Indian novelists over the last century also include male patriarchy and female oppression (eg Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* [1997]), and rural poverty and urban servitude deriving from class hierarchies (eg Adiga's *The White Tiger* [2008]*)*, among others. Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) portrays the sad life of divorced Ammukutty and her unfulfilled love for the low-caste untouchable 'Vellutha' (which ironically means *white*). Ammukutty's twins, Rahel and Estha, are the only witnesses to the accidental death of their cousin Sophie*mol* and are duly separated. As the novel concludes, the twins find relief in the act of incest. Set in the postcolonial 1960s to 1990s, Roy's novel is marked by clever appropriations of the English language and includes themes of caste and class politics; power play in the form of the authoritative police who get away with beating and murder and of the masturbating Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at the cinema, for example; broken relationships, divorces and separations marking the end of innocence of the children Estha, Rahel and Sophie; and forbidden romances or sexuality.

In Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) set in a fictional village in Pakistan, years of patriarchal violence and humiliation turn the protagonist Sufiya Zinobia into a sexual beast and murderer.

Similarly, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) contains accounts of oppressive 'class' behaviour that appear to be exaggerated by the protagonist, Balram Halwai (a driver by profession) in his sequence of letters to the visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Halwai explains how he has ruthlessly manipulated his way up the social ladder and, in the end, justifies his act of killing his employer and taking over his identity as an act of 'entrepreneurship'.

With respect to the above examples from contemporary Indian writing in English, the postcolonial approach of acknowledging 'the material realities and the modes of representation common to colonialism' (McLeod, 2000; p 33), such as patriarchy and oppression, still has resonance today. Nevertheless, it is also true that 21st-century Indian society is much more transcultural and global.

Today's writers – both male and female – and readers are relatively more financially and socially independent than previous generations. Thus, according to McLeod, postcolonialism also recognises and asserts the possibility and the continuing need for change. In the context of Indians writing in English as well as the Indian readers who are giving meaning to or interpreting their texts, we need to ask whether the response to the so-called shared postcolonial themes of exile, male dominance, 'marginal' existences, class struggles, or female victimisation differ from those seen just two decades ago?

The answer is a resounding yes. For example, in her essay about Indian women writers (1982) Anita Desai compares the act of writing about the old 'strains' of nostalgia and regret to the 'satisfying' act of slipper-dragging in order to irritate the listener, and admits to it having been the only kind of dull, monotonous statement that women could make for a long time. However, the new 'mobility and independence' of women, she suggests, is bound to reflect in their writing that may be "indistinguishable from writing by men, both in style and matter" (1982; pp 56-7). Furthermore, in the contemporary novels and short stories of immigrant writers of Asian origin such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Kamila Shamsie, what once constituted exile or rootlessness is now the new strength as stories flit beyond Kolkatta and Karachi across international boundaries of various

towns and cities in the US, England, Afghanistan, Turkey, and so on.

So far we have explored the definitions and themes of the colonial and postcolonial with regards to regional as well as English fiction by the Indian writer. We have also come across some novels that do not seem to fit either of the above categories, prompting the question of whether the postcolonial is a chronological term. The following subsections explore how the deep reach of colonialism and postcolonialism formed the background for the characterisation of Madhu in *Memoirs of a Taboo*. We will also briefly examine some of the stereotypes associated with the postcolonial, and begin to understand the reasons for the novel's attempt to move away from it.

The deep reach of colonialism and postcolonialism as reflected in the novel

It is worth remembering at this point that the most common concepts of colonialism and postcolonialism were formulated by Western critics such as McLeod, Ashcroft – that is, by the ex-colonisers rather than the colonised.

Presumably, this 'blanket' labelling is a more convenient arrangement with which to categorise the nations of the world that were previously ruled over. However, if this point of view is reversed for just a moment to focus on the individual currently-independent nations, the so-called *marginalised* would, in fact, constitute the *majority.* A 'majority' such as India, for example, which has been under various colonisers for several centuries, as well as a post-independent, post-colonial period of about 70 years, it is inevitable that the peoples' cultural, political and social lives bear a deep imprint of colonialism.

A minor but telling effect of this is visible all over India where there appears to be an almost unanimous culture of showcasing foreign faces on commercial hoardings. This is normalised even in remote rural areas: public displays outside vendors of childrens' toys ranging from plasticware to tricycles and bikes, small enterprises of barbers or 'ladies-only' beauty saloons, cosmetic product vendors of face-whitening creams, photography studios, Indian jewellery, opticians, maternity homes, etc, to huge construction sites for forthcoming residential apartments – all are taken over by a common and highly overused image bank of chubby, blue-eyed toddlers, blonde women or brunettes, pictures of white 'families' at scenic parks, or white male models in smart business suits for commercial premises. The message of this visual *self*-colonialism seems to be that anything that is endorsed by a 'white' or foreign face immediately has a unique selling value attached to it.

The novel identifies this colonial mindset and attempts to present this complexity as a backdrop for Madhu's reasons to research ancient and pre-Victorian India. Madhu recognises the older generation of Indians as more entrenched in their beliefs of *karma* and destiny, even if she dismisses some of this as nothing more than 'emotional blackmail' (*MOAT*, p 128). She believes that the traditionalist Indian attitude of attributing every consequence to fate further reinforces Indian history-textbook narratives that continue to project the British coloniser as the saviour of weak and oppressed dark tribes. Consequently, the colonial view of the white British as superior is hard to eradicate and is still ubiquitous post-colonially. This is why, she suggests, seventy years after independence, brown faces in India continue to light up when they have a 'gora' in their midst, much to the visibly bemused face of the visitor in question.

In the novel's 18th-century setting written by Ambilli, the fictional Paarvani's escape from Tipu's army is aided by the English artist, Thomas, who knows that: 'Malabarees or Mysoreans, ...he would not be harmed on account of his white skin'. He matter-of-factly implies that the pursuing Muslim soldiers cannot differentiate a British enemy from a French Ally, and he is confident that Paarvani can get away if she follows him, unseen, out of the forest. Here, Thomas is portrayed as Paarvani's saviour, although he is not flawless as, in return he greedily pockets all of the gold that Paarvani offers to him in her distress (*MOAT*, p 174).

Later, in her last journal entry in *Memoirs of A Taboo*, four years after having written her novel, Ambilli acknowledges this colonial mindset. She refers to the local tourist guides at ancient Indian temples who "learn to deliberately ignore the flawless craftsmanship of the ancient sculptor, the pride and the passion in his tools of trade, the pure love of shape and symmetry" (*MOAT*, p 249), when faced with Indian tourists as clients wanting to learn about their own past. The latter are whisked away by the guides to the next attraction, "bypassing the smiling stone onlookers, dismissing their various [erotic] poses with a general 'lack of shame in those days'" (*ibid*). For a white-skinned tourist, on the other hand, the same guide gushes verses from the Kama Sutra and narrates the sculpture-relevant anecdotes, tickling the latter's curiosity. Ambilli's reference to the tourist guides in her journal was inspired by my personal experience as an Indian tourist in my own home country.

In the face of a digital and global economy that is becoming in some sense the new *coloniser*, the former categories of first-, second-, and third-world countries are getting

'levelled' into one small, connected world. For example, the beneficial aspects of information technology and its functionalities are penetrating most of the businesses, education and health facilities, as well as the social media, in India. The characteristics of this 'New India' include more well-paid jobs, global travel and education opportunities strengthened by technological developments, a richer younger generation that can afford to make mistakes, and an older generation of parents far more secure today than in their own struggling, 'postcolonial' earlier lives (this aspect is covered in further detail in the subsection, *The notion of a new Indianness*). It should not be surprising, then, that seventy years post-independence, emerging writers and artists portray this newly confident version of Indianness in their works and prefer to call themselves postmillennial or *post*-postcolonial.

The following section briefly explores the dangers of some postcolonial stereotypes before addressing the benefits of moving beyond postcolonialism into post-postcolonialism.

II

The need to go beyond postcolonialism

> *"...so that is how to create a single story: show a people as one thing,*
>
> *as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they*
>
> *become"* (Adichie, 2009).

In her oft-quoted TED talk, the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie described her experience of being exposed to the 'dangers of a single story', both as a victim and

an innocent perpetrator. She has explained how single stories – by which she means all

the stories repeating the sombre postcolonial 'problems' of caste hierarchies, corruption,

the male oppressor or the female victim, and of colourism, and immigration – especially

in the impressionable minds of young children, can soon turn into stereotypes that can

flatten the (cultural) experience of the adult reader/listener. The problem with

stereotypes, she adds, is "not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete" (TED,

2009). I begin this section by applying Adichie's statement to the context of some

contemporary Indian imagery, and Indian writing in English.

Some generic postcolonial stereotypes

Following on from Boehmer's example of the *Arabian Nights*, stories like *Sinbad the*

Sailor, or *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* have been reinterpreted in colonialist and

postcolonialist ways in print and cinema over the decades. Thanks to these, exotic and

orientalist imagery of the Arabs as "camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers

whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilisation" (Said, [1978], 2003; p 108),

and 'half-naked' Indians with handlebar moustaches, turbans, magic carpets, snake

charmers, against a background of elephants and their dark mahouts and domed

minarets continue to represent India on everything from covers of children's book titles

to commercial merchandise like mugs, printed tote bags, T-shirts, souvenirs or curios at

international airports, or even bags of rice and dals at Britain's local superstores. This

kind of commercially-driven stereotyping may contain elements of truth and be

culturally-specific; it can certainly be used for economic advantage to 'brand' the

country.

On the other hand, to date, *BBC* drama, documentary and news coverage unfailingly reproduces images of a stubborn cow or calf standing in the middle of a busy road, aerial shots of crowded slums or of half-clothed 'homeless' urchins chasing each other at a recycling dump yard. Together these images imply that India needs help – curious, considering that the 2017-official figures (Shelter, 2017) for UK's own homeless population show a rise to 307,000, with 78,000 households and 120,000 children from England alone affected, just in the official figures. At this juncture, one can almost point a mirror back at the source of all the Indian archetypal imagery and symbolism, and ask whether it is, in fact, the ex-coloniser who is *also* holding on to the idea of the old postcolonial India, and not vice versa. Almost invariably the *BBC's* India imagery is accompanied by racy musical beats of the traditional *tabla*, the calming strains of the *veena*, *sitar* or the *sarangee* – string instruments usually played on local Indian television channels such as the Doordarshan during national mourning periods.[15]

This postcolonial attachment to colonial tropes is not limited to India. The Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina does not mince his words when addressing the language of 'paternalism' and 'developmentalism' suffusing accounts of Western aid in Africa. "The kind of pity-thing," he suggested in an audio interview with *The Guardian*, "is greatly offensive to the educated African..." (2011). Wainaina belongs to the generation of *post-postcolonial* writers who believe that "[the West] should stop treating the new generation African writers like an exotic species" (*ibid*).

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[15] In the area of music, this stereotyping feels heightened in contemporary India when leading Indian composers have been successfully interfacing their traditional notes with technology. A recent performance in the US, for example, played stringless 'air' music produced only by 'smartbands' worn on the performer's arms and in the absence of any real instruments. At the recent Consumer Electronics Show at Las Vegas, renowned Indian music composer A R Rahman and his six-member band performed live on stage wearing only 'smartbands' powered by Intel's 'Curie' software program. The technology is said to use sensors on the smartbands "to convert hand movements into mini data decoded by software to create music" (Gadgets Now, 2016).

Interestingly, the patterns of representation adopted by the West in the case of Africa are strikingly similar to its representations of India. Wainaina's article in *Granta* (2006), for example, is scathingly satirical on what one must include while writing about Africa:

> "In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book...Describe, in detail, naked breasts (young, old, conservative, recently raped, big, small) or mutilated genitals, or enhanced genitals. Or any kind of genitals. And dead bodies. Or, better, naked dead bodies. And especially rotting naked dead bodies...Always end your book with Nelson Mandela saying something about rainbows or renaissances. Because you care."

I want to suggest that, while poverty and class hierarchies continue to exist in contemporary India, there exists alongside it a newer India taking the old one by the hand and rapidly progressing. Through globalisation and innovative information technology Indian engineers have become indispensable to multi-national corporations. A handful of Indian cities are being transformed by the erection of glass, steel and cement structures; India has also pioneered the launch of low-cost satellites. A recent World Economic League Table report (*Reuters*, 2018) predicted that India would overtake Britain and France in 2018 to become the world's fifth-largest economy. But

perhaps the reporters from Western media giants such as the *BBC*, or *The Guardian,* prefer to stick to their postcolonial templates.

Apart from the generic stereotyping of postcolonial countries, I want to suggest, that Indian English-speaking readers might also be experiencing postcolonial fatigue. Arundhati Roy's '*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*' (2017), for example, contains an admittedly fierce and talented narrative – a roman a clef that all but feebly disguises predictable Indian political figures, giving them satirical names and identities whose real-life counterparts would be obvious to any Indian national. Her characters seemed to randomly symbolise and tick every political movement, episode of communal violence, or incident already well-documented over the past half-century: the Sikh riots of the 1980s, the Bhopal gas tragedy, the Narmada Dam protests, the Gujarat riots of 2002, the hunger-strikes by Anna Hazare, the present-day issues in Kashmir, the cow vigilantes, the Maoist insurgencies, and more. In Roy's India globalisation is the new master – but a globalisation that is merely 'a continuation of the postcolonial' (Munaweera, Sekaran, 2017). She compares the city of Delhi, for instance, to an old sorceress, a grandma who has 'become a whore', with [globalisation] wanting to "hide her knobbly, varicose veins under imported fishnet stockings, cram her withered tits into saucy padded bras and jam her aching feet into pointed high-heel shoes" (Roy, 2017; p 96).

Although Roy's new novel was eagerly awaited worldwide, some reviewers and columnists in the Indian media called it 'a far cry from her brilliant first novel', a 'seriously flawed' experiment, one of them comparing her to Rip Van Winkle, who 'woke up after a slumber of 20 years in a world he no longer recognised' (*HuffingtonPost; Indian Express; LiveMint*; 2017).

I too have experienced postcolonial fatigue. *Memoirs of A Taboo* is therefore also my response to the Booker-prize-winning success of *The White Tiger* (2008), in which Aravind Adiga exploited all possible cliches of a 'dark' and stereotypical India. Adiga, in interviews, has talked of colonial attitudes that continue to exist among the Indian middle-class to this day: "A handful of men in this country [perhaps he is referring here to the British] have trained the remaining 99.9% - as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude." The divide between the Indian rich and the poor is such that, he remarks, "...if we were in India now, there would be servants standing in the corners of this room and I wouldn't notice them" (Jeffries, 2008).

At the time, in 2008, I was writing some of the initial chapters in the novel while just beginning to research the women in ancient and pre-Victorian India. The statements made by the Oxford-educated Adiga, who left India as a teenager and has spent most of his life abroad, brought to mind the thin difference between modernisation and westernisation. Modernisation, I want to suggest, signifies economic and technological growth, alongside the development of mass communications, but, at the same time, it builds upon a country's cultural roots. Westernisation, on the other hand, involves an imitation of the West and the wholesale adoption of the coloniser's values and cultural forms. I felt it necessary to counter Adiga's novel in mine by viewing the servant class in contemporary India from a different perspective, and one that I would contend is more authentic: as a self-respecting community with more economic freedom and flexible opportunities at their disposal.

Thus, in *Memoirs Of A Taboo*, the 'domestic' characters such as the ayah, Shobha *tai;*

the office peon, Ganpatrao; Rajeshwari Amma and her son and child-helper, Husain;

Achchamma's servant-friend Kunjumalu *edathi* – all these were, in a way, shaped by

this desire. For example, none of the above implied 'lower' classes are oppressed in the

traditional understanding of the word. In fact, what is – I hope subtly – revealed is their

power to intimidate. Despite their contemporary Indian surroundings, the characters are

thus portrayed as unashamed, self-respecting and proud workers who see dignity in their

jobs. Furthermore, as we see in chapter 35, the collective 'under'class of coolies,

fishsellers and railway urchins who charge their way through at the train at Lonavala

station would fill any high-society commuter with dread, as Shashi finds out for

himself:

> "The train had gradually come to a halt by then and instead, Shashi
>
> got caught among the Maharashtrian women fishsellers who first
>
> charged through the narrow doorway. "*Arre, disat nahi? Bazula*
>
> *hatt, saalya,*" *Can't you see? Step aside, you idiot!* Shashi was
>
> showered with more curses, as well as leftover fish-water that
>
> splashed out from the huge baskets over their heads – just when the
>
> coolies began to push commuters along with their luggage inside
>
> the compartment...One of the porters scolded Shashi. "*Idhar naya*
>
> *hai kya*? Are you new here? You should know better than blocking
>
> the entrance at this peak hour. They would have killed you with
>
> their *gaalis* alone," he said, pointing to the fisherwomen before
>
> hopping out of the moving train onto the platform.
>
> The railway urchins sitting near the door laughed at his expense,

more comments followed and Shashi, his clothes stinking wet and

toes stepped on, felt foolish to the core" (*MOAT*, p 191).

My point here, I want to suggest, is that the postcolonial discourse recognises only

economic power, thus reproducing its Western origins whereas the novel, through

its depiction of the 'working class', brings out their social power. Like Roy's *The*

Ministry of Utmost Happiness, Adiga's *The White Tiger* allegedly explores the

'dark side' of India's rising superpower status but it fails to recognise, or largely

ignores, the ground-reality that with globalisation, and the emergence of

supermalls, skyscrapers, and multinational IT companies and call centres offering

higher salaries for its young employees, the Indian servant's status has also

improved for the better. *Memoirs Of A Taboo* tries to highlight this and, in the

process, also places various ends of the Indian spectrum - its pre-colonial past as

well as the postmillennial present, the servant-class as well as the upper-middle

class - together in a single novel.

For example, the social circumstances of Shobha*tai*, Ganpatrao, Rajeshwari Amma and

the child helper-Husain could perhaps be attributed to factors favoured by postcolonial

discourse: a lack of education (in the English language) and consequently better

employment opportunities, or rural-to-urban migration in search of higher wages. But

the case of the ex-devadasi, Rajeshwari Amma, is more complicated. The latter

represents a forgotten face of the Indian past, as was revealed to me by my historical

research.

The exalted status of devadasis among many in the pre-colonial era, for example, was

gradually eroded by the stigma of prostitution that was attached by the Victorian British to all artists such as courtesans, *nautch* artists and other female performers. (I argued this in the section *End of the devadasi practice,* of the original thesis). In the novel, the fictional Rajeshwari Amma works as a cook and caretaker in Mysore, at the same time as raising the orphan Husain. As a writer, I have attempted to show a woman who is not defined by her material circumstances but has retained agency – and how the choice that she made changed her life. This brings us to the next part of this discussion.

Post-postcolonialism in the context of Indian writing in English

In the debate between what is colonial, postcolonial, or indeed what is beyond the postcolonial, there seems to be only one winner: the English language. For the past two centuries or more, by adopting and nurturing an alien culture through the English language and making it their own, and through the wave of rapid globalisation, a growing number of postmillennial Indians, I want to suggest, have come to feel alienated from their own pre-colonial past.

There are a number of factors that contribute to this. As one graduates out of formal education, for example, memories of the colonial and postcolonial that formed part of the Indian syllabus are forgotten along with school books and history texts. Secondly, while postcolonial fictions by Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie or Jhumpa Lahiri highlighted the challenges of new, adopted homelands outside India and captured the nostalgia of their old roots, these familiar settings are gaining new perspectives in the present day. Thus, some well-travelled postmillennial writers, along with their readers, seem to find a strength in being rootless, in being bi-lingual, and are thus 'outgrowing'

the postcolonial. As *they* prepare to bring up the younger, next generation away from home, what increasingly becomes apparent is the widening gap between the Indian old-school, dehumanised, historical narratives and the many versions of India that have been narrated only through vernacular, mythological stories. Consequently, there is a gnawing curiosity among Indian readers with regards to the latter.

This split into the two interests, one of them "located largely in the West and focused on literatures written in Englishes...[by] easily accessible writers," and the other "context-based line of study...still concerned with writing in Englishes, but more focused on particular vernacular and cultural regions" was anticipated by Boehmer in her study *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995). There she identified an imminent shift in the interpretative perspective in postcolonial criticism which would 'resist the dominance of Western theory' that is external to it and would, instead, be contained within a mythical, traditional framework more intrinsic to the nature of the text. "Most obviously, where a novel or poem unites godlike personalities from different mythic pantheons, or stirs together, stamps and boils a *khichri* of languages, it tells us that it is to be read syncretically, impiously." As this shift develops, she adds, it will signify a 'coming-of-age for postcolonial writing' (*ibid*, pp 249-50).

Boehmer's interpretive shift has a direct bearing on both the aims and style of *Memoirs of A Taboo*.

The novel relies on the Indian oral tradition of dipping into flashback stories and metafictional frame narratives, folk-tales, and first- and third-person points of view. Although written in English, it scatters a variety of vernacular languages across its

chapters, among them Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, as well as some Sanskrit. Furthermore, its 21st-century setting is commonly recognised as the post-colonial period, it prompts the contemporary reader to re-interpret and re-examine aspects of the British pre-colonial period in India through the characters of the devadasi mother-and-daughter, Pankaja Amma and Paarvani; the colonial-18th-century Malabar's Narayanan Namboodiri and the Nair matrilineal system via Shakuntala *chechi*; and the helper of women refugees, *Veliamma*.

All of this is done keeping in mind the central narrative of the 21st-century Ambilli; the context of her sexual abuse by a close friend and the emotional trauma that follows is intended to *connect* with readers on a global level. Given the recent exposure of sexual harassment in the workplace in the US and the UK, and as well as India, and the emergence of the #MeToo movement, the novel is thus highly topical with resonance beyond India even if it explores a woman's internal 'processing' of sexual abuse specifically in an Indian setting.

In a sense, Shashi is the *coloniser* of Ambilli's psychological identity; directly, or indirectly, he controls a significant period – six to seven years – of her private life. Ambilli's consequent, internal or '*post*-colonial' conflicts after the sexual abuse gradually gain a kind of closure when she makes a choice. This leads to her confronting her own past - by revisiting the past of the many women from the generations before hers. Ambilli's psycho-social coming of age thus marks her emergence out of her own postcoloniality. Although Ambilli may never forget what Shashi did to her, as the novel ends it is implied that she has ceased to be afraid of her memories of him. In this way

Ambilli succeeds in integrating her former colonised identity with her modern, postcolonial one into a new post-postcolonial self.

Re-introducing pre-colonial identity to solve the problem of the reader

One of the challenges for the post-postcolonial writer, as highlighted by Wainaina in his *Guardian* interview (2011), is to *engage* the current African reader who has grown up in Africa 'consuming' everything that the Western media or western fiction says about his or her country, 'just as normally as the average British or American reader would' (*ibid*). This statement could easily be applied to the contemporary Indian reader, reared on Western narratives and not only alienated from the nuances of their own Indian cultural practices but now, ironically, heartened hearing about these *through* the West once again. The practice of yoga is a prime example. Its popularisation in the West almost returned it now relegitimated to Indian skeptics of the ancient exercise. The same has happened to certain alternative medicines, meditative techniques, the benefits of authentic spices and combinations such as the mostly-despised *haldi-doodh* or turmeric-milk (now a glorified 'golden *latte'*) or moringa leaves, or even, martial art. The older Indian generation's free knowledge about these practices was almost taken for granted and had less value for an Indian in India until a foreigner or non-resident Indian hailing from the West decided to promote the same – for a price.[16] For such a person, who consumes anything meted out by the West, as Wainaina suggests, it is necessary to create certain universal kinds of 'codes'. Perhaps, in *Memoirs Of A Taboo*, the universal codes by which a reader can engage with the text is empathy, provided by the case of Ambilli's abuse, and reconciliation with

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[16]   Deepak Chopra, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the ISKON group, are a few examples.

the past.

The concept of post-postcolonialism is gaining recognition in British ex-colonies. Outside the Indian subcontinent, for example, the Caribbean author Marlon James (b. 1970), already teaches 'Beyond postcolonialism' in a US-based university. James calls himself a post-postcolonial writer, identifying with this "new-ish generation of writers who are not driven by our dialogue with the former mother country [the UK]." In an interview (*NPR*, 2014) soon after winning the Booker-prize for *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014), he explained: "...Identity for us is not necessarily how to define ourselves in relation of colonial power, colonial oppressor – so now it's a matter of defining who you are as opposed to who you are not" (*ibid*).

The new Indian English post-postcolonial genres

Perhaps post-postcolonial literature now feels freer to draw on the pre-colonial experience and integrate it with the postcolonial context. Almost three decades since Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel,* the freely available, tried-and-tested bank of ancient Indian mythological narratives has re-established itself in the Indian literary scene as a unique genre. Writers who could be called post-postcolonial include Devadutt Pattanaik, Anand Neelakantan, Ashok Banker, and Amish Tripathi – the latter, a former banker, is now also being called the 'Indian Tolkein' of Hindu mythology (*BBC*, 2017) – so perhaps colonial connotations are not so easy to shake off after all.

In the process of reinterpreting the complexities of the ancient, pre-colonial Indian myths, the above-mentioned writers seem to be blending 'old' stories of mythology, of

the gods Rama, Sita, and Shiva, in 'new' ways and vice versa. With this creative strategy, they are not only successfully arousing the curiosity of the masses of the English-educated, non-vernacular-language-literate, they are also gradually unlearning the postcolonial shame – with reference to the erstwhile sexual openness that was once condemned by early English-educated Indian converts in the mid-1800s. Publishers are reportedly paying them huge advances for book sequels[17] (Umachandran, 2013). This demonstrates that the new genres of '*Bharati* fantasy' and epic narrative (Varughese, 2013, p 123) are fast gaining popularity among young English-speaking Indians who have grown up consuming western, postcolonial ideas of India. More significantly, like the writers belonging to this post-independent, increasingly affluent middle-class, the readers, too, are trying to reach out towards their cultural roots through both fiction and non-fiction titles.

In the area of contemporary non-fiction, Sanyal's *Land of The Seven Rivers* (2013) and *The Ocean of Churn* (2017) tell the story of how India's history is shaped by 'not only politics' but also by its geography, and by the Indian Ocean, respectively. In the tradition of Indian storytelling, it uses a mix of oral narratives, information about ancient trade routes, archeological and maritime trading evidence. It centres around 'human' characters with strengths and flaws who are monarchs or dynasties, 'adventurers, merchants, explorers, monks, swashbuckling pirates, revolutionaries and warrior princesses'.

Another prominent example of post-postcolonial non-fiction is Tharoor's more

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[17]   In 2013, Amish Tripathi was paid a million-dollar-advance for his *Shiva* trilogy, the highest by Indian literary standards. Sales of his book are said to have crossed over five lakh copies within a day of its release.

controversial analysis, *Inglorious Britain: What the British did to India* (2017). The

book was a consequence of his speech at Oxford in 2015 regarding the need to re-assess

Britain's imperial legacy in India. The Oxford debate, which continues to be widely

shared across social media and international news organisations, demonstrates that a

rising number of Indians living in various areas of the world as well as in India are

ready to acknowledge and reflect upon the gaps in Indian history and are inquisitive

about the incomplete truths that they were taught. Hitherto knowledge of richer Indian

historical material was limited to a small number of enthusiasts with access to resources

outside India, academics, orators or ex-diplomats such as Shashi Tharoor, or indologists

like Rajeev Malhotra. Interestingly, both these individuals belong to opposing parties of

the political spectrum. The fact that this makes no difference to their united mission to

publicise such debates surely makes it a *post*-postcolonial endeavour.

The notion of a new *Indianness*: Some examples of postmillennial writing

Emma D Varughese's book, '*Reading New India*' (2013), offers a helpful and detailed

survey, as well as close sociological readings, of post-millennial Indian writing in

English (2000 to 2012) and is therefore useful in this discussion. We have already

considered some new genres of postmillennial non-fiction, for example, 'epic narrative'

or *Bharati* fantasy. Here I will discuss some more examples depicting the new

Indianness in other categories.

Metro Reads: One of the categories of the 'New Indian' writing, according to

Varughese, is demonstrated by the launch of Penguin India's 'Metro Reads' series in

2010. The move is concurrent to the development of the urban, metro transport system

in the metropolises of Delhi, Bangalore, and Mumbai. These light, 'uncomplicated' novellas are supposedly targeted at India's Metro commuters belonging to the 'young professionals' of the 18-35 age-group "who [find it] difficult to read heavy literature and prefer to read books that they enjoy, storylines that they can relate to and characters whom they can identify with," according to Vaishali Mathur (*The Hindu*, 2012), commissioning editor at Penguin Metro Reads. Some of the popular titles include chick-lit - female narratives that explore what it means to be young and single in India today. They also comprise murder mysteries, romance or love stories and corporate narratives. What makes them post-postcolonial is that they relate to the India that is contemporary, or devoid of any 'physical' colonial memories, and are generally conversation-based narratives. Priced at an affordable Rs 150, that is under £2, Penguin India is allegedly tapping into a niche market that is literate and wants to improve its English. While the imprint has published over 13 new authors in its first two years, the writing is generally dominated by the urban landscapes of Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore.

Urban narratives: Bangalore is also a dominant element in Anjum Hasan's novel *Neti, Neti* (2009, [*Not this, Not this*]) for example, where the protagonist of Bengali-origin, Sophie Das, moves to Bangalore (South India) from her hometown in Shillong (North-east India). Hasan's novel depicts Bangalore as 'a city awash with BPO[18] activity'. Sophie and her colleagues in the novel represent other unsettled inter-city Indian migrants struggling to find an identity amid employment roles completely different from those available to their parents' generation, and with mixed-up daily routines (as their career choice requires them to sleep during the day and work through the night to be available during the UK or US daytime). For the non-Indian, external reader, who is

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[18]   Business Process Outsourcing, also known as 'call centres' belonging to multinational corporations

accustomed to the postcolonial tropes of India, this new India demonstrates a mix of

migrant cultures, fast-paced lifestyles and financial freedom that contribute to the

changing or transient nature of the cities themselves, just as in any other international,

Western cities such as New York or London.

In her study Varughese re-considers the questions of *Indianness* against these

backdrops. She compares postmillennial writing (from India) with the characteristics of

postcolonial literature as defined by Gilbert (2001) as 'a form of co-option into Western

cultural economies' and a 'central concern with cultural power' and by Boehmer (1995, p

3) as 'writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonial perspectives'.

We get a glimpse of this feature in *Memoirs of a Taboo* when Ambilli finds herself

situated in the new, unfamiliar India. The setting is that of Bangalore again, India's

'garden city' that came to be known as the country's own 'Silicon Valley' in the late

1990s- and early 2000s. The metropolis is reeling under the rapid expansion of

multinational companies, the splurge of extra funding by venture capitalists and the

resultant IT and dotcom boom. Ambilli is unable to comprehend the 'celebrations' for

the 'International Womens' Day' event in her office in Bangalore because her colleagues

act nothing like 'Indians'. Dressed in flowing Toga robes, they drink and pour alcohol

over each other, then in their intoxicated state swaying and licking it off one another

while dancing to a re-mixed old Bollywood song from the 1970s (*MOAT*, pp 41-43). It

is a surreal scene, one that I witnessed myself and transposed it onto my protagonist. In

the novel, Ambilli, brought up as a 'good girl' by her first-generation migrant-Keralite

parents in Bombay is not alone in her reaction. Amruta, of Gujarati/Jain origin with a

similar upbringing, screams and runs away from the room, collapsing into Ambilli's arms under the massive culture-shock. Subsequently the camaraderie between three 'unlikely' friends – Ambilli, Amrutha and Fiona – blossoms through their shopping trips or late nights out at the pub. As they drink tequila shots and dance their way back to their accommodation, they also begin to access aspects of the new India, demonstrating a financial as well as moral freedom that their parents would find very hard to imagine. The novel thus captures the experiences of Ambilli's postcolonial upbringing, in the post-postcolonial setting of a new India.

To summarise, the last decade has seen a rise of various categories and genres of writing such as chick-lit or 'crick-lit' (narratives on cricket, [Varughese, 2013]), 'urban scapes' and corporate narratives of a young India that is dealing with their contemporary experiences in a globalised world. Historical fantasy novels and epic narratives (framed by Tripathi and Banker, among others), have emerged that freely blend the old, pre-colonial and ancient narratives with the new. 'Queer' fiction exploring Indian gay and lesbian identity and behaviour, as well as graphic novels, all seem to suggest that Indian postmillennial is in a state of flux and therefore merits the label *post*-postcolonial writing.

More examples of the post-postcolonial with regards to the novel
My intention here has not been to dismiss or dismantle the definitions of postcolonial literature per se: I have merely been attempting to reject its more reductive formulations and to demonstrate how, in the case of *Memoirs of a Taboo*, such a label, while useful in places, is also limiting. The fact that Ambilli's migrant parents, Indu and Unni, are still

finding their roots in their adopted home, that is the multicultural city of Bombay, is evident in their seeking out of similar Malayalee communities or Ayyappa temples. Set between the 1970s to 1990s, this clearly points to the postcolonial element of displacement and change of language – from Malayalam to Hindi, Marathi or English. Another aspect of the novel that could be considered postcolonial is also the deliberately 'idealised' character of Ambilli, raised as a 'good' daughter despite living away from Unni's real home (Kerala). When Ambilli eventually begins her career in a male-dominated workplace, for example, it is her overprotective upbringing and limited interaction with the opposite sex that makes her easily susceptible to Shashi's plans to repeatedly molest her on the outward pretence of a 'friendly' bet.

At the same time, with Ambilli and Madhu's youth largely set in the postmillennial era, the novel is also an attempt to understand and explore the directions that the new India is taking. This new India is distinct from the stereotypical representations of India in the 20th-century postcolonial literature discussed above, with its concern with exile or displacement. Thus, placing myself in the emerging strand of post-postcolonial writers, I have used the opportunity to consciously explore in this novel the elusive connection between the Indian colonial and pre-colonial past and the post-postcolonial present.

Section III

A brief overview of the political context in India

This study of postcolonialism in the context of my novel has forced me to closely examine the contemporary political scene in India, provoked me to analyse the way it has shaped my novel without my realising it.

India is currently the world's second-most-populated nation and perhaps as diverse as the continent of Europe, if not more. Any generalisations, therefore, with regards to its varied languages, customs and cultures is fraught with several possibilities of misinterpretation. One of the reasons for this can be traced to the sense of timelessness that is associated with the Indian historical tradition (also see chapter 1 [section 1.4] for more on this discussion). Historical narratives in India are passed on for generations through the retelling of oral narratives and legends, or by being preserved in stone in sculpture and temple architecture. An overall glance at the timeline of Indian history since 500 BC shows traders, merchants, and pilgrims in origin Greek, Roman, Arabic, Turkish, Chinese, Indonesian, Portuguese, English, and others, visiting, assimilating and sometime, settling into the country over the centuries. What began with trade, knowledge-exchange, and integration in the southern parts of Hindu India also turned into invasions and expansions by some of the above nations in the northern and central parts of the country as well, overlaying the already existing rivalry and infighting between local kings, ambitious commanders, and dynasties.

If we now return to the definition of colonialism as: "the consolidation of imperial power... manifested in the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands" (Boehmer, 1995; p 2), in effect, it can be said that Hindu India has had more than one 'outsider' coloniser: they include the Islamic, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English, even if not all of these have been entirely successful in colonising the Indian mind. Take for instance, the Muslim or Islamic trader communities that appear to

have integrated into the country very early. Local legends in Kerala claim the first

mosque to have been built in 621 CE, which interestingly, makes its construction

contemporary to the time of the Muslim holy prophet.[19] Furthermore, Kerala Muslims

are still called 'Mappilla', derived from *Moplah* during the Arab trade period, which

translates in Malayalam as 'son-in-law'.

Such consequent socio-cultural influences are also evident in many of the political

landscapes of some of the coastal port-towns and communities. Thus, every individual

state in India, while maintaining the cultural practices common to Indians in the country

as a whole, also includes within itself some of the cultural aspects of the external

influences of the first visitors, as well as the colonisers to their respective state. In the

state of Kerala, thriving communities of Muslims, Syrian Christians, Catholics, Jews,

etc, represented by their places of worship, food specialities and festivals jointly

celebrated by all Keralites overall, are a few examples.

Colonial influence on town names

To further illustrate and apply this colonial 'adaptability' to *Memoirs Of A Taboo*, let me

narrow this down to the oddly-named *Sultan-Bathery* in Kerala, which became one of

the primary research destinations for my novel as the 18th-century background setting

for Paarvani's escape. On the map of south-India where I first came across the name, the

title stood out because of its reference to the prefix (Tipu) 'Sultan'. However, unlike

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[19] The 16th-century Arabic historical work *Tohfut-ul-Mujahideen*, by the Kerala Muslim, Shaikh al-Malbari Zain al-Din, locates the origin of Kerala Islam in eighth-century Mecca, Arabia, when three pious pilgrims set out for Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka, stopping in Cranganore en route. Al-Din writes: "Contemporary local Muslims go one better: The Cheraman Juma Masjid, named for Cranganore's dynastic rulers, bears a sign proudly proclaiming it the oldest mosque in India, having been established in 621. This would date the mosque from the lifetime of the prophet himself, thus connecting Kerala's community directly with Muslim sacred time, in accord with local legend." (Goldstein, 1999; p 123)

other present-day town-names in Kerala that generally signify local landmarks, symbols of the physical landscape, place of worship, the name of a deity, historical relevance or capture by previous Muslim rulers,[20] to my mind the suffix 'Bathery' meant nothing in any language. Upon enquiry, I learned from one of my interviewees, Ajith Swamy, that the town was originally known as Kidanganad as it belonged to the *Kidangan* tribe. It was changed to 'Purakizha' during the predominantly Hindu Kulashekhara dynasty (12th-century CE), whose last king constructed a huge Ganapathy temple and promptly renamed the land, 'Ganapathyvattom' (12th-13th-century CE). The same Ganapathyvattom gradually turned into a market town with a population comprising Jains, Hindus as well as Muslim traders; apart from spices, the market came to be known for its pearls and hence was called '*Maanikyapuram*' (pearl market). Eventually, sometime in the 17th- and 18th-centuries, Tipu Sultan's many invasions into Malabar were led by a destruction of the town's temples, some of which he used to store his army's ammunition.[21] As a matter of convenience, the English forces fighting Tipu and his French allies during the time referred to the place as 'The Sultan's Battery'.

In the present day, the town has no memory of its previous existence as an erstwhile, rich pearl market that once attracted many traders and merchants from faraway places. Nor does it boast the majestic Hindu temples that at the time functioned not only as 'banks' for the Hindu communities connected to them but also as learning centres or schools for children. Currently, as heritage properties belonging to the government's

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[20] Many city and town names across India have undergone renaming after British or Muslim occupation. In Maharasthra, for example, the town Khadki was renamed to Fatehnagar after Fateh Khan, the son of Malik Ambar who had made it the capital city in the early 1600s. Fatehnagar was renamed to the present-day Aurangabad, after the town was captured by Mughal king Aurangzeb in 1653. Another example is the city of Hyderabad, which was first called Bhaganagar after a local nautch girl Bhagmati that the then ruler, Mohammad Quli Qutb Shah, reportedly fell in love with.

[21] Some of these monuments are now under the Archeological Survey of India. See Research Notes for more details and photographs.

Archeological Survey of India, the foundation stones for many of these structures still exist, some of their pillars standing roofless, open to the forces of nature and devoid of idols of gods or goddesses who were destroyed along with the loot. The name of the town naturally retains its identity as coined by the British two hundred years ago, *The Sultan's Battery*, and is localised to Sultan Bathery. The point of this example is to demonstrate that sometimes the cultural and political imprint of India's colonisers can also be found to begin with the etymology of a town's name.

Although the name Sultan Bathery has not been used in the novel, its setting, along with the temple ruins and forests, has been applied to various points in Paarvani's escape route from Mysore to Malabar (*MOAT*, pp 176, 242).

Remnants of the colonial era

The British colonial period 'officially' came to an end in 1947 but the English language remained, as did the education system initiated by Macaulay. Still today the impact of this English education continues to be felt: Indians are brought up memorising nursery rhymes about Humpty Dumpty, about Bonnie who lies over the ocean, or the cat going to London to visit the Queen. The sole responsibility of imparting the cultural link of 'Indianness' through folk tales and stories relevant to Indian children are left to English-illiterate grandmothers and great-grandmothers who are fast fading away. Meenakshi Mukherjee, speaking at a seminar on Indian writing in English in 1982, said that the issue of this 'Indianness' is taken "to its absurd limits today [and] seems to support an entire research industry in the English departments of various Indian universities, where the scholars themselves, paradoxically, have been brought up almost entirely on non-Indian literature and fed almost exclusively on non-Indian criticism" (1983, p 46).

Mukherjee was perhaps referring to the colonial and postcolonial pedagogic model of English literature studies in India which, from its conception in the early to mid-1800s, recognised the knowledge and skills of the native population as 'ignorant' and unfit for educational use (Kumar, 1991, 2005; p 16). Despite much contention and discussion with regards to the curriculum following the years after independence in 1947, the literary studies syllabus appeared to remain unchanged until the late 1980s and early 1990s.[22] As Mukherjee explains, almost all the critical theories about the novel came from British and American literature, none of which equipped the Indian 'critic' to deal with the cultural, economic or historical aspects of Indian writing.

This leaves little doubt that of the many colonisers and empires in India, no one was as successful as the English in colonising the Indian mind. Unlike post(Western)-colonialism, however, and despite the partition of India and Pakistan, aspects of Islamic culture remain firmly embedded, and on many occasions also celebrated, in the socio-cultural fabric of India.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that there continue to exist undercurrents of anti-colonial feeling against the British, as well as anti-Islam sentiments among divided political parties in India. In this post-millennial era, while Indian society is moving towards modernity and its economy rapidly growing, it is not only examining and ironically assimilating the remnants of colonial rule alongside, it is also questioning the narratives presented with it. To cite an example, some of this introspection is reflected

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[22] In my personal experience as an English Literature BA graduate at one of Mumbai's universities (1990-95), there were hardly a handful of takers for the *optional* subject of Indian English literature; consequently the class of at least 20-30 students had to study British and American literatures. To my knowledge this is offered as an ancillary subject even today at Mumbai University.

in debates around history textbooks in India: what is taught in schools and how much of it is left out[23] is finally being discussed. In the shorthand used by Western media and other critics, this possibly is the 'rise of Indian nationalism'.

My novel, while using the language of the colonialists themselves, has tried to capture these political implications as a background to the narrative developing through Ambilli and Madhu. Paarvani and her mother, Pankaja Amma's, 17th- and 18th-century pre-colonial narratives are interwoven with Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan's rule in Mysore and subsequent invasion into Malabar, where there is some background of the Hindu Namboothiri and Nair customs as well. Meanwhile, the novel is led by the narratives of 21st-century Ambilli, and specifically Madhu, who is re-examining this colonial and pre-colonial past and challenging current historical narratives with the aim of filling the gaps within them.

The novel recognises the ongoing issue of 'moral policing' by certain vigilante political parties or some segments of the Indian police as a reaction, albeit a confused one, to the combined postcolonial 'Westernisation' as well as to the 'modernisation' of contemporary Indians. These groups challenge and often violently object to any display of Western acts of 'obscenity' that appear to 'threaten' Indian culture, such as unmarried couples or same-sex members kissing publicly, celebrations on Valentine's Day. They regard these as alien to Indian culture; they also seek to ban films that they see as promoting western-influenced obscenity or anti-Muslim colonial prejudice. Although the novel does not specifically name these groups, a reader of Indian origin will recognise that the allusion to the 'Shiv Sena', for example, with its reputation as a kind

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[23]   See chapter 1, section 1.5.1 for more about the narratives presented in Indian history textbooks.

of moral brigade. Interestingly, Indian laws dealing with 'obscenity', 'immoral' and 'indecent' behaviour were drawn up in 1860,[24] suggesting perhaps, that they were intended to curb Indian *pre*-colonial attitudes towards sexuality.

Coming back to *Memoirs Of A Taboo*, Madhu is aware of the targets and the power of this moral police, and tips them off to teach Shashi a lesson. Consequently, Shashi is slapped by them; he and his girlfriend are both fined by the railway ticket collector, publicly shamed and made to get off the Bangalore-Bombay *Udyan Express* train at a remote station (*MOAT*, pp 191-2). Perhaps, in a real situation, this response, as well as the violence, would have been more brutal. However, like the other passengers on that train, the readers who understand this issue of moral policing behind the fictional context will gather that the womaniser, Shashi, has had a deserved lesson.

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[24]　Laws 292-294; Indian Penal Code,1860-1739

iii) <u>Feminism, definitions and approaches to *Memoirs of a Taboo*</u>

Establishing a context for feminism

Despite claims that the word *feminism* was the most searched online word in 2017, a single or uniform definition of the term is lacking. It is more helpful, therefore, to talk about feminisms in the plural and in their diverse manifestations they encompass debates about male sexuality; women's legal, social and economic rights; gender inequalities; 'masculine' or 'feminine' classifications; sexual abuse, anti-patriarchy struggles; freedom of reproductive choice; race and intersectionality, and so on.

Despite their different emphases, what unites these debates is "the assertion that feminisms concern themselves with women's inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex" (Freedman, 2001; p 1). By extension, they appear to collectively point towards a single oppressing factor: that of the male, or patriarchal dominance. Even the Oxford dictionary, in the present day, defines feminism as 'the advocacy of women's rights on the *ground* of the equality of the sexes' (OED, 2017 [*emphasis mine*]). In doing so, it appears to suppose a gender-based inequality.

Different strands of feminism thought foreground different theories about and different solutions to the causes of women's oppression. These include *equality feminism*, that promotes equal rights of both men and women across all areas of economic, social and personal goals and opportunities; *radical feminism*, a political movement to effectively

'end male supremacy in all areas of social and economic life' (Willis, 1984; p 91); *cultural feminism*, whose primary goal is to free women of all so-called male-values and replace them with female values; *eco-feminism*, which examines the treatment of both nature and women by patriarchal or male-dominant society; *liberal feminism*, which stands for the equal application of liberal principles, or laws, to women as well as men (Jagger, 1983; p 35); *marxist feminism*, which views women's oppression as a result of capitalism, consequently dividing and labelling domestic work and wage work as non-productive and productive (Poonacha, 2014; p 119), respectively. Besides these, there also exist other variations or categories such as psychoanalytical feminism, poststructural feminism, black feminism, and more.

However, given that this thesis is mainly a study of the creative process that traces the use of historical research in the novel's fictional narrative, its structural development, and characterisation, a full discussion of the various branches and tributaries of feminisms and their various conflicts currently lies beyond its scope. Here instead I ask whether the novel, which is women-centric and therefore open to feminist interpretation, embodies and dramatises a particularly Indian form of feminism. In order to contextualise this, the chapter begins with some early Western theories of patriarchy and feminist representation in 18th- and 19th-century Britain. In its second section, I explore the concept of feminism in India and how it is perceived differently; I also look at some literary works by Indian English women writers. Finally, the chapter considers how the resultant analysis is helpful in understanding the experiences of the characters in *Memoirs of a Taboo*.

I

Western perspectives on patriarchy, sexuality, and the rise of feminists

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir retraces women's role in human history from the point of view of historical materialism (1941, p 84-5). While 'man brandished heavy clubs' to keep himself safe from wild animals, she reasons, 'woman's physical weakness did constitute a glaring inferiority'. She further cites Friedrich Engels's theory (1884) based on the same perspective, that in the stone age, male roles evolved from that of hunter-gatherers while the female species contributed productively towards gardening, pottery or weaving. The discovery of metals and invention of agricultural tools such as the plough necessitated the need for more physical labour to cultivate fields or clear woodlands, and thus began the restriction of women to 'household duties'. Engels, in *The Origin of Family, Private Property, and the State,* calls this upsetting of the old division of labour owing to the invention of new tools, the 'historical defeat of the feminine sex' (Engels, cited by Beauvior, 1941, pp 85). "The same cause which had assured to woman the prime authority in the house – namely, her restriction to domestic duties – this ... now assured the domination there of the man; for woman's housework henceforth sank into insignificance in comparison with man's productive labour – the latter was everything, the former a trifling auxiliary" (*ibid*). Following the transfer of maternal authority to paternal authority, and private property being inherited from the father to the son, a patriarchal system emerged (Beauvoir, 1941). One of the many consequences of this gendered division of labour – with women being restricted to domestic tasks – was that it allowed men to assume authority in the home almost by default.

In her book *The Coming Order* (1911), English feminist author Lucy Re-Bartlett likened the 'beast'-like, 'lower self' attributes of selfishness, ego and sexual lustfulness to the

double standards in men, in their assumption, for example, of women being their sexual

properties. Feminists wanted this experience of sexual objectification and violence to be

replaced by a 'new sexual morality in which men lived by the same ethical precepts as

women' (Bland, 1995, p *xiii*). But this wish was not their only challenge. Subsequent

feminist writers analysed how the imbalance of power between the sexes operated in

daily life. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* ([1892], 2014), for

example, was an early feminist work that *furiously* demanded to be heard. This short,

semi-autobiographical story details the futility of the narrator's isolating treatment for a

nervous condition then called neurasthenia which eventually drives her into madness.

Subtle, poignant expressions by the narrator about her husband, such as "John laughs at

me, of course, but one expects that in marriage"(2014, p 1), or "And what can one do?"

(*ibid,* p 2) are examples of the gender relation in marriage during the time, and of

patriarchy. As Gilman in one of her other works, *Women and Economics* (1898) says

about women's 'ineffectual domestic status':

> "the same human energies and human desires and ambitions within. But all
>
> that she may wish to have, all that she may wish to do, must come through
>
> a single channel and a single choice. Wealth, power, social distinction,
>
> fame, - not only these, but home and happiness, reputation, ease and
>
> pleasure, her bread and butter, - all, must come to her through a small gold
>
> ring" ([1973][25]; 2014, p 56).

In her essay, *A Room of One's Own*, the writer Virginia Woolf remarked on the ways in

which women served as distorting mirrors designed to project the figure of man at twice

its natural size. Without that image, 'how is he to go on giving judgement, civilizing

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[25]   Quote cited from the *Afterword* to Gilman's story by Elaine Hedges (1973); p 56, *The Yellow Wallpaper* ([1892], 2014), Virago UK.

natives, making laws, writing books, dressing up and speechifying at banquets...?" If not for the so-called 'inferiority' of the women, Woolf reflected, men 'would cease to enlarge' (Woolf, [1928], 2004; pp 41-2).

Apart from the gendered division of labour that granted men status and authority and subjugated the women, 18th- and 19th-century British feminists were undermined by two other factors. One of these concerned a perceived lack of adequate language in defining 'passion', and in talking about, or in understanding 'sex'. Charles Darwin's views in *The Descent Of Man* (1871), along with his scientific writings of anthropometry and craniology were highly influential. One outcome of Darwin's argument was that women were widely compared, indeed identified, with the 'lower races', a term used interchangeably with primitives, savages, negroes and black people, as well as other supposedly inferior racial groups.

A theory of evolution for patriarchy

Darwin's theories of natural and sexual selection resulted, in short, in "the man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman – whether requiring deep thought, reasons or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and the hands" (Bland, 1995; p 72). Females thus came to signify the 'lower race' of gender, whose characteristics, like with those of children, included lack of willpower, emotional dependence, imitativeness and 'little capacity for abstract thought'.

Most interestingly, according to Bland: "The dependence of both women and black people was thought to necessitate their 'protection' – by white, Western man...both women and blacks were simultaneously the unknown 'Other' – '*terra incognita*', the

'dark continent' – to be 'discovered', dominated and controlled...(This was) related to the fact that both groups were currently challenging their subordination. The British women's movement had begun in the 1860s, while the Indian mutiny of 1857, the Jamaican revolt of 1861 and other black uprisings raised the spectre of the 'threatening native'" (*Ibid*, p 74). Scientists thus used 'racialised' language to claim that like the 'other' races, women who crossed the boundaries proper to their sex, 'risked degeneracy'.

Over 5000 miles away from England, this view was also apparently plain to see in the treatment of the British Empire towards its (Indian) colonies. Boehmer has called English colonisers "a man's world, much more emphatically so than was Victorian patriarchal society back in Britain. From the beginning of the Empire, the expanding colonies had offered the 'mother country' a practice and testing ground for its manhood" (Boehmer, 1995; p 74). It was not an unusual practice among the governing British authorities to characterise the Indians typically as 'passive, soft, seductive, languid, and generally effeminate when compared to the robustly male personae of the colonizers' (Boehmer, 2005; p 82). In the *History of British India* (1817)*,* for example, written by James Mill who by his own admission[26] felt it unnecessary to visit India and yet, produced six volumes of the book, Hindu culture is described as 'febrile, decorative, delicate, all too feminine' (*ibid*).

Interestingly, so enduring was this characterisation of Hindu culture that, a century-and-half later, psychoanalyst Erik H Erikson, visiting independent India in 1962, reflected that even 'Father Time' in India, 'is a Mother': and every Indian, be he ever so well-educated and pragmatic, lives also in a feminine space time that is deep inside a HERE

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[26] "*This writer, it will be said, has never been in India; and, if he has any, has a very slight, and elementary acquaintance, with any of the languages of the East.*" James Mill, *The History of British India* Vol 1. For link to this online reference, see Bibliography.

and in the very center of a NOW[27]" (1970, 1993; p 43).

As a Western observer, Erikson was also writing about his first impressions of the quality of family life in India: on the 'diffusive' role of the mother in an extended or joint family who responds to its every member, and to the 'unbelievable' importance attached to the many aunts and uncles in the family. Understandably, and in the same statement, Erikson admitted the difficulty of interpreting and transposing this 'touching', yet 'disturbing' element of an Indian family scene to a Western family. Interestingly, the continuity between Mill's and Erikson's observations appear to support Said's tropes of Orientalism of constituting racial characteristics such as the 'lazy Indian', the 'murderous Arab', the 'inscrutable Chinaman'; or of gender assumptions such as the masculine West or the feminine East (*Ibid*).

Furthermore, this is where the discourses of feminism and postcolonialism converge. For example, given the apparent overlap between the above racialised and gendered discourses that set out to mark the (white) man as superior to the woman, it can be argued that while the white woman's racial superiority is modified by her gender, the brown Asian or Indian man is marked for his femininity. This then makes the female *subaltern*, that is, the 'voiceless' Asian or Indian woman, doubly marked by various kinds of patriarchal as well as colonial authority (Spivak,[28]1988; McLeod, 2000; p 174-5).

We have seen the how Western women in the 18th- and 19th-centuries were subjugated by male status and authority, as well as by theories of science that targeted them

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[27] Erikson refers to the sense of timelessness in the Indian tradition. This has been mentioned in the original thesis as well. See section 1.4 '*The Indian historical tradition and the sense of timelessness associated with it*', p 100-4.

[28] In her essay '*Can the Subaltern speak?*' (1988) Gayatri Spivak has examined the plight of Hindu widows and British intervention in the practice of Sati in connection with the *voice* of the subaltern or third world woman.

racially. We now look at the second challenge that women experienced with regard to the very language of sexuality.

An inadequate language for sexuality

The early 20th-century witnessed heated discussions of sexuality, many of them initiated or joined by self-declared 'feminists' and 'Freewomen'. Some argued for the benefits of abstinence, while others insisted that the Feminist movement *must not* have sexually-deficient and disappointed women. Bland also notes that keen discussions about a supposed 'repression' of sex took place in the weekly feminist journal called the *Freewoman* which started in November 1911 and promptly closed in October the following year, seemingly due to a withdrawal of funds because of the same subject (Bland, 1995; p 267).

In his *History of Sexuality (*1978)*,* Michel Foucault may have had these debates in mind when he referred to the 'transgressive' discourses that were taking place against the hypothesis of a Victorian, 'repressed sexuality'. The prohibitive legislation on sexuality and the policing of it by way of regulations since the advent of the 17th-century, according to Foucault, resulted in a 'discursive explosion' (Foucault, 1978; p 38) in the 18th- and 19th-centuries that led to a continuous spiral of 'power', to the person speaking about the so-called taboo, and of 'pleasure' to the person hearing it.

Despite 18th- and 19th-centuries feminist debates in Britain, colonial women novelists writing in India or about India spared no detail in portraying the Indian's obsessions with desire, sensuality, and spirituality. Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), for

example[29], proclaimed that Indians were not fit to rule themselves owing to their 'racial degeneration' on account of sexual indulgence. Furthermore, E M Forster's *A Passage to India* portrays a Raj that seems to profit from the fear it generates among the Indians, and yet the Anglo-Indian rational protagonists, too, are victims of the fear that India induces in them: of the hidden ('furtive fantasies' or sexuality) and the unknown, and amid scenery they do not understand. (Parry, [1972], 1998; pp 71-2, 226) Benita Parry's study, *Delusions and Discoveries, India in the British Imagination*, *1880-1930*, thus points to more such double-standards:

> "The love affairs of the British are presented by the Anglo-Indian romancers with the aseptic sentimentality common to the novelettes of that era, as procreation mysteriously follows the clasped hands and chaste kisses of fully clothed bodies. But when Indians love or lust after Europeans, the lacunae are kaleidoscopically filled. What fantasies inform the ethereal yet sensual passions of Lilamani and Sarasvati, the siren seductions of 'half-caste' women, the smouldering appetites of Indian men? Assailed by such tainted thoughts, the women writers committed their fantasies to paper and retreated to the safety of the wholesome British world." (Parry, Sprinker, [1972], 1998; p 93)

The above examples support Said's argument that the 'feminised', 'submissive', 'erotic' Orient was, in fact, *made Oriental* by the West (Said, [1978], 1995; p 6), and, as McLeod suggests, *projects* onto the Orient "fantasies of the West concerning moral degeneracy, confused and rampant sexualities" (McLeod, 2000; p 46). At the same time,

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[29]   Some of the examples of Flora Annie Steel's *On the face of the Waters,* of the hero's incomprehensibility of Indian sexual passions, are also mentioned in the chapter *A postcolonial approach.*

I want to suggest that they also, perhaps inadvertently, reveal some truth about pre-colonial India's liberal attitudes to women and sexuality. *Memoirs of a Taboo*, in its portrayal of the protagonist Ambilli's 18th-century fictional character Paarvani, highlights one aspect of the lives of certain sections of women in India, namely devadasis, *ganikas,* and courtesans in one of the royal courts in Karnataka, south India. In the chapter on the theme of sexuality in this thesis, I attempt to clarify and answer some points raised in the viva regarding the suggestion that the novel idealises women's sexuality in pre-colonial India.

Here, though, I examine whether the novel can be read as a feminist account of female sexuality and whether such a reading needs to take account of the different tradition- or culture-based manifestation and expression of feminism in India.

II

Feminism in India

The concept of 'Feminism' in India is complex. To begin with, Indian women's engagement with feminism is shaped by multiple strands of their social, psychoanalytical and cultural conditioning that may depend, for example, on their region of origin, ethnicity, upbringing, education and marital status. These factors overdetermine how an Indian woman positions herself: as an urban, elite *feminist* campaigning for women's rights and the division of domestic labour, for example, or as the spectator or the *object* of that discourse, such as a homemaker who does not work outside the home.

To take this illustration further, a collective panel of contemporary feminists in India, for instance, however provocatively speaking about women's rights and empowerment and demanding equal division of labour, may fail to garner any significant reaction from the average, upper- or middle-class, or working-class housewife who would just want to 'get her work done for the day' or spend time with her children and the elders in her family. While the feminists see oppression or unfair division of labour in the life of the housewife, it is highly likely that the latter will *not* take them seriously, if not dismiss them outright as 'superficial'. This perceived gap between both the women, one of them a feminist, could be possible because of a problem - *not* with the message or discourse, but with the *medium* itself. In order to understand this gap, one has to consider the common observation that most prominent Indian feminists tend to be Western-educated, upper-class or elite women who have rebelled against gendered Indian cultural norms by not marrying, by marrying outside the community, by divorcing or being in same-sex relationships.

This *image* provokes an often generalised reaction among the 'non-feminists', that is, among the 'normal' or regular Indian housewife who supposedly tends to follow all the traditional norms as a 'good' daughter, wife, or mother: that Indian feminists are haters of the male sex, 'privileged' wealthy women who are stuck in traditional roles and therefore, espouse 'concerns of upper-caste women' (*Anon.*, 2003), and are bad role models. The larger part of the country's female population, ranging from educated housewives or homemakers, career-women juggling multiple domains of domestic care of elderly or young dependents at home and exhibiting professionalism at work, or women in villages literate to a basic level, thus finds itself unable to relate to this rather negative image of the feminist.

It should not come across as surprising that in such a scenario the agenda of Western feminism of gender equality or resistance to male patriarchy is not a priority for the contemporary working-class urban or rural Indian woman. For example, in the 1980s-90s, when Action India, a women's organisation, visited the area of Saharanpur in north-India, it was met with this response from Rajbala, an elderly local: "Equality? Equality with whom? Equality for what? Will my stomach be filled with equality? I don't want equality with my man. I want equality with you, you who have cars and send your children to English-speaking schools" (*Outlook*, 1995).

A Western feminist would say, though, that this is the result of patriarchal ideology: that women are socialised into domesticity and putting their domestic role above everything. But as Chitnis argues in her essay, *Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions* (1985), the cry of the western feminist about the neglect of Indian women does not really appeal to the latter: "They see that the legal safeguards and equal opportunity facilities that are being fought for in many of the countries which claim long traditions of equality and individual freedom are already available to them in principle. Thus they react with the feeling that feminism is alien" (Ghadially, 1988; p 88).

Western vs Indian perception and conditioning

Another difference between feminism in India and Europe is related to the earlier point of the socio-cultural background of the woman 'spectator'. This is related to the reader response or reception theory which "deals with the reader's position as the one who creates meaning rather than the meaning producer" (Rosenblatt [1978] cited by Koeswandi, n.d). That is, the interpretation of a text depends upon the social and cultural background, personal experiences, biases, and beliefs of the reader, rather than

those of the author. This can be demonstrated with the help of an example from

Memoirs of a Taboo: where Ambilli has to repeat aloud the sex-word 25 times by her

class teacher (*MOAT*, pp 36-8). When a Western acquaintance in her late 50s read this

chapter, her immediate 'reader' reaction was that of shock. She strongly disapproved of

the 'rather abusive' treatment by the teacher towards Ambilli, and was also aghast to

hear the justification that this was the normal pedagogic course in India: an Indian

swimming instructor, for example, would tackle a hesitant, novice swimmer's fear of

water simply by pushing him or her into the pool. Ambilli's teacher, according to this

writer, had done something to the same effect.

While the classroom incident was based on a personal experience, it is unique in the

sense that not every woman in contemporary India goes through this process of being

de-sensitised to what is taboo: in this context, the term *sex*. By way of illustration, the

US-based, postcolonial and women's studies scholar, Ketu H Katrak begins her book,

Politics of the Female Body (2006), with her experience of attending a Women's

conference in Kerala in 1990. Organised as a series of workshops, the event was said to

comprise women representatives from all over the urban and rural parts of the country

and abroad, while the workshops themselves were divided according to various themes

of 'Women and Media', 'Feminism and Women's Studies' programmes', 'Women and

Politics', 'Women and Violence' and 'Women and Health'. Katrak, who is of Indian/Parsi

origin, noticed that despite the range of speakers and workshops that centred around

women's issues, there was a loud silence on the subject of sexuality, with a rare mention

equating the term 'rather narrowly with lesbianism' (2006, pp *x, xi*). Katrak notes that

female sexuality in 'third world' countries of Africa, Caribbean and India is often

represented in elevated terms and associated with the glorification of motherhood, or it

is demoted to objectifying the female body.

As readers, we are culturally positioned. A vast country like India with its population of over 1.3 billion (2016), spread over 29 states that stretch across 1.270 million square miles, can perhaps be compared to the cultural diversity seen across the 44 countries of Europe (Worldometers, 2018). Furthermore, every Indian state carries with it a different set of traditions, mythologies, oral narratives, languages, and customs that have even more variations within its own individual territories, borders, religions, castes and roles and duties. The practice of isolating a young girl or woman when she is menstruating, for example, can be perceived differently[30] in the north and the south of the same country. These cultural differences are manifold when compared to the range of cultural gender differences in the West. Elisabeth Bumiller thus reiterates in her book, *May you be the mother of a hundred sons* (1990), that the women's movement in India has a different approach and focus from Western women's movements. Bumiller's book[31] gives an insight into the lives of women in India across the classes. It details elite urban feminists' attempts towards 'equality' of the nation's women, as well as at the grassroots level by the government represented by Vina Mazumdar in the 1970s, which eventually

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[30] In her book, *Of Women: In the 21st Century* (2017), Shami Chakrabarti presents the case of a 15-year-old girl who tragically died during the extreme tradition of *chauppadi*, where a girl is isolated during her period. However, and perhaps, unintentionally, by presenting only partial aspects of the *chhaupadi* tradition, the British-born and educated Shami Chakrabarti's 'outsider' outlook only raises further questions of taboo, victimisation, prejudice and privilege about such extreme practices in the mind of a western reader, as it did in *The Guardian*'s Gaby Hinsliff's review of the same book. While this tradition is outlawed in many parts of India and Nepal as Chakrabarti mentions, she fails to study its contrasting significance in the south of the country where other reasons of hygiene, convenience and physical rest for the girl (from strenuous hard labour in a joint-family setting) used to be considered.

[31] Interestingly, as a Western writer who is clearly passionate and empathetic about the conditions of women in India and engages the reader with her analysis and insight, Elisabeth Bumiller is not spared of the subconscious gender 'conditioning'. In detailing her interactions or interviews with a woman, for example, she always begins with a description of the woman's attire: regardless of whether she be a peasant, a worker, a feminist, an elite or a female star actor. This is not repeated for the men in her book. The SEWA founder, Ela Bhatt, described as an unlikely revolutionary as she is small and shy with a 'tiny' voice is "dressed simply in handspun cotton saris (Bumiller, 1990; p 136); Kunti Devi, a poor woman from Bihar who had fought in the Bodh Gaya struggle wore "a printed orange sari and was thin and muscular, with a tatoo on her arm" (*ibid*, p 134); poet Nabaneeta Sen is a "comfortably disheveled woman of fifty, bundled that evening into a traditional Bengali silk sari with intricate folk designs on the borders" (*ibid*, p 220), and more.

began to identify the problems with the previous feminists' approaches. Indira Gandhi, who was elected as the Indian prime minister four times (1966-77, 80-84), believed that "the problems of poor Indian women were fundamentally no different from those of poor Indian men." The problem of women was thus related to poverty and a lack of economic opportunity and not problems of gender roles, according to Gandhi (Bumiller, 1990, p 149).

In their paper titled, *Asian Indian Women and Feminism: A double-edged Sword?,* Robin Allen and Jayashree Nimmagadda (1999) reiterate the point that the Western concept of romantic love and sexual fulfilment are not the concerns of Indian women who seek peace and harmony in their domestic lives and are 'not dependent on sex for emotional gratification', as an unnamed feminist health worker suggested to them. According to this respondent, Indian women's priorities include: "Freedom of movement, equitable division of labor, getting our work done, advancing the women's movement, coping with children (Mies, 1991, cited in Allen and Nimmagadda 1999, p 35).

It thus appears that, just as in the West, there is also no 'single' contemporary Indian feminism. The early 1980s witnessed the emergence of Women's Studies conferences and debates at a local and national level following the *Towards' Equality* report[32] in 1974. Feminist journals such as *Manushi* (1978), and women's publishing firms such as Kali for Women (1984) were founded.[33] The urban, elite feminist leaders who

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[32] The Indian Constitution guaranteed women complete equality with men at independence. The 480-page *Towards Equality* report (1974), was the first comprehensive report commissioned to investigate the status of its women with regards to the Constitutional laws that they were entitled to. The report instead revealed that "large masses of women in this country have remained unaffected by the rights guaranteed to them" (Bumiller, 1990; p 127) While the status of men had improved during this time, the majority of India's rural women, for example, were worse off with regards to literacy and the issue of dowry.

[33] The founders of Kali for Women, Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, both feminists and scholars in their own right, have recently diversified into Zubaan Books (2003) and WomenUnlimited (2011).

established some of these initiatives and others during this period soon realised that the primary concerns of over 80 percent of Indian women were access to clean water, animal fodder, and cooking fuel source. And yet during this time those feminists who gained support and attention in the country were not writers or activists but the women from rural backgrounds. In 1973, for example, a local widow led two dozen other women of her village to 'hug' the trees whose felling they opposed.[34] Other campaigns included the struggle for fishermen's rights led by women in Kerala; in Karnataka, a protest strike initiated by women workers of a tobacco factory demanding a minimum wage, and so on. Contemporary examples include the local, stick-wielding sari-clad women resident vigilantes of *Gulabi* (pink) *Gang*[35] whose targets are corruption, domestic violence, female infanticide, child marriages and the abuse of women. These women came together to fight, even physically, societal *wrongs* and issues of injustice however patriarchal, industrial, minor or large, rather than for problems that could be characterised as middle- or upper-class ones of economic or personal injustice such as job discrimination or equal pay.

Working within a 'gendered' power system

Feminism, according to Menon, is not just about individual men and women but "about understanding the ways in which 'men' and 'women' are produced and inserted into patriarchies that differ according to time and place" (2012; p *viii*). In the Indian context, she argues, feminism means recognising the structural inequalities in gender, believing

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[34]   This was famously called the Chipko movement (1973).
[35]   The gang originates from the same area as the legendary Phoolan Devi (1963-2001), who in spite of being subjected to rapes and violence in her youth, found herself in a band of dacoits where she learnt self-defense, and became a kind of Robinhood-figure working for women from the lower classes, eventually joining the Indian parliament.

that 'change is possible', and women working within their social limits so that 'decisively, the old markers shift forever' (*ibid*, p 222). The women in *Memoirs of a Taboo* exemplify these aims in many ways. Their characterisation was based on my own observation as an Indian woman of other young women relations or acquaintances who were placed after their 'arranged' marriage into families completely out of keeping with their own social upbringing: from a close-knit, nuclear family of three to four members, for example, to a joint family of twenty-two; from a traditional south-Indian family to a boisterous north-Indian family belonging to another caste, language and related customs, cuisine etc, or vice versa. In almost all the cases, I have witnessed the women's transformation from reluctant, submissive new brides who strictly followed the patriarchal customs and procedures of their new families, especially pertaining to their domestic duties or the choice of continuing their career as against staying at home, into confident decision-makers and career women over a short period of time, without explicitly challenging the structure of the patriarchal system.

The characters of Rajeshwari Amma and Indu in the novel, for example, show the diverse ways in which feminism can be defined and expressed in Indian society. As a woman from the devadasi community, Rajeshwari Amma could have evoked sympathy in the reader for being an outcaste or having to prostitute herself for money. Instead, she chooses to work her way up as a domestic help and is eventually employed as the house-keeper for a rental property. Apart from this economic fulfilment and security, emotionally, she satisfied her maternal needs by bringing up Husain as if he were her own son. Her compromise was to give up dance forever – a sacrifice made more significant by the fact that she was born in a family of dancers. In Rajeshwari Amma's case, the prospect of finding a decent and respectable means of survival took priority

over an artistic skill that would perhaps remain within her forever. I want to suggest that in this, perhaps, she played out a particularly Indian feminist compromise.

In the journal entry preceding chapter 18, Ambilli shares with the reader what every Indian girl is told about marriage as being a compromise: "*you have to let go of some of your interests, you have to accommodate some of his.*" Indu, Ambilli's mother, has forgotten her favourite music because, inadvertently over a number of years, she let her husband's music take priority over her own. Ambilli's cousin puts her ailing father and family first although her educational ambitions could have been fulfilled by her scholarship abroad. From the Western perspective and as a writer, these 'compromises' are facts that I recognise as women giving in to patriarchal pressures and placing their domestic duties above everything else. However, as an Indian woman who has also been brought up in this environment, I have chosen to depict the common situation of women choosing the compromises that they feel are inescapable in a happy marriage, even if they do so sometimes grudgingly, as against the longer-term 'gains' of a new identity and *self-discovery.*

The cousin who had to forego her higher education is thus the 'good' daughter, daughter-in-law, and mother who is forever available for her family, and additionally, teaches children at home. Ambilli's journal entry also suggests that in her marriage, it is Manu who is making the compromises: by giving her space, by not getting physically intimate with her or making her uncomfortable. Ambilli recognises this and decides that she will not allow Manu to change on account of her inability to let go of her past. As for Manu's character, by seeing her as an equal and not imposing his love or conditions on her as her husband, it is he who plays the role of the male feminist. In representing Ambilli's marriage in this way, I have tried to portray the multi-faceted complexities operating in

a modern Indian marriage.

At this point I want to suggest that this concept of 'compromise' by the Indian woman in her real life also carries echoes of Elaine Showalter's statement about the progression of the existential woman from the 'feminine to the female':

> "First, there is the prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, and *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy. Finally, there, is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning-inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (Myles, 2006; p 7).

Indian feminism thus espouses a kind of gradualism, in contrast to the West. These progressions or transformations have also been observed in other works by Indian English postcolonial writers, such as Anita Desai, or R K Narayan. We will see some more examples in the following subsection.

Literary representations by Indian writers

The realistic 'progression' of the quiet, submissive woman who *exists* in a patriarchal setting and yet never gives up is a characteristic feature of many of the women protagonists in the novels of the postcolonial writers Anita Desai, R K Narayan, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya.

One example is Deven's frustrated wife, Sarla, in Desai's *In Custody*, who appears to be the least intellectual of all of Desai's women characters. Sarla is disillusioned because

like most simple 'good' Indian girls, she had always dreamed and looked forward to living a happy, married life even before her marriage. The reality, however, turns out to be different. She becomes aggressive and constantly quarrels with Deven; she is often almost unfairly left to her own means while Deven pursues his interests, yet she does not know how to express her desires or individuality. As a mark of protest, she eventually leaves for her parents' house along with her son but returns within a week, having decided to make peace with her circumstances and the lack of attention from Deven. Remarkably, the latter is engrossed in his own struggles and is indifferent on both occasions. Although the role of Sarla is sketchy in the novel, she is a strong character, and the author seems to suggest that Sarla, through her 'surrender', finds her secret triumph and contentment: "Contrary to appearances, she was actually pleased to be back in her domain, to assume all its responsibilities, her indispensable presence in it; in her parents' home she had missed the sense of her own capability and position" (Desai, [1994], 1999; p 214). Desai's Sarla appears to be an embodiment of Showalter's 'existentialist' character who in her various stages from a new bride to the mother of a young four-year-old, goes through the imitation and internalisation of patriarchal and societal norms, protests and advocates albeit in vain for some recognition or appreciation and, finally, accepts her husband and her circumstances with the realisation that if there has to be peace in her family life it has to first come from within herself. In *Memoirs of a Taboo,* Indu's conflict with her mother-in-law is additionally heightened by her inability to understand or accept the concept of matrilineality in her husband's home. After almost a decade of staying away from Unni's family, she returns for the sake of her daughter Ambilli who, as Indu realises, also deserves her grandmother's love and attention.

The (south-Indian) women in the novelist and short story writer R K Narayan's books are generally portrayed as subservient to their husbands or fathers; they are represented as strong traditionalists, tolerant, and as a picture of the 'ideal' Indian woman who is content to hide in the shadow of her husband's achievements[36]. In his autobiography, *My Days*, R K Narayan writes about his rationale behind his *The Dark Room* (1938) protagonist, Savitri: "...I was somehow obsessed with a philosophy of Woman as opposed to Man, her constant oppressor. This must have been an early testament of the "women's Lib" movement. Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she herself began to lose all notion of her independence, her individuality, stature, and strength." The grandmother and mother in *Swami and Friends* set in Malgudi are more examples.

The only woman character in Narayan's *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967)*,* is Grace, a half-American who is suddenly implanted in the life of the protagonist, Jagan, as his daughter-in-law. The Gandhian and widower, Jagan, who is accustomed to doing all the housework himself, is aghast when he sees Grace tidying the rooms, washing the vessels in the kitchen and raking every corner of the rooms with a broom in her hand. She brushes aside his feeble protests by saying, "Father, you think I mind it? I don't. I must not forget that I'm an Indian daughter-in-law" ([1967], 1983; p 46). When Grace unwittingly tucks up her Indian sari, exposing her ivory-hued kneecap, Narayan cleverly reveals another insight into the difference between the Western and Indian attitudes to the female body, with a subtle reference to the Indian woman and her *femininity*. Not surprisingly, Jagan is flustered and embarrassed and yet, unable to take his eyes off her skin as she scrubs and cleans. He says, "What will people think if they see a modern

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[36] As a Malayali Nair woman currently married into a Tamil Iyer family myself, I understand these to be characteristics that are typical of most Iyer households.

girl, brought up in New York, doing all this drudgery" (*ibid*)? As with Showalter's statement mentioned earlier, Grace has no other identity far away from her homeland except as Mali's wife and is, therefore, 'existential'. The surprised (Indian) reader knows that Grace, a modern, Western girl brought up entirely in America, is not expected to imitate, internalise and fit into the patriarchal ideology that her husband, and not her father-in-law, subscribes to. However, later in the story, when it becomes apparent that Jagan will not sponsor his son Mali's business idea, she is asked by the latter to go back to America despite Jagan's firm protests: "If you read our *puranas...*the wife's place is beside her husband whatever may happen" (*ibid*, p 102).

In her essay on the concepts of 'femininity' and 'liberation' in the context of changing sex roles, Manisha Roy compares the women in modern India and America. "In India, a woman's femininity does not depend on her ability to attract the opposite sex with sexual and personality factors determined by male standards...What is stressed are indicators/signs (*lakshan*) – both physical and mental, which indicate that she will successfully play out her future female roles" (Roy, 1975; Ghadially, 1988, p 138). The term femininity here has an ideal connotation in the context of Indian womanhood. It indicates how ably she performs her social roles of wife or daughter-in-law; if this role demands to be aggressive, for example, towards a required goal such as standing up for her husband's or family values or in raising her children, such a woman would still be considered feminine and not 'bossy' or masculine. Here I briefly return to my earlier example of witnessing how contemporary, modern women who married into completely different family environments than those of their own eventually worked their way up from within the patriarchal systems albeit by making some compromises. One can say that the social need to adhere to this quiet quality of femininity eventually works in the

favour of the woman who, in her own way, learns how to express her individuality despite the male-dominant family surrounding her. In the Indian culture, where both men and women are equally and closely bound to their extended families and communities, the struggle for 'individuality' is less talked about, than for instance, issues raised by patriarchal dominance or inheritance laws. "Most women," according to Kishwar, "are unwilling to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family, but also from their larger kinship group and community" (2004, pp 30-1).

On sexual harassment in contemporary India

Apart from literary works, Indian films, especially in the Bollywood genre, play a significant role in shaping contemporary attitudes – both Indian and non-Indian – to women in India. Although the subject of the representation of women in Indian film is beyond the scope of this thesis, what is relevant is the kind of explicit sexual display in Indian-language films alongside traditional norms and codes of social conduct. This kind of display is addressed in the novel through Madhu's apparent fascination with the advertisement posters of 'Adult' or 'blue' films while Ambilli, standing next to her, cringes with embarrassment (*MOAT*, p 67). Within minutes the girls are teased by a few intoxicated 'roadside romeos' who have been watching their reaction to the posters. Madhu ignores them and carries on with her commentary.

I have used this example to suggest in the novel that the sexual harassment of women in contemporary India – trivialised in the common term 'eve-teasing' – has been normalised in many Bollywood films where it functions as a plot device for the development of romance between the male and female actor (*Aljazeera*, 2018). Some

prominent examples[37] include the films *Professor* (1962), *Padosan* (1968), *Dil* (1990),

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jaayenge (1995), *Badrinath ki Dulhaniya* (2017) among others;

Darr (1993), *Ranjhanaa* (2013), *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), etc, also glorified

stalking[38] girls in order to win them over. According to film producer Tandon, Indian

film makers "basically have confused romance with eve-teasing, which is extremely

dangerous because that's what young kids are growing up seeing" (2018). Elite

'celebrity' feminist actors such as Shabana Azmi, Kalki Koechlin, have critiqued,

through social media, the depiction of 'item girls' in Bollywood films. The role of the

'item girl' requires a degree of bodily exposure and is hence played by either a new and

upcoming artist or a very highly-paid established ones; the lyrics for these songs

themselves are suggestive and obscene. While some aspects of sexual display is also

critiqued in films or advertisements that are made in the West, this subject gains more

pertinence in India because a lot of social 'codes' with regards to the mingling of the

sexes or bodily exposure are still 'taboo'.

At a 'Women of Worth' panel as part of the International Women's Day programme

(2016), Azmi reminds audiences that while the 'item' songs in question could be

lyricised by one male writer and composed by another, they are being watched by

millions of Indian viewers worldwide: "If a top actor sings 'I am a *tandoori murgi*

[chicken], eat me with alcohol', it's not a laughing matter. It's a serious issue...It's a

wonderful thing for women to celebrate their sensuality. But are you celebrating your

sensuality (with item numbers)? No. You're surrendering yourself to the male gaze.

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[37] It is noteworthy that the 'eve-teasing' depicted in the Indian film is itself very casual; indeed a majority of Bollywood films, including some of the examples cited here, belong to the comedy or romance genres.

[38] In most cases, stalking and wooing of the female actor by the male in Bollywood and other Indian language films portrayed through song and dance, accentuating its unreservedness. Examples of this kind of 'playful' behaviour are also seen in the stories of Krishna and the *Gopis*.

You're commodifying yourself. You're objectifying yourself" (2016). Azmi effectively implies that the problem really arises, or rather, is conceived, when children as young as three- to six-year-olds, who have yet to comprehend bodily sexual development or indeed the concepts of violation or shame, imitate the item-girls and dance to the beats of their songs. The parents, meanwhile, albeit fully aware of the sexual innuendo, prefer to ignore it, and applaud the creative talents of the child instead from a 'fun' perspective. This, in effect, tends to lead to a cycle of psychological conflict in the minds of growing Indian girls and boys for whom, 'taboos' with regards to sexuality have been 'de-sensitised' or normalised thanks to these 'item numbers'. Thus, a young male perhaps would think it 'normal' to woo a girl or even stalk her in the manner depicted in films, unmindful of traditional socio-cultural and moral segregation between the genders, and restrictive codes on sexual behaviour in schools, colleges, and other institutions that stubbornly remain.

The term 'eve-teasing' is a neologism apparently coined in 1958 by a *Times of India* journalist. It has evolved since to now include "leering, catcalling and singing *filmi* songs, to the more menacing exposure of sexual organs, public masturbation, and physical intrusions such as 'accidental' brushes, violent groping or even hitting women...and often stops barely short of rape" (Misri, 2017). While 'rape' is taken seriously and considered as bad a fate as death, the repeated portrayals of film heroes 'stalking' female actors into coy submission, or the romantic notion that 'when a girl says no, she means yes', trivialise sexual harassment. *Memoirs of a Taboo* highlights a cycle where what appear on the face of it to be relatively harmless acts on part of the male lead to the woman's victimisation. Here too, as in the vast majority of cases, 'eve-teasing goes unreported and becomes normalised until, eventually the victim gets

blamed on account of the kind of clothes she has worn, and whether she is drunk or

sober.

In its very first few paragraphs, *Memoirs of a Taboo* thus homes in on the universal

predicament of a woman whose body, having endured encroachments, is unable to

forget them. Ambilli re-lives the incidents and almost 'lists' them in her journal entries in

the order of their intensity: of being groped at the crowded railway station in central

Bombay some seven or eight years earlier; of being slapped hard on her breast at the

age of 18 by a cyclist; and, eventually, Shashi's act of violating her that, despite its

severity does not officially 'qualify' as rape. Additionally, in chapter 25, the stronger-

willed Madhu shares her experiences with Ambilli: of the man who would masturbate

outside their secondary school; of the lecherous ex-colleague who would obstruct the

path of his female co-workers in the narrow canteen corridors with his body and

intimidate them; or of the teaching assistant who had 'slid his rough hand underneath'

her skirt made of colourful tissue-paper when she was seven and part of a dance

programme. Madhu considers girls to be as 'tender and fragile as tissue paper' and asks

Ambilli: "Who has not been abused, Ambilli? Why make a big fuss of something we

face everyday, sexual or not? ...*regardless* of whether or not our parents were over-

protective, or broad-minded" (*MOAT*, p 142-143).

Thus, in a way, while the above lists by Ambilli and Madhu allude to a 'sexual

repression' that seems to have affected *both* the male and the female in contemporary

India, the novel is focussed on Ambilli's lonely struggle to come to terms with sexual

abuse as an act that transcends cultural and structural boundaries.

In her analysis of eve-teasing, Deepti Misri says that the "objectification of women is

frequently attributed to the corrupting influence of Western culture, seen against women's supposed deification in Indian culture" (2017, p 306-7). However, given the earlier suggestion that Bollywood too plays a significant role in objectifying women, perhaps it is fairer to say that the crude depiction of women's sexuality in modern India has been overdetermined, with both Western culture and Bollywood playing their part.

A feminist approach to the novel

At the heart of *Memoirs of a Taboo* is the character of Ambilli, brought up as a single, second-generation migrant daughter in Mumbai by her overprotective Keralite parents. Unni and Indu's tendency to protect Ambilli comes from their inexperience, because unlike in Kerala, where matriarchal influences can still be observed in certain pockets of the state, Mumbai has always been a male-dominated city. Ambilli's interactions with the opposite sex are thus restricted. The consequence of this well-intentioned sheltering is that Ambilli nurtures an unhealthy naivety with regards to her own developing sexuality. Despite this, Ambilli seeks to find herself by attempting to walk home from her college un-escorted and, years later, by working in a career environment that includes male colleagues. Not surprisingly, both times she fails.

The novel thus raises questions about Ambilli's quest for freedom from her ignorance and the price she pays for it – sexual harassment and abuse.

By contrast, for Ambilli's best friend, Madhu, also a second-generation daughter of Keralite parents in Mumbai, 'freedom' means being able to express her individuality and exercise her personal decisions - of divorce from her first love and husband, Vinod; of choosing to study further; and in choosing to live with her boyfriend of two months, Anand, as a 30-year-old 'single' woman. In the Indian social context, the factors of both

'being single' as a woman, as well as 'unmarried' at the age of 30, go against the general norms where a woman's marriageable age in India averages 22-25 years. But Madhu is indifferent to this 'requirement'. Also, regardless of whether her decisions are right or wrong, Madhu stands by them - much to her mother's disappointment.

Madhu's upbringing is not as socially restrictive as Ambilli's, even though they both grew up in Mumbai as second-generation Keralite immigrants. This is because she has a brother a year older and, in the Indian cultural setting, parents expect their son to protect their daughter in their absence. In the northern states of India, festivals like *Raksha-bandhan* and *Bhai-Dooj* further intensify this brother-sister bond and the notion of the male protecting the female. In the south, this takes another form: *Karthikai-Deepam*. While these sibling-oriented festivals signify nothing more than a gesture of love or a symbolic 'warding off' of evil, they may be seen as having a strong 'patriarchal' objective and resisted by a person who is of non-Indian, Western origin, or by someone who views society through a 'feminist' lens. Such a perspective would critique the concept of women needing male protection.

The novel explores these different perspectives through the contrasting character and behaviour of Ambilli and Madhu, with Ambilli growing up as an only child and a vulnerable girl isolated from the opposite sex. On the other hand, Madhu's confidence and carefree attitude have been acquired partly through proximity with her brother and his male friends, whom she always accompanies on her way back from school and college. "She had even picked up their jargon for X-rated movies, their signals, and slang, their carefree attitude. By the time they had graduated and she was on her own, she was independent enough to be elected as the class monitor, and quite a resourceful one at that" (*MOAT,* pp 67-72).

The other strong women characters in the novel are the ex-devadasi Rajeshwari Amma, and Ambilli's mother, Indu. Rajeshwari Amma, in her early 50s, finds everyday satisfaction in being a full-time mother for her adopted son, Husain, and in her job as an employed cook and caretaker of a house in Mysore. Her *choice* to not continue in her community of devadasis, and therefore detach herself from the stigma of prostitution, is a crucial decision that immediately frees her, as well as Husain, from her past. Given this situation, and Madhu's earlier, both Rajeshwari Amma and Madhu are shown to be in apparent control of their 'destinies', regardless of what the Indian society thinks of them. In a sense, they are both seeking to make an individual identity of their own and resisting their oppressive pasts. Thus, these characters show the many diverse ways in which feminism can be expressed in Indian society.

Indu's position as Unni's wife from 'outside' of Kerala straightaway pitches her against his family of seemingly 'dominant' mother and sisters. Firstly, as a newly-wed bride, Indu is unable to understand the ways of life in her husband's home. She is unable to sleep for the first two nights, frightened to the point where she finally gets a fever when a stray cat walks over the teak-beams in the kitchen. Indu's new sisters-in-law, naturally accustomed to the ancient architecture of their own house and living, are not able to relate to her as a 'city-girl' either. Although the characterisation of the sisters is not developed further in the novel, it is implied that Unni's family is an extended one, where the sisters continue to live in their mother's home along with their husbands.

Thus, the novel pays attention to the concept of the matriarch, although it is 1971 when the system of matrilineality in Kerala had been long outlawed[39].

The contrasts between the vastly different cultures in the individual states of India is

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[39]   Matriliny in Kerala was abolished in 1923.

also revealed in the novel. Indu, for example, albeit originating from the south of India, has no clue about the old matriarchal system in Kerala when the woman was always the head of the household. The novel, however, reveals the present reality that despite laws banning a way of life practised for centuries in the matriarchal Nair community, some remnants of the system still exist, such as the dependence on some occult practices, or the existence of 'househusbands'.[40] This is displayed by the description of Unni and his father who, when Indu's fever becomes critical, remain 'disengaged' while the women by contrast play an active role.

> "The young bridegroom hung his head down for most of the day, feeling helpless, yet somehow responsible for his wife's fate....The father sat in his reclining chair rubbing his hairy chest, sharing tea and the news with everyone who seemed even remotely interested in the affairs of the house. The sisters gossiped among themselves, greatly amused by the fuss created by this new sister-in-law-from-another-planet. Only one member of the family knew what to do. His mother. Without lifting her head from her prayer book, she threw instructions to the cook... To the servant.... To her daughters...And finally, almost whispering, to her son: Unni, waste no time. This fever is the evil eye itself and will take her away if we are not quick. Go fetch Bhaskaran Nair, the *manthravadi* [black magician or exorcist]..."
> (*MOAT*, p 17).

The second instance in the novel when Indu displays her self-assertiveness and strength

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[40] The word 'househusband' comes closest to the concept of the Hindi term 'gharjamai' or 'ghardamaad', where the husband stays in the wife's home and only occasionally visits his own family. This practice, although a matriarchal one, continues to exist in some pockets of Kerala. My father's sister, for example, continues to live in their mother's ancestral property, while her husband lives with her. However, perhaps owing to the bureaucracy around land rights issues, the practice is more a matter of convenience in the present-day rather than a stubborn refusal to let go of old customs.

of character is when she returns to Unni's native home 17 years later when Ambiili is a

teenager. Indu stands her ground against her concerned mother-in-law, who is not happy

with the way Ambilli is being brought up in Bombay. In the process of being primarily

responsible for her decisions in favour of herself and for Ambilli (in letting her live

independently in Bangalore), it is implied that Unni as Ambilli's father prefers not to

interfere, even though he is the functioning head of the family. Far from this scenario

being a quarrel between incompatible relationships, *Memoirs of a Taboo* reveals the

technical as well as the practical facets of the contrasting matriarchal as well as

patriarchal systems. Although matriarchy has been technically abolished, for example,

and Ambilli's nuclear family lives in Bombay as a patriarchal unit, the everyday

practical decisions continue to be made by the women. Given the above contextual

background, modern definitions of feminism seem of limited relevance if they cannot

encompass the perhaps more diffused concept of power intrinsic to matrilineal families.

Nevertheless, in the face of the constant conflicts and pulls between two strong-willed

women – Indu and Unni's mother – in the same family, what grows increasingly

apparent is Ambilli's trusting, indeed gullible, nature. Added to her overprotective

upbringing and restricted interactions with boys, this puts her in a position where she is

unable to fight or flee from her abuser.

Probing further, the circumstances of Ambilli's sexual abuse in the novel and Shashi's

lack of remorse, open up complex questions about patriarchy and its largely

unexamined normalisation, not only in the Indian society but also worldwide. It also

represents conflicting currents in the lives of modern Indian women, striving for roles as

decision-makers while subject to the kind of groping and abuse featured in the novel,

their professional power offset by an apparent sense of powerlessness in the face of

sexual abuse. Ambilli's story of how she comes out of her victimhood is thus a comment on contemporary sexuality in India.

This chapter has thus explored the concepts of patriarchy and sexuality in both the Western and Indian contexts and the feminist dimension in *Memoirs of a Taboo*. In the novel, the characters of the wives of Manu's friends and colleagues who come to meet Ambilli and advise her to visit the GP, or discuss the latest Bollywood movies, are loosely based on my own acquaintances and experiences soon after my arrival to the UK as a newly married woman. Ambilli feels suffocated in the presence of these women and their superficial concerns and, in spite of finding herself in the same position as them (as a dependent and unemployed wife), she decides to *not* confide her own problems to Manu and travels back to Mumbai to confront them instead. In a sense, Ambilli's decision does not subjugate her; it makes her stronger. Her husband Manu respects her as an equal. Madhu's decision to leave the man she married for love, Vinod, was not intercepted by Vinod's father who had recognised the power-hungry monster his son had become – as a result of too much love. Through these examples, the novel accepts the existence of patriarchal conditions in the Indian society and the inequality of power and hierarchy in marriage – and yet it identifies a shift in this perspective on an individual level within some families or communities, albeit by a handful of characters.

Chapter 1: The historical context

1.1 Defining historical fiction:

A work of historical fiction, according to author and professor Sarah Johnson, can be defined as a novel that is set more than fifty years in the past, and one in which the author is writing from research rather than from personal experience (2002). The metafictional element in my novel fits into this category as it deals with the period of early 18th-century south India. Research concerning the lives and status of women living during this period (and in ancient India) is being researched by 21st-century Madhu in the novel, and she is helped by the protagonist, Ambilli. Through Madhu, Ambilli learns of certain lesser-known real events in history, most significantly: the massacre of 700 Iyengar brahmins by Tipu Sultan. She also realises that the representation of women characters in mythological narratives such as Sita in the Ramayana epic, and the legends of Sati and Savitri, have changed drastically since the 13th- or 14th-century onwards. In an attempt to understand the reasons, and the social consequences and implications of these contemporary 'truths', Ambilli invents a fictional character, Paarvani, and places her amid real, relevant historical happenings in 18th-century Karnataka and Kerala in south India.

This device, of placing an invented character or plot in history, is not new. The author, Rose Tremain, reflecting on her own successful novel, *Restoration* (1989), states the importance of recognising the two different paths that writers of historical fiction can now choose from. "One path, which owes a significant debt to Walter Scott," she explains, "is that which sets out to solve historical problems. The other path, which

winds down from William Golding, doesn't aim to do this at all" (2012). This other

path, according to Tremain, is the use of history as a context in fiction, which is also

similar to the approach in my novel. In *Restoration,* for example, Tremain casts the

character of Robert Merivel as a physician during the 16th- and 17th-century-restoration

era, to mirror the "moral consequences of Britain's plunge into Thatcherite materialism"

(Tremain, 2012). Another writer who uses the 'invented unknown' as its protagonist is

Tracy Chevalier in her novel, *Girl with the Pearl Earring*', about the (fictional) model in

the 17th-century artist, Johannes Vermeer's painting (Tremain, 2012). The combination

of history/mythology and fiction in the Indian context, has also undoubtedly been

explored by many non-English writers in their native languages of Marathi, Kannada

and Malayalam, to name a few. For the purposes of this commentary, however, later in

the chapter on Narrative, we will briefly examine the novels of two Indian writers: S L

Bhyrappa (*Aavarana: The Veil,* 2007 [English translation from Kannada in 2014]), and

Aatish Taseer (*The Way Things Were*, 2014).

The creative subject of my thesis, the novel, explores the concept of 'off-stage history'.

The term is defined by Linda Orr, in her commentary about historical fiction, as:

allowing readers 'to see what is hidden from the public' (2005, p 257). In the historical-

context approach used in my novel, for example, Ambilli's invention of the fictional

Paarvani facilitates readers with an opportunity to revisit the period of Tipu Sultan's

Mysore and Kerala along with her, with a view to remind them of the social culture, and

morally-unrestrained attitudes towards female sexuality prevalent during a pre-Victorian

India that is now largely forgotten. The apparent lapse in public memory can be

attributed to a few socio-political factors, two of which include: the decline of

traditional education and the Sanskrit/regional language as a medium for the same in the mid-1800s, and the subsequent prominence of English teaching; and, secondly, history-textbook distortions in post-independent India. These are briefly discussed towards the end of this section in this document.

1.2 How history has informed the writing of the novel

This thesis limits itself to the scope of the creative novel, of which the two main research points include Ambilli's reading of Tipu's rule in the South (in order to shape her fictional character, Paarvani), and Madhu's extensive research about women in pre-Victorian India, which in effect is my study. Thus, the objective for the writing process is two-fold: firstly, to reflect with a contemporary consciousness on certain historical events during the late 17th- and early 18th-century period pertaining to Tipu Sultan. The latter continues to be an object of political controversy (TNIE, 2015; Deviah, 2015) even 200 years after his death. In order to retell this history effectively, an imaginary protagonist, Paarvani, is created in a community of devadasis, courtesans and royalty that is representative of the late-17th- to early 18th-century era in Karnataka. Events in history are thus localised and conveyed through the perspectives of Paarvani and her mother Pankaja Amma; the village simpleton, Siva; the courtesan, Rati Kumari; or Tipu's ambitious commandant-in-chief, Jamaal - all of who are fictional.

The second objective is to bring alive the social contrasts between two periods, 300 years apart; this is achieved by the creation of 21st-century fictional protagonist, Ambilli, and her friend, Madhu. To illustrate, in the novel (chapter 15, p 62), in a suburban street in Bombay, thirty-year-old Ambilli finds herself repulsed and deeply

embarrassed by the obscene 'blue-' and erotic film-posters stuck on a wall; 'roadside romeos' at the end of the street notice her discomfort and whistle at her. By contrast, three centuries earlier, chapter 22 (pp 106-7) in the HF displays a routine bathing ritual of the courtesan's ten-year-old daughter, Rati Kumari. Various attendants, maids and eunuchs anoint her with oils and unguents and encourage her to flaunt her tender and nascent sexuality. My primary research and secondary readings revealed liberal social attitudes in ancient India and up to the early 18th-century. During this time, sexuality in any form (be it heterosexual or homosexual) was considered natural, and sex was just another bodily need (Narasimhan, 2010). By the end of the 20th-century, the majority of these attitudes appear to have turned restrictive whereas some others are still considered taboo.

Finally, an essential aim of the research trip was to trace the fictional Paarvani's escape route from Mysore to Malabar. At this point in the study, this fictional course was already drawn out with the help of old and current-day maps available online. The profiles of the characters helping her, such as the English artist, Thomas, and the senior Namboothiri brahmin, were also imagined and briefly sketched out. Interestingly, despite the fact that I had not visited Mysore in the recent past, fictional scenes in the novel, such as the riverside *ghat* or bank, where young Paarvani first spies Rati Kumari's entourage of eunuchs and assistants fussing over her bathing ritual (p 106), or the temple ruins in the forest where Paarvani hides all night to escape from the sight of Tipu's *Mapilla* or Muslim army (p 162), were eerily identical to what I had imagined and written in the story. Pictures and brief descriptions of the above-mentioned places can be seen in the attached research-notes document.

Furthermore, until this time, my awareness of Namboothiri brahmins was limited to what I had read about them in secondary research material (books and photographs); the research trip made it possible to also meet such a gentleman in person, whose vast resource of knowledge, as well as his appearance, behaviour and mannerisms, made it look as though the octogenarian had stepped out of William Logan's *Malabar Manual*, written in the 1800s. While the said person, Agnisharman Namboothiry,[41] discussed in detail some of the questions asked by this author pertaining to history and how it had been recorded in ancient India, along with the customs of *sambandam* and *smarthavicharam* in the Namboothiri community, the meeting was illuminating and greatly helped in characterising the fictional Narayanan Namboodiri in the HF.

1.2.1 History research findings pose a fictional challenge

Coming back to the practice-element of the research, the novel, one factor that expresses the contrast between the 17th- and 21st-centuries (and which connects to the central focus of the novel: redemption) is the protagonists' reactions to a betrayal in the context of their surroundings. A case for serious deception in the twenty-first century, for example, would be a breach of physical trust or bodily misconduct by a person known to the 'victim'. The novel opens with an image of the crowded railway platform where Ambilli feels a hand grope her bottom, and this sets the pace for her story, at the centre of which is trauma associated with sexual abuse. As the novel progresses, Ambilli accompanies her friend, Madhu, to assist her with her (Madhu's) history research assignment in Mysore, and this is where the second part of the novel, the HF begins.

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[41]   See Research notes for interview, pp 265-70, 273.

Initial readings in the research process about early Indian society (prior to 10th-century

CE, and in certain regions up to the seventeenth century) revealed a culture where

women were already comfortable with their bodies, while some sections in society were

even taught the erotic arts. This is demonstrated by the presence of courtesans,

devadasis, female spies or *vishakanyas*[42] such as those existing in the 3rd-century BC

(during the Mauryan Empire; these were trained to kill an enemy by sexual contact,

sometimes, by touch), *veshyas* (prostitutes) in zenanas, royal courts and palaces, as

witnessed by history and Indian literature. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, for example, a 2nd-

century CE-treatise comprising 15 texts on duties of the king, state governance, law and

order, and politics among others (Rangarajan, 2000 cited in Sabhlok, 2011),

demonstrates the existence and smooth functioning of a well-regulated prostitution

system in ancient India over 2300 years ago. Rules cited in the book include: taxation

and revenue generation policies concerning the welfare of the *ganikas* (prostitutes in

royal courts) and courtesans with allowances for personal expenses like jewellery,

musical instruments or silks for their trade. The *Arthashastra* also mentions that

courtesans and prostitutes are to be trained by the state: such a person 'had to be

accomplished in singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, reciting, conversing,

acting, mind-reading, preparing perfumes and garlands, shampooing, and the art of

lovemaking' ([2.27.28] cited in Sabhlok, 2011). The treatise prescribes strict

punishments for anyone 'cheating or robbing a prostitute, abducting her, confining her

against her will or disfiguring her...[and, interestingly], for depriving a prostitute's

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[42]   A *visha-kanya* (poison-damsel) was a female-spy trained to kill an enemy by sexual contact or even touch. Such a woman was reportedly fed poison in small amounts since her birth, until all of her blood and bodily fluids turned poisonous. There is recorded evidence of these spies used in the Mauryan empire (third century BC) in Chanakya's *Arthashastra*, the ancient treatise on statecraft/how to run a country, and other Indian literature.

daughter of her virginity whether she herself consented or not; the right of the mother was recognised by making the man pay not only a fine but also a compensation to the mother of sixteen times the fee for a visit' ([4.12.26] cited in Sabhlok, 2011).

It thus appeared from the readings that one was a prostitute or royal *ganika* by individual choice or heredity, for the respect the profession enjoyed as well as its tax benefits. It also demonstrated that such a sexually open culture as seen in ancient India was more or less prevalent at least until the late 17th-century. As one of the objectives in the novel and HF was to make both their protagonists, Ambilli and Paarvani, face a crucial deception in their respective timelines, the research findings potentially challenged the idea of creating a 'physical' breach of trust in the HF element of the novel. Secondary research from photographs or books, and primary interviews (Namboothiry, 2010; pp 265-7-, 273) further revealed that 17th- and 18th-century Indian clothing consisted of unstitched cotton or silk robes loosely draped around the body, with caste and class determining the fashion. In Kerala, for example, wearing of the upper garment was reserved for women from the higher caste brahmins, such as *antarjanams* (wives of Namboothiris) and wealthy Nayar women, while the rest of the female population covered themselves only from the waist down (Kodoth, p 349).[43] Modern-day India has mixed attitudes with regards to levels of decency or indecent exposure in a woman's attire; for example, public hoardings in some regions of north India openly warn of dire consequences if a women is seen wearing jeans (possibly, most Western outfits), or if seen in indecent clothing, whereas this is not the case in metropolitan cities of Delhi, Bengaluru, Mumbai or Chennai. The UK government's

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[43]   This dress code was prevalent until the arrival of the Victorians, and Christian missionaries. (Kodoth, 349) Also see Chapter 16, Achchamma, pp 68-71, in the novel.

safety advice (2015) for woman travellers in India also warns potential tourists against wearing revealing clothing which may lead to 'unwanted attention' or invite incidents of 'sexual assaults'. In the context of the novel's HF element, Paarvani's 'betrayal' was intended to form a major turning point in the narrative, but the above-mentioned, contrasting knowledge about the relaxed attitude to clothing in 17th- and early 18th-century south India then further narrowed the scope for the same.

1.2.2 Discovery of 'off-stage history' overcomes the challenge

During this critical juncture in Mysore, I learnt about a mass massacre of 700 Mandyam Iyengars by Tipu Sultan in 1783, from an interview with M G Narasimha, the secretary to the then scion of Mysore, Sri Srikantadutta Wodeyar (recently deceased). Other interviews with the Mysore palace Archives' director, Dr Jayashri, *Itihaasa Bharati'*s director, M A Narasimha Rao (who, along with his sister, are also descendants of the victims of the Mandyam massacre, and currently campaigning to bring the event to mainstream history textbooks), and secondary readings from Vikram Sampath's *The Splendours of Royal Mysore: The Untold History of the Wodeyars*, (2008), further backed evidence regarding the factuality of the historic incident. A combination of factors, such as the power of an untold history, the gentle demeanour of the Mysorean people and added to this, the apparent raw sentiments still attached to an event which killed their ancestors over two hundred years ago, made it increasingly appropriate that the Mandyam Iyengar incident be made this research trip's focal discovery. Thus, temporarily assuming the role of a historian, I decided to incorporate the 'off-stage history' (the 1783 mass massacre) in the HF, allowing readers a glimpse into an incident in India's past that is not officially public. In the process, the fictional challenge in the

HF was also resolved. The event formed a major turning point in the invented story

about Paarvani, which is in turn being imagined and written by the novel's protagonist,

Ambilli.

The fictional Paarvani in the HF element of the novel, is thus made to face a betrayal of

trust (by Jamaal[44]) that kills her best friend, Rati. Jamaal, who is the killedar or

commandent-in-chief of Tipu's fort in Seringapatam (Srirangapatna), makes Paarvani

reveal strategic information that leads him to secret correspondence between the

imprisoned queen Rani Lakshmammanni and General Harris, the governor of

Madras/present-day Chennai (another real event[45] in the course of the history of

Mysore; [Sampath, 197-8]). Eventually, she flees Mysore via the Sultan Bathery forest

and finds herself in Malabar. The interleaving of fiction and primary and secondary

history-research about Tipu Sultan's rule over South India, have thus helped in

contextualising the HF element of the novel.

1.3 Novelists vs historians

> ...(the) historian's past has a wholeness of sweep that the novelist's doesn't.
>
> The difference is between observing the flow of a river from the shore and

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[44] During the actual Mandyam Iyengar massacre, the killedar or commandant of Tipu's fort at Seringapatam was Asad Khan. On July 24, 1783, in the absence of Tipu, a revolt was planned by the mayor, Narasinga Rao, and the British army so as to prevent Tipu's return to the fort. However, Asad Khan uncovered the plot and intercepted the letters of correspondence. Narasinga Rao and his allies were tortured and made to confess about the secret revolution, while their families – 700 members including women and children – were thrown into the dungeons of Seringapatam. On Tipu's return in November (during the festival of Diwali), all these prisoners were ruthlessly executed. (Sampath, pp 226-7) In the HF element in my novel, the killedar of the fort is the ambitious Jamaal.

[45] Although she was imprisoned by Haider Ali, the queen or Rani Lakshmammanni began her negotiations with the British from the 1760s onwards. Author and historian Vikram Sampath records that the Rani had sent her trusted agent, Tirumala Rao with a message to Lord Pigot, the Governor of Madras. However, Haider Ali gets wind of the secret plan and attempts to kill Rao. Meanwhile, after Lord Pigot's untimely death around the same time, the new governor Lord Macartney signs a treaty with the imprisoned queen of Mysore on October 18, 1782, for 'the conquest of Hyder Ally and the restoration of Hindoo supremacy'. (Wilks cited by Sampath, pp 197-8; 2008)

from within the waters: the direction of the current is the same in both the

cases, but a swimmer, or a fish, has, at every moment a million different

choices (Ghosh, *History of the Present*).

My reading of Indian history, over the course of the primary and secondary research for

this practice-based PhD, threw up several interesting leads and perspectives that could

perhaps be considered as potential plot points, or topics for further study. However,

mindful that the central theme of the novel is that of redemption and not history, not all

of the research findings were reflected in the practice. Despite this restraint, of having to

underplay some interesting aspects of the history research, the overall study played a

crucial role in shaping the strong supportive character of Madhu (as a research student)

in the novel. This exercise is probably common to other novelists taking inspiration

from history as well.

In an interview (n.d) with *The Journal of Critical History*, Amitav Ghosh, the author of

the *Ibis* trilogy (2008-2015) and several other titles, differentiates between the role of a

historian and a novelist. In most respects, he says, "the novelist's understanding of the

subject is far less complete, far less rigorous than that of the historian – this goes

without saying. But there are some respects in which seeing the past through the prism

of a character's experience allows for a wholeness that is unavailable to the historian."

It can be argued that in the HF element, while the fictional Paarvani's story is a

reinterpretation of certain historical events in the Indian past, in the novel, the *present* is

being reinterpreted by Madhu for the protagonist, Ambilli (and by extension, to the

reader). To illustrate, my research is used to expose some of the oral myths narrated in contemporary India regarding the portrayal of women (such as Sati and Savitri, for example[46]) and this is conveyed to the reader through conversations between Madhu and Ambilli. In Mysore, Madhu in a way indirectly takes on the role of contemporary India's 'historical conscience'; referring to the mass massacre by Tipu in the Lakshmi Narasimhaswamy temple that still stands in Srirangapatna, she reminds Ambilli that omitting a part of Indian history from textbooks does not mean it can be wiped out from the memories of those affected by it. "...For us, as common Indians who have a right to know our past, history is denied. If *this*, Ambilli, isn't a true betrayal, what is?" she asks Ambilli (chapter 40, p 191).

In keeping with Ghosh's explanation therefore, my responsibility as a novelist lies with the characters of Ambilli, Madhu and Paarvani, their predicaments and how their lives are affected by the given contemporary, or historical, contexts. For example, as it turned out in the process of writing the same chapter (of the temple massacre) referred to above, the narrative mirrored my personal response (transposed to Ambilli) to the temple-visit in present-day Mysore, and not 18th-century Paarvani's. Upon reflection this seemed to be the right approach, for although fictional Paarvani holds herself responsible for the course of events that lead to the unfortunate massacre, a contemporary lay-reader would perhaps want to identify with 21st-century-Ambilli's first impressions of visiting such a temple and question them, rather than be overwhelmed by too many historical details.

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[46]   Contemporary retellings of the mythological legends of Sati, lord Shiva's wife, and Satyavan's wife, Savitri, differ vastly by comparison to the original tales. For example, young girls and women in the present-day, are told to maintain weekly fasts for their future husbands or families and be pious, and submissive, like Sati and Savitri. According to the ancient, traditional narrative however, the two women had chosen their husbands of their own accord, respectively, despite being told otherwise, and had firmly stood their ground. This information is either suppressed or entirely overlooked.

1.4 The Indian historical tradition, and the sense of timelessness associated with it

One interesting by-product that emerged during my research study was the observation that, for many locals in India and at different levels, the difference between the historical past and the present hardly exists. For instance, my questions to prominent Mysoreans and casual conversations with locals, regarding the dance of the devadasis and courtesans in Mysore, or the effects of Tipu's imposing rule in the state, invariably elicited initial surprise (about the subject of study in their native Mysore), followed by an unmissable enthusiastic and patriotic fervour prompting them to reveal more and more unguarded information about Tipu's atrocities, or the greatness of the Mysorean culture, be it in the form of dance or architecture. From these formal and informal interviews it appeared as if generations of the population—despite their highly visible twenty-first-century technology (IT) aptitude and proximity to the silicon valley of India (Bangalore)—were still 'living' the history long forgotten by the rest of the country. A priest in the local Ranganatha temple of Srirangapatna for example, was surprised and moved to tears of gratitude when I enquired about the devadasis' dance in the premises (Vijay, 2010). He immediately arranged a meeting for me with the local tour guide V Sathyanarayana, an artist whose ancestral home and current residence is in close proximity to the ill-fated Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple where the mass massacre had taken place. The priest also recommended a visit to the nearby Jama Masjid (mosque) with the instructions to 'pay close attention to its walls'. Built in 1787 by Tipu, the mosque was indeed once a part of the Hindu Hanuman temple, motifs and carvings from which had begun to reveal themselves from under the layers of paint and plaster. (See attached Research Notes document for some photographs of this evidence).

1.4.1 Physical memory of history

The temple-priest's suggestion to visit the mosque as mentioned above, perhaps holds the clue to at least one explanation for the universal reaction demonstrated by the locals: the 'marks' of history, in this context, the physical architecture of Mysore. Temples (anywhere in India for that matter), for example, showcase sculptures of various dancers (devadasis) and their expressions frozen in stone. On an emotional level, such is the universal ambience and pull of these beautiful structures that a visitor, foreign or native, is automatically made to feel their presence (through the sights, smells and sounds) which lasts long after they have left the temple premises.

As the majority of old Hindu temple-structures are associated with temple dancers, it is necessary to include at this point a short note about devadasis (servants to the gods). Also known as *Nityasumangalis* (translated: forever married [to the gods]), devadasis were ordained to their sacred profession by birth. Like the geisha in Japan, a devadasi was trained by senior devadasis in the arts of music, dance and poetry, and also sex, all of which was usually paid for by a royal patron. In the Brihadeeshwara temple of Thanjavur (anglicised, Tanjore) for instance, more than four hundred devadasis (Kersenboom, 1987; p 26) were provided with wealth and land, and made exempt from paying any taxes by the Chola king. Historical evidence also suggests that the presence of a devadasi was considered highly auspicious (Kersenboom, p 205; Dubois [1816], 2000, pp 648, 661). However, they were stripped of their duties as priestesses in the temples, owing to annexation of the princely states by the British Raj in the early- to mid-1800 onwards, followed by the British Act prohibiting devadasi practice during the same period. This eventually led to the fall of these artists into extreme poverty by early

19th-century, leaving most of them with no choice but to enter prostitution to sustain themselves. Perhaps this general knowledge among most locals in India, ingrained from their childhood through stories and frequent temple visits, is what brings their historical memories alive. While rare pockets of the devadasi community survive even today, albeit in deplorable conditions, in the novel, I have taken the creative liberty to portray the ex-devadasi, Rajeshwari Amma, in a positive light: as a survivor who not only is financially independent, but she also adopts and cares for a Muslim child. This profile is not entirely implausible and has been created on the basis of knowledge about renowned devadasi descendents, such as the devout and iconic south-Indian carnatic music exponent, M S Subbalakshmi (1916-2004), and the highly-respected and popular Bollywood and Marathi-films' playback singers, Lata Mangeshkar, and her sister Asha Bhonsle.

1.4.2 Oral tradition of narrative preserving historical memory

Another possible factor contributing to the timelessness element of history in the Indian culture is the ancient tradition of narrating, over generations, mythological stories, and epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, or retelling events from the past to children and even to the unborn foetus (a Hindu pregnancy ritual called *garbhasanskaar* involves reading mythological stories, relevant *shlokas* and legends to the child in the mother's womb[47]).

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[47] Myths are communicated through the three avenues of narratives, symbols and rituals. In traditional Hindu homes, this communication begins when the child is in the mother's womb to promote a positive well-being of both the mother and foetus. The pregnant mother is reminded of Abhimanyu (who heard partial instructions on how to enter a military formation/*Chakravyuh* but didn't know how to come out – as his mother had dozed off halfway through the instructions), and Ashtavakra (who, as a foetus, corrects his father regarding a wrong verse. The father curses that the boy will be deformed in eight places. Later however, the young boy regains his normal form as he defeats his father again, in a *tarkashastra*/logic debate). In a technology-friendly urban India where the tradition of a joint-family system is fast disappearing, this pregnancy ritual continues to indoctrinate the unborn Hindu through audio CDs and the Internet, complete with instructions and meanings of the relevant chants, in English.

F E Pargiter traces the Indian oral narrative tradition back to its 'preservers' such as the *sutas* or bards as stated by the ancient *puranas*, whose role was "to preserve the genealogies of gods, rishis and most glorious kings, and the traditions of great men, who are seen as declarers of sacred lore in the Itihasas and Puranas" (Pargiter 1922, p 15). The stories, the majority of which appear to leave an indelible imprint on the young Indian psyche on account of the teaching, cultural knowledge, values or morals that they impart, are carried forward to the next generation, and so on. In the context of this research study, the incident, for example, concerning the mass massacre of 700 Bharadwaj brahmins or Iyengars in Seringapatam in 1783, is not documented in official historical records, but can be recounted by every child who belongs to the Bharadwaja community in Karnataka, as it is retold to them during the anniversary on every fourth day of Diwali (Iyengar, 2010). The Hindu sense of time is more psychological than historical (Kakar 1978, p 53). Among the possible causes of this is the Indian teleological attitude to history. To quote the Indian-studies and Hindi-language scholar, professor A W Entwistle, "Traditional Indian literature presents history as a ceaseless conflict between the forces of order and chaos in which *dharma* (right conduct or moral duty) must ultimately prevail" (1985). A prominent example of this approach is the immediacy evident in the reactions attributed by those interviewed during the research trip, to events, and personalities - be they heroes or villains - that happened centuries ago. Owing to my own 'Hindu' cultural conditioning as an Indian native, these responses were first overlooked as they were assumed to be the prevailing 'normal', common sense beliefs, but upon reflection, they appeared striking and even curious. It is "this telescoping of different periods of time," warns psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar, that "may

catch the modern social scientist off-guard in his pursuit of the oral history by means of the reminiscences of Hindu peasantry" (Kakar; 1978, p 52). He further illustrates this with the example of Gandhi's murder, which in the minds of Indians has "already assumed the mythical form of the 'death of a hero'....On the other hand, mythical figures like Rama or Hanuman are as actual and psychologically real as recent historical characters such as Ramakrishna[48] or Shivaji [16th-century Maratha king]" (*Ibid*).

1.5 Documenting history through literature: An alternative view

A generic perception among early Western scholars and, curiously, also some postcolonial Indian historians such as professor R C Majumdar, is that history is poorly documented in India, or even almost entirely absent (cited by Keay, 2000; p xvii). However, Indian historiography can be approached in a different way. The early 19th-century treatise, the *Malabar Manual*, for example, mentions a couple of ballads or *tachcholi pat*[49] (Logan, pp 95-6) that are "composed in the same metre regarding the doings of other men. There is one commemorating the Palassi Raja's rebellion (1797-1805 AD), another about Tippu Sultan, a third about the mythical feats of Veikeleri Kunhi Kelappan." The songs contain stories that are meant to be conveyed and understood by generations of the community members; a minor but crucial requisite perhaps, in the healthy maintenance of any civilisation. Tenth-century CE's Aberuni (or Abu Raihan) writes in an account of 'the Hindus in general': "... the scientific books of the Hindus are composed in various favourite metres, by which they intend, considering

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[48] Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, 19th-century guru to Swami Vivekananda and founder of the Ramakrishna Mission

[49] "Of the hero of the original *Tachcholi Pat*—the Robin Hood of North Malabar—many traditions are extant. He was apparently a man of fine physique and skilful in the use of arms, who attracted to himself a large and mixed following..." and so continues the literal translation of the ballad, "narrating with much quaintness the events of this duel, and shedding various interesting lights on native customs and habits." (Logan, pp 95-6). Other *tachcholi* ballads include accounts from the lives of local heroes such as Tachcholi Othenan; the lady-warrior, Unniarcha; etc.

that the books soon become corrupted by additions and omissions, to preserve them exactly as they are, in order to facilitate their being learnt by heart, because they consider as canonical only that which is known by heart, not that which exists in writing" (Sachau, 1910; p 19).

Upon close examination of the ancient myths, folklore and several forms of stories that have originated in India, one can fairly say that the single common thread running through is that of *dharma* (or right conduct/moral duty). As mentioned earlier, the Indian attitude to history is said to be teleological (Entwistle, 1985): if it does not teach anything, apparently, it is not history. It can, therefore, be argued that India did record history but more creatively: through literature. To illustrate, the majority of young (Hindu) Indians are traditionally instructed about the existence of 18 major ancient narratives (or the encyclopaedic, *Mahapuranas*) where genealogies of various dynasties are recorded from pre-Vedic times up to the Mauryan period (around 500 BCE). However these are also interspersed with several hymns or prayers to various gods, and other mythological stories that probably can be understood by us as metafictional elements. This concept can also be extended to ancient Indian literary works. For example, the use of animal stories within human (frame) narratives, overlapping with Persian, Buddhist and Arabic tales appear to have made its way into literature, as have the morals and justice-oriented short narratives packaged in the interesting fables of the animal kingdom for children, the *Panchatantra* (composed in both verse and prose in 200 BC[50]) or the Jataka Tales (400 BC). Furthermore, there is evidence that not only

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[50]   The *Panchatantra* is a collection of five (*pancha*) frame texts, believed to be composed by Pandit Vishnu Sharma as practical guidelines or *nitishastra* (roughly translated, the art of conducting life wisely) for the young sons of a King who wanted to ensure that they grew up wise and worthy of the throne.

history, but aspects of geography such as seasons, and physical places (4th-century-

Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara,* and *Meghdootam*[51], or The Cloud Messenger), mathematics

(Bhaskara's *Lilavati*) and science were also covered by Indian literature. Bharata's work

on the art of drama and dance, or *Natyashastra*, has analysed the structure of aesthetics

and the rasa or emotions it produced "two thousand years before Alexander Gottlieb

Baumgartten coined the word 'aesthetics' in 1735." The second century treatise,

Vishnudharmottara, "details the rules of painting, including choice of materials,

techniques and colours" (Varma, p 141).

The author, Abraham Eraly, considers the Puranas to be a 'vast miscellany of material on

religion, society and history', despite their getting 'mixed up with all sorts of fanciful

tales and expedient myths'. Their objective, according to Eraly, was to serve the goals

and purposes of the Hindu tradition, regardless of whether the past was recorded

accurately or not (Eraly, 2000: Ch 2:2 [no page numbers]). This view was reiterated by

Agnisharman Namboothiry, an octogenarian from the Namboothiri community,

interviewed during the research trip to Kerala, who blamed the English and 'nationalist'

education system for changes in this tradition. "History (in India) has always been

recorded in literature in the form of *shlokas* or couplets or stories; contemporary

historians have considered it to be literature and not history. Indians record something

as history only if they believe it would serve a higher purpose, for example, if it would

impart moral values or contribute to society" (Namboothiry, 2010; pp 265-70, 273).

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[51]   A poem written about a Yaksha imprisoned by Kubera. The yaksha longs to see his beloved and upon
finding a cloud in the sky, he tells the cloud to take his message across to the North across the
mountains of Ramgiri. The verses in the poem describe aerial views in north India, especially Ujjain,
complete with directions (for the cloud) to reach her.

In a sense therefore, my novel follows the early Indian historical tradition of presenting history through literature, that is, through both its fiction and metafiction elements. The purpose behind using this approach was: to convey historical information to the reader by deploying it in the novel, and yet not make it sound overtly informative or like a history textbook. I needed to establish, for example, whether Tipu Sultan's apparent villainy (as I discovered through research) or heroicism (as painted by school history texts) had any real historical basis. I also needed to find out what happened to the royal court dancers and the performers when Haider Ali imprisoned the artistically-inclined Wodeyar king in 1761, and how the once-rich devadasi community that left its imprint on Indian temples, is in the present-day a subject that is rarely taken up by Indian historians. Having discovered this information through my primary research and interviews, and secondary readings, I gained more confidence in making the HF characters of Pankaja Amma, Paarvani, and Jamaal, convincing. In the novel, the teleological approach is also apparent in the characterisation of Madhu as a research student, whose scepticism (towards history lessons, in this context) is in direct contrast to Ambilli's believing nature. Here again, Madhu enlightens Ambilli about the changing reinterpretations of some mythological legends and epics over the past three centuries. In the process, she also encourages Ambilli to start questioning them, and contemporary Indian attitudes to women – with their imposing moral dos and don'ts' on one side, and the unending fasts and reference to female literary heroes on the other. Madhu's fictional study in the novel, which in reality is based on my own research findings, is thus intended to prompt in the reader a curiosity with regards to the gaps in the knowledge of 'official' Indian history, and the drastic change in the Indian culture, vis-a-vis women's sexuality, over the past 300 years. The following section looks at some of these aspects

in brief, not all of which are conveyed in the novel. Nevertheless, they have helped in shaping Madhu's profile, and also setting the background to the HF.

1.5.1 A quick look at reasons for the 'selective' lapse in public memory

It is plausible that, with the slipping away of the Sanskrit language and the tightening grip of English education by the end-1800s, Indians had begun to be ashamed of their own roots and culture. An increasingly patriarchal society, coupled with the mass rural-to-urban migration over the next century (mid-to-late 1900s) owing to the promise of better financial prospects, apparently saw majority of the Indians managing the duality of work (English speech and manners) and home (native language and customs) life (Kumar, 2009, p 28). Curiously, it seems as if, this generation of Indians insisted upon preserving their values through ritualistic associations with their ancient mythology and legends even at the cost of making their women more submissive. At the same time, however, they appear to have overlooked the roles of the (literary, religious or historical) women in the same stories, and the liberal social attitudes towards female sexuality portrayed in them. This eventuality has a brief mention in the novel, in a chapter where Madhu blames the Victorians squarely for the damages they imposed on the Indian culture and the "layers and layers of morality thrust" upon the country: "first through the missionaries, then through the English generals and their wives. Today, we are losing the use of our own regional languages fast, along with our ancient literature and culture, to English." She laments that the twenty-first-century 'urban generation' is not doing enough to 'undo' the past, and furthermore, is getting swayed by a commercially-induced need to look fair-skinned (or 'Western'), thereby promoting racial stereotypes as well (chapter 24, p 120).

Another reason for the apparent presence of gaps in publicly available historical knowledge is possibly a deep-rooted one. It begins at the foundational level of the decision taken – of what should be included in school history textbooks, and what should be left out – by members of the Indian educational committee in the post-independent mid-1900s. In their alleged attempt to avoid sowing the 'seeds of thorns in the minds of the growing children which will grow up as barriers to national integration', especially, '...found in history courses', the committee decided not to teach children 'useless facts' such as Ghazni Mohammad's act of looting the Somnath temple, or about Aurangzeb who 'built mosques by demolishing the temples in Kashi and Mathura' (Bhyrappa, 2012; Balakrishna, 2013, pp 13-16). Under the circumstances then, of a newly-independent country that was on the brink of war with neighbouring Pakistan, the committee members believed this would only generate further hatred. Consequently, for decades, teaching of history in schools in India has evidently been affected by 'eminent' historians suppressing or even distorting factual historical events in the books authored by them. In his scathing and unsparing book *Eminent Historians: Their Technology, Their Line, Their Fraud*, the scholar, politician and writer, Arun Shourie, has accused the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) to have "blackened the Hindu period of our history....and strained to whitewash the Islamic period." (Shourie, 1998, [Introduction] p *x*) The book's 372 pages provide exhaustive records, dates and excerpts from school-syllabus textbooks alleging the history-distortions[52] in the name of 'national integrity' by many of the 'leftist' historian-writers.

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[52] "India turns out to be a recent construct. It turns out to be neither a country nor a nation. Hinduism turns out to be an invention ...Simultaneously, it has always been inherently intolerant. Pre-Islamic India was a den of iniquity, of oppression. Islamic rule liberated the oppressed. It was in this period that the Ganga-Jamuna culture, the 'composite culture' of India was formed, with Amir Khusro as the great exponent of it, and the Sufi savants as the founts. The sense of nationhood did not develop even in that period. It developed only in response to British rule, and because of ideas that came to us from

For their part, schools too appeared to have focused only on examination grades and completion of the government-set syllabus to a deadline. This promoted in children the blind need to learn a subject 'by rote' or memorise (be it individual chapters or mathematical theorems) and heavily discouraged any chance to question, let alone understand the content they were reading (this leads to the aspect of Ambilli's naivete in the novel). In the subject of early literature studies, for example, stories from the *Panchatantra* or *Jataka* Tales, Indian poets and playwrights like Kalidasa (5th-century CE) and Bhartihari (7th-century CE) are ignored completely. Instead children are made to memorise and enact stories that are not a part of their everyday context (*The Shoemaker and the Elves*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, etc). Vast portions of the syllabus are devoted to poems of Shakespeare, William Wordsworth and other English poets whose works are incomprehensible for young Indian minds. The poem, *Daffodils*, for instance, is one of them although the flower does not abundantly grow in India. Ironically, the classical Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa's (4th-5th-century CE) *Ritusamhara,* which talks about Indian seasons, and *Meghadootam* (Cloud Messenger) which describes in poetic detail the aerial geography of north India, continue to be left out of the Indian syllabus till date.

Coming back to the context of the novel, Madhu shares some of S L Bhyrappa, Arun Shourie, and Sandeep Balakrishna's rage and passion when she learns of the real history during the course of her research,

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the West. But even this – the sense of being a country, of being a nation, such as it was – remained confined to the upper crust of Indians. It is the communists who awakened the masses to awareness and spread these ideas among them.
"In a word, India is not real – only the parts are real." Sarcastic commentary by Arun Shourie in *Eminent Historians* (2014, pp 290-1).

"... and more so the deep feeling of injustice on realising that her school had never included these details in the course of her study. Perhaps it was in their interest to remain neutral – if that was indeed their intention – but the fact remained that it had ended up being a one-sided version of history. Something that continued to this day. Had the ups and downs of the Indian subcontinent been recorded early in the minds of its children, she believed, they would have grown up to be more tolerant and more accommodating of each other's differences in cultural and religious practices. Much unlike the present age, where Hindus and Muslims were still being judgmental and repeating old attitudes, and rioting over minor issues. Becoming a fanatic, whichever side you were on, was thus very easy" (chapter 19, p 96).

Not surprisingly, interviews conducted as part of the primary research confirmed that the Hindus in Kerala remember Tipu to this day as a tyrant whose army had carried out many atrocities across the state (Logan 1887; Sampath 2008). I also learnt that to date, the Bharadwaj Iyengars in Mysore do not light the lamp on the fourth day of Diwali, in remembrance of the ruthless massacre of seven hundred brahmins from their community on the day (Iyengar, Mysore; 2010) by Tipu in 1783. Interestingly, history textbooks in Indian schools still continue to portray an irrefutable, blanket 'truth' implying that Tipu was a hero who, according to one text: "expanded his territories at the cost of his neighbours, particularly the Raja of Travancore, who was an ally of the British"; that ...he "worked continuously to secure help (from France, Arabia, Kabul, Turkey) to fight British imperialism;" received "a friendly letter from Napolean," and single-handedly fought the British "till he himself was shot dead" (TN State board history textbook, 2007; pp 16, 28-9). Perhaps, students, who are not encouraged to read

between the lines, would find the subject more intriguing if they are presented other aspects of the historical context, for example, if they are told of the reasons for the said 'expansion' in Travancore (Kerala), or if they are allowed to form independent opinions after reading the actual contents of letters of correspondence[53] between Tipu and Napolean, and indeed other Nizams and officials governing various regions of India at the time.

For a writer, this instantly held potential as a crucial gap in the realm of known or studied historical narratives. It is necessary to reiterate at this juncture that while Tipu Sultan himself has no direct role in the novel, the fictional characters of protagonist Ambilli's metafiction are placed in the historical context of Tipu's rule. The use of historical facts is thus based on the available and new evidence (surprisingly found in libraries in the UK, written by Indian historians whose books are not easily available in their home country), and presented to a lay reader as plot points in Ambilli's narrative. This exercise also led me to the realisation that while historical information has perhaps always been available, the research process is about looking in the right places for it.

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[53] Tipu apparently wrote many 'misleading' letters to the French. However, Napolean's only response had actually never reached Tipu, and was intercepted by the British officials in February 1799. (Balakrishna 2013, p 169)

Chapter 2: Theme of sexuality in the novel

> "If history can help anyone it is people like you and me...by reminding us that
>
> we live in a country where what is amoral now was at one time considered
>
> *normal*" (*MOAT*, chapter 15, p 71).

The historical research for the novel was based on the premise that female sexuality in contemporary India is significantly at odds with its representation in ancient traditional Hindu literature, and in certain references with regards to Indian rituals, available up to the late 15th-century. Some of these, as we have seen in the preceding sections, were practitioners of the sensual arts. These included the existence of resident devadasis, courtesans, *ganikas,* and sex workers in the many temple towns of south India prevalent well into the late 1800s (Dubois, [1816], [1906], 2000, pp 648, 661-4), while *Nagarvadhus* (bride of the city; or state courtesan) evidently[54] existed in the north. In addition, there lived women who practised wisdom and learning. Amartya Sen has observed that ancient Indian women scholars, or more specifically competent debaters on philosophy and logic (such as Gargi, and Maitreyi) are known to have provided 'some of the most celebrated dialogues' and 'sharpest questioning' without 'any special modesty'. These, according to Sen, have formed some of the earliest foundations (7th- to 6th-century BC) of Hindu philosophy: the *Upanishads* (Sen, 2005, p 7).

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[54] In the north of India, the earliest documented record of a *Nagarvadhu* (translated, bride of the city; or state courtesan) is the legend about Amrapali (500 BC), which has in the recent past, been reinterpreted in regional novels (*Vaishali ki Nagarvadhu*, 1948; *Ambapali*, 1962), Hindi films (1945; 1966), tele-serials (1996) and documentaries. The title was apparently conferred on the most talented (dancer) and beautiful woman in the city, perhaps, akin to the beauty titles of Ms 'x' country/ Ms World, or Ms Universe in the current day.

In contemporary India, by contrast, Sen has identified the many interconnected forms and faces of gender inequality. When, for example, "...women lack decisional power (even) *within* the family, which amounts to a deprivation of women's effective agency, this can also adversely affect their own well-being" (*sic*; Sen, 2005, p 220; emphasis, mine). Apart from the evident disparity between sexes, Indian women since the 1950s have faced social restrictions and have had strict codes of normative behaviour imposed upon them by male family members, leading to poor self-esteem and an unhealthy sexual view of themselves. (Bumiller, 1990; Kakar, [1978], 2007; Sen, 2005). As a novelist, these observations have helped me develop strategic hunches that I turned into crucial plot points in my narrative about the protagonist, Ambilli, as well as the characters of Shashi and Madhu, as will be revealed later in this chapter. Furthermore, a personal interest in understanding the changing status of women in Kerala – from a clearly matriarchal to a male-dominated, patriarchal system – over the last 150 years prompted me to study and highlight my research findings in the novel.

This chapter also attempts to address the points raised by the viva examiners with regards to a possible idealisation of the historical past in reference to women's sexuality in India. In addition it considers the examiners' concern that the thesis points to colonial incursions in the 18th- and 19th-centuries as the primary cause of sexual restraint and decorum in contemporary Indian women.

Although I would respectfully disagree with the first point, I appreciate the criticism and thereby understand the need to clarify my previous argument: the various aspects of women's sexuality in early India, albeit liberal and free of moral constraints, was also *regulated* by way of its various castes, classes, and sections in Indian society. This was

not stated clearly in my original thesis (September 2016).

Thus I want to suggest that while actual sexual *practices* and sexual activity were limited to certain sections of women such as the courtesans, prostitutes, royal court dancers and devadasi communities – some of who are represented by characters in my novel – the awareness of a number of different aspects of this sexuality was widespread in the rest of the women population in ancient and pre-colonial India as well. This awareness, as we will shortly examine, was imparted by way of literature and education. Expressed through the various sensuous and erotic forms of dance, poetry, sculpture, oral folk tales and even through educational texts like algebra, this sexual awareness was effectively 'normalised' and conveyed language that described *pleasure*. In my novel, Ambilli's fictional 18th-century characters Rati and Paarvani are the representatives of this language.

This chapter is thus divided into three sections. The first focuses primarily on pleasure, that is, as against the traditional assumptions about female sexuality in ancient and pre-Victorian India.

In the second section, as with the original thesis, I explore some of the reasons for the gradual effacement of the status of women in India over the centuries. With respect to the colonial incursions in the 18th- and 19th-centuries, my study and observations are limited to Kerala and Karnataka in the south of India which forms the setting for my novel. Here I look specifically at the changes imposed due to the rapid advancement of the English education system in India in the mid- to late-1800s and the resultant decline and disappearance of traditional literature and oral Indian language narratives; I also

briefly look at the reasons for the end of the devadasi practice, the change in Nayar women's status from a matriarchal to patriarchal system and the changes brought about by rural to urban migration from Kerala to Mumbai. The collective effect of these factors, beginning with literary, educational and related linguistic and pedagogical practices in colonial India resulted in the loss of several socio-cultural reference points for its native population, such as the study of works by ancient Indian playwrights, oral narratives of literature and sacred lore.

This section thus considers the implications of these effects with regards to sexuality in ancient India: I argue that the colonisation of Sanskrit and other vernacular languages and their accompanying literature in education by the English language resulted in a mismatched acculturation between the East and the West. In effect, as Madhu says in the novel, what was once considered a language of pleasure turned into something that was immoral and could not be spoken about: a language of taboo. As a second-generation Kerala-to-Bombay migrant, a woman, and a victim of sexual abuse, the protagonist Ambilli in the novel represents the culmination of all that has been taboo. Her journey from shame to self-respect forms the crux of the novel, thus leading to its title: *Memoirs of a Taboo*.

The third and final section of this chapter relates to the novel and its characterisation of Paarvani, Ambilli, and Shashi, as well as a commentary on the additional novel segments in response to feedback from the viva discussion.

Section I

2.1 A language of Pleasure: Traditional assumptions from history and ancient

literature

The strength of Madhu's character in *Memoirs of a Taboo* is derived from my research findings on the empowered status of India's ancient and pre-Victorian women and the open and equal society they enjoyed. The idea was informed by hearsay (narrated by older women in my family) and generic observations about the rigid, social and moral restrictions that many Indian parents imposed on their daughters in Indian society from the 1950s onwards (most of which were applicable during my growing up years in the mid-80s as well). One distinctive, yet universal, feature appears to regularly stand out of these observations. This concerns the *version* of the past that is communicated to the younger generation orally by the elders, or even through popular culture such as television drama. Selective sections of the mythological stories of Sati, and Savitri, or of Sita in the Ramayana, for example, may be changed to suit the social morals of the present-day society – many segments of which still suffer from a hangover from Victorian, postcolonial norms of prudity. Interestingly, these discrepancies are often overlooked and emerged only during this research, when I studied them in correlation to the original, ancient tales.

In the novel, I solved the creative challenge of presenting this contrast to the protagonist, Ambilli (and by extension, to the reader) by using Madhu as a mirror to reflect some of the comparisons between the India of the ancient past and present. The research process was an enlightening experience. To begin with, secondary readings revealed that there was very little sexual repression in ancient India. "The demands of sexuality had to be reconciled with those of religion, but it was reconciliation rather than suppression when the two were in conflict" (Kakar, 2007, p 81). In addition,

societal variations of caste, religion or class played a major role in regulating sexuality.

Not all women were sexually active, of course in sexual practices, although the

language of pleasure would have been widely understood because of of the exposure to

traditional Hindu literary texts across all sections of Indian society: treatises like the

Kama Sutra, sections from the *Artha Shastra,* and the *Agamashastra* that defined the

roles of women in politics and temple worship, and stories from the *Puranas*, the

Upanishads and the epics were orally narrated and therefore available for all.

> *"When the wheel of sexual ecstasy is in full motion, there is no textbook at*
>
> *all, and no order."*
>
> Vatsyayana, author of the 3rd-century treatise, the *Kama Sutra* [2.2.31]
>
> (Kakar, 2007, p 81).

Allegedly, one of the primary aims of Vatsyayana and his contemporary fellow

'sexologists' through the *Kama Sutra* (2nd-to-3rd-century CE) and other similar texts

was to "rescue erotic pleasure from the crude purposefulness of sexual desire, from its

biological function of reproduction" (Kakar, 2007; p 72). The ancient gurus were also

inheritors of the view held by the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, that sexual love is

usually a straightforward matter of desire and its gratification (*ibid*; pp 71-3). Indeed,

the Mahabharata showcases at least two tales that refer to 'sex hospitality', where a guest

was allowed access to the host's wife or daughter for pleasure; polyandry, where

Draupadi is allowed to take five husbands and yet not be called a whore; open marriage,

or the tradition of *Svayamwara*[55], where the princess or bride-to-be is decked in the

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[55]   Interestingly, the *Swayamvara* tradition continued well into the eleventh century, probably till the
advent of Islam.

finest of clothes, and has the freedom to choose her partner from among several royal

contestants; tales of ambition in the women Satyavati, Kunti, and Gandhari, and many

others. Presumably, there was no taboo associated with a *Nagarvadhu*'s supposed

privilege to choose the king or royalty she wanted to spend the night with, or even

demand a high fee for her dance performances in the royal courts. References to other

Nagarvadhu women are also seen in the Mahabharata (in the person of Vaishali), and

the ancient Sanskrit playwright Sudraka's *Mrcchakattika* or 'The Clay Cart' (in the

character of Vasantasena), written in the 2nd-century BC.

Apart from pleasure, the majority of plays by Sanskrit playwrights such as Bhasa[56],

Bhartrihari, Kalidasa[57], and others include characters exhibiting the almost-equal status

that women enjoyed[58] prior to and during the early centuries of the Christian era. Older

references to Indian morals and women are evident too in ancient Indian anecdotes and

folklore,[59] where it is implied that a woman can choose her lover(s), regardless of her

position in society. This attitude seems to have been carried over to certain sections in

south India even in the late 1700s and early 1800s. To illustrate this in *Memoirs of a*

Taboo, the 18th-century courtesan Muddapalani's poem, *Radhika Santwanam*, has been

adapted to suit the light-hearted revelry and amatory teasing among the 'young women

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[56] *Swapnavasavadutta*, *Mrrchakattika* (said to be completed by Sudraka)
[57] *Ritusamhar*a, *Meghdootam*, *Malati Madhava*, *Kumara Sambhava*, etc...
[58] The Rigveda, first of the four oldest scriptures in Hinduism presumed to be dated around 1700-1100 BC, mentions a poem expressing this idea: The home has, verily, its foundation in the wife/ the wife and the husband, being equal/Halves of one substance/are equal in every respect;/Therefore both should join and/ take equal parts in all work, Rreligious (sic) and secular. (Rigveda 5.61.8)" (Kumbhare, 2009, p 12)
[59] Take, for instance, the popular legend of King Bhartrihari of Ujjain in north India (1st-century BC), who was given the fruit of immortality by a highly-austere brahman. The king simply presents the precious fruit to his youngest and most beloved wife (among a hundred), Pingala. She in turn presents it to her lover, the chief of guards, who in turn passes it on to the prostitute he frequents. The prostitute, considering none but the king as the most worthy recipient of the immortal fruit, presents it back to him. When the king subsequently sees the same fruit, he is both enlightened and disillusioned by the futility of love; he abdicates the throne to become an ascetic, and a poet.

from the palace harem - dancers, courtesans, their royal maids and the attending

eunuchs'. (*MOAT*, pp 167-169)

Moreover, Ambilli's journal entry prior to chapter 23 in the novel (*ibid*, p 123) shares

one of the traditional principles of the *Kama Sutra*: that a girl, whatever her social

standing, must know how to seduce a boy, and learn the erotic arts. This will prepare her

for her married life, as well as her youth, and she "will not fall into the snare of

ignorance." In a sense, this note in Ambilli's personal diary also prepares the reader for

the following HF chapter in the novel, where the courtesan's daughter, young Rati

Kumari, finds Siva sitting alone at the river bank. Disregarding Siva's infamous

reputation as the 'village idiot', she gently teases him, making seductive gestures that

eventually lead to him getting sexually aroused much to his alarm. At the end of the

chapter, the reader, as well as the shy Siva, realises that he need not remain a naive

simpleton after all: "Sshh," she (Rati) hushed him again, whispering, "This, is proof that

you are a man, Siva. A man. Not an idiot. Now you know...don't you?" (*ibid*, pp 126-7).

Secondary readings about the traditional assumptions of sexuality thus helped in

transferring a certain confidence to Ambilli to write the HF.

Interestingly, alongside the apparent sexual freedom and equality between the genders,

my post-viva research on feminism in the Indian context also revealed that some

patriarchal prejudice existed during the time as well. Certain scholars and sections of

society though, evidently opposed it, as this 6th-century literary reference indicates:

> "Tell me truly, what faults attributed to women have not been practiced
>
> by men? Men in their audacity treat women with contempt, but they

really possess more virtues (than men)" - *Brihatsamhita,* by

Varahamihira, 505-587 CE.

In his essay, *Varahamihira: An ancient Indian feminist?,* Arvind Sharma acknowledges the role of the 6th-century CE polymath and scholar, Varahamihira, as a champion of women's rights. Sharma considers that the positive sentiments expressed towards women in ancient Indian literature, as well the negative references, suggest a "significant misogynistic trend in the intellectual circles of ancient India." He further highlights the feminist point of view in Varahamihira's treatise, *Brihatsamhita*, where the latter makes 'a spirited defense of women and eulogises them highly' (Sharma, 1982, Kane, p 579, 1941).

The essay also mentions the presence of another genre of Sanskrit literature called *subhasitasangrahas* that groups its verses on women into *strininda* (against women, or the denunciation of women), and *kulavadhuprasamsa* (in praise of women of good lineage), just like the examples found in Sanskrit literary works such as Bana Bhatta's *Kadambari* of verses in favour of good men and the condemnation of bad men (Sharma, 1982; p 145). Another scholar points out that the caste and class differences among the Indians must also be considered. According to Pandurang V Kane, in his influential work *The History of the Dharmasastras* (1941), the 'higher minds' of Hindu society knew the worth of women and insisted on chastity being their highest virtue. "There was no doubt an undercurrent among common people of poor opinion about women...those who valued an ascetic life and wanted to wean people away from worldly ties and attachments looked down upon women and exaggerated their faults. It has to be borne in mind that many of the passages condemning women are put in the mouths of persons who were for some reason or other angry with women or wronged by

them or dissatisfied with their conduct" (Kane, 1941, p 581).

It is possible that the notions of 'good' and 'bad' women, and of 'chastity' and 'sin', could have emerged after or around the 8th-6th-century BCE. This is alluded to in the 5th-century BCE story of the Mahabharata, by the characters of king Pandu and his wife Kunti who discuss the erstwhile era of polyandry. According to the king, it is the Rishi (sage) Uddalaka Svetaketu who is enraged when he sees his mother being taken by another man in the presence of his father. The learned and much-feared Svetaketu sets a restrictive rule for men and women: "From today onwards, a woman's infidelity to her husband shall be a sin tantamount to aborticide, an evil that will engender misery. Seduction of a chaste and constant wife avowed to her husband shall also be a sin on earth" (Singh, 1978; p 78). Interestingly, despite the reference to this discussion between Pandu and Kunti, the Mahabharata's Draupadi, who is Kunti's daughter-in-law, ends up as being the wife to all of her (Kunti's) five sons, the Pandava princes.

This polyandry was customary in the North-east of India and in the South in Malabar, both of which were predominantly matriarchal until the 19th-century. There is also literary evidence demonstrating the freedom and rights that an unmarried Indian woman enjoyed, at least up to the 12th-century, to choose her husband through a *Swayamvar* (*swayam*: self, *var*: groom), for example.[60] In history, albeit debated among historians, Rajput marriages were often conducted after a ceremonial *Swayamvar*. Examples of some well-known legends include the prince Prithviraj Chauhan and princess Samyukta (12th-century), and Rani Padmavati and Raja Ratan Singh (13th-14th-century). The

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[60]   Of the eight types of Hindu marriage, the *Swayamwar* ritual is considered as part of *Gandharva vivaham*, or marriage by mutual consent, where the bride chooses her groom herself. Other pure forms include the *Brahma vivaah* where the father offers his daughter as bride to an eligible man of learning.

above background about women's status as scholars, courtesans or queens in ancient

literary and history gives us an idea about the traditional assumptions of sexuality

during the time. In the next section, we look at some of their contextual studies in early

education in order to examine how this sexuality was normalised in everyday life.

2.2 Other factors contributing to sexual awareness: Education and habitat

The ancient education system in India is a vast subject encompassing various

specialisations and stages of the Vedic and post-Vedic period, that is, the Brahminical

education system[61] based on (Hindu) religion, and the Buddhist education system.[62]

These co-existed with other *prakrit* or non-sanskrit mediums. While there are

perceivable gaps between primary sources on ancient and medieval education from 500

BCE to the 11th- or 14th-centuries CE, the available secondary sources such as

travelogues by Chinese or European visitors, along with secular topical works of the

period such as the study of mathematics or architecture, deem it possible to make an

informed inference with regards to the content of this educational curriculum. The focus

of this education was to inculcate religious values of devotion and spiritual thinking in

the students, along with a strict regime and discipline, teachings of right conduct or

dharma and, above all, a means to overcome the six vices of greed, jealousy, lust, anger,

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[61] In the Brahminical education system, for example, as detailed by Radha Kumud Mookerji's
     exhaustive literature on *Ancient Education in India* (1947, 2011), the curriculum included the study of
     the four Vedas, poems, *Puranas* and *Sutra* literature, the individual sciences of grammar, phonetics,
     arithmetic, *tarka shastra* or logical reasoning, politics, legal subjects, astronomy and philosophy,
     principles and education imparted by the epics, industrial and vocational education, etc. Vocational
     subjects were said to comprise 64 arts that included, among others: pottery, sculpture, carpentry,
     drawing, music, dance, singing, weaving, *sarpa vidya* or the science of snakes, making weapons, and
     many more.
[62] The Buddhist education system (circa* 400 BCE to 1100 CE), also prevalent in ancient India, was
     studied in great detail by early Chinese travellers to India, such as Hsuan-Tsang, Fa- Hein and others.
     It was more monastic, however, and included the relevant training and guidance.
     *Exact information and documentation of this period are not traceable and vary from from one source
     to another. Therefore, these dates are based on the basis of the establishment of the first Buddhist
     sangha/council in 400 BCE up to the destruction of the Nalanda university in 1193AD.

desire, and materialism. However, the content of this education - be it from mythological or religious sources as mentioned early in this chapter, or catering to vocational and secular ones - was wrapped in layers of elements like the actual characterisation, themes, plot or background of narratives that conveyed sexual or erotic contexts and settings.

I want to suggest that this content, provided in the formative years of the student, 'de-sensationalised' sexuality and the woman's body as an object of desire, and presented sexual pleasure as just another human need. These approaches did not act as tools of distraction; rather than being incompatible with educational objectives, they aroused curiosity in the subject by making it more human. Children – boys as well as girls – in ancient and medieval India thus grew up *listening to* and passing on a favourable language of sexual pleasure through verses from Kalidasa's poetry, sacred lore, the epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata or songs from vernacular and regional languages. This background supports the chapter in *Memoirs of a Taboo* (pp 119-122) where the 18th-century Paarvani finds it easy to talk to her mother, Pankaja Amma, about her wish to enter into a profession of courtesans that cater to men and not dedicate herself to the service of temples as a devadasi's daughter. The 21st-century Ambilli, on the other hand, cannot openly talk about her feelings or inhibitions to either of her parents. As her conversation with her best friend of many years, Madhu, reveals, Ambilli also finds it impossible to open up to her about her abuse in the past or indeed, about Manu (*MOAT*, pp 139-143).

Subjects in early Indian education also included religious or Vedic literature and quasi-

historical texts such as eulogies in the *Puranas* that contained royal geneological stories, dynastic accounts, ballads and heroic tales (Pargiter, [1922], 1977; p 5, 60). The prolificity of these orally-narrated texts available in Sanskrit and other *prakrit* languages from various parts of the Indian subcontinent also leads to the inference that, after the period of an underlying basic education, students could then travel to universities for higher studies where admission was based strictly on merit. This was noted by the Chinese travellers Fa-Hein, Hsuan-Tsang and others in the 5th- and 7th-centuries (Mookerji, [1947], 2011; pp 492-507). As we have already observed, 'stories' such as Svetaketu's from the *Upanishads*, and the mention of women *rishikas*, devadasis and *Nagarvadhus* in oral narratives and literature were consistent in their repetition over generations whereas subjects of architecture, mathematics, chemistry, medicine, statecraft etc were more specialised but not widely known. While the former had a shared language of sexuality, the following paragraphs will reveal how even the latter secular texts such as Algebra for example, had similar themes.

The fact that prominent women-sages contributed to Vedic subjects, alongside the practice of *upanayana* or initiation into brahminic rights for young girls, etc, are suggestive of the fact that education during the ancient to medieval period was not denied to women (Mookerji, [1947], 2011; pp 105, 208, 274, 343). Apart from the common educational curricula, girl students from communities of devadasis, courtesans and dancers were taught additional subjects of music and the arts (Dubois, [1816], [1906], 2000; p 380; Bartolomeo, 1800). Although the Buddhist educational system saw women as 'mentally and morally inferior', such reservations were soon overlooked and many Buddhist nuns became leading scholars and teachers (Mookerji, 2011; p 463).

As for the Brahminic and other language educational systems, it was not unusual for girls and boys to be educated at their homes by the father as their guru. At other times, however, students typically stayed at the house of the guru until the end of the education period, that is, until their late 20s, during which time they also performed duties such as fetching firewood for the guru's house, tending to his cattle, helping the *gurumata* or guru's wife, in cooking, and other such tasks (*ibid*; p *xxix*). This *gurukul* system contributed to other aspects of the practical education of the student such as self-help, respect, teamwork and dignity of labour. Temple courtyards were also used as centres for imparting educational content to students. These practices demonstrate that ancient education was not restricted to any one gender, except when it came to girls from the communities of temple dancers or courtesans who, in fact, received a wider range of educational training.

Returning to the topic of early education, an 11th-century text suggests that sexual behaviour was not always morally judged during this period. In many of the poem-sums in Bhaskara's mathematical treatise, *Lilavati*[63] (1150 CE), references to love or courtship, playful flirting and sex, display the general attitude of the ancient Indians, wherein there is no taboo. A 21st-century Indian would surely be shocked by the hint of mischief and open discussion about lovers in a textbook on Algebra.

> *Whilst making love a necklace broke.*

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[63]   Bhaskara's mathematical treatise, *Lilavati*, was dedicated to his daughter so her name would live on even though she was destined to remain unmarried and childless. As an astrologer himself, he had foreseen this and yet faced a failed attempt to get her married. What is interesting (but not revealed) is that despite the liberal morals in the society, a formal marriage seemed necessary to carry on the lineage.

A row of pearls mislaid.

One third fell to the floor.

One fifth upon the bed.

The young woman saved one sixth of them.

One tenth were caught by her lover.

If six pearls remained upon the string

How many pearls were there altogether?" (Menon, 2006; Colebrooke, 1817)

Or there is this popular example in the chapter on 'Quadratic &c. Equations':

The square-root of half the number of a swarm of bees is gone to a shrub of jasmin;

And so are eight-ninths of the whole swarm:

A female is buzzing to one remaining male, that is humming within a lotus,

in which he is confined, having been allured to its fragrance by night.

Say, lovely woman, the number of bees.

My primary research interviewee in Mysore, M A Narasimhan, explained the historical contrast in social attitudes to sexuality in a matter-of-fact manner: "Sex was considered as one of any bodily functions – eating, defecating – in those days [ancient India], unlike today, where everything begins and ends with sex" (2010, Research notes, pp 243-8). Not surprisingly this perspective is reflected in the works of ancient Indian literature, as well as the erotic sculptures and temples friezes built in the 10th- and 11th-

century central India such as Khajuraho and in almost every other temple in south

India.[64] In Hindu tradition the sexual act, according to Sudhir Kakar, 'does not lie outside

but within the holiness of life' (2007, p 82). Innumerable examples also exist in the

sphere of the Bhakti poetry[65] [14th- to 17th-century CE] where even the "highest of

gods delights in the many hues of sexuality as much as mortals do."[66] (*ibid,* p 83).

As a native of metropolitan Bombay in the late 1970s and a second-generation Kerala

migrant, I was startled by many of the findings from the primary research interviews in

Mysore and my secondary readings: they presented me with information that I had

never encountered before. This response could perhaps be attributed to my own

inhibitions as a result of an upbringing and environment where physical affection was

rarely displayed and reserved – as it still is – for very small children. In the light of this,

creating Madhu's carefree, unhampered personality sometimes posed a fictional

challenge. But this simple quote from the ancient religious text, *Brihatsamhita*

(Varahamihira; 505-587 CE, cited by Kakar, 2007, p 82),

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[64] See Research notes document, for photographs of the thousand-pillared dance hall (for devadasis) in the temple at Srirangam. Now a dining space for pilgrims, each of the pillars depict apsaras (heavenly nymphs) and gandharvas (male spirits in search of earthly maidens of beauty) in various suggestive poses.

[65] The Bhakti movement began in response to the fact that Brahmins alone enjoyed access to Sanskrit literature of the gods. "'Bhakti' means devotion, and was based on the belief that a direct personal relationship with god is possible, without the mediation of a Brahmin expert or the performance of an esoteric ritual. This was a democratic movement that ignored the established social barriers of caste and sex: all devotees were regarded as being equal. An individual was able to empower himself or herself in an intense personal relationship with the divine, unhindered by the controls and restrictions advocated by the orthodoxy of the 'great tradition'. This suggests that freedom of choice inherent in the movement appealed to women. Particularly, as a feature of this movement was the fact that the devotional hymns and poems were composed in the vernacular and were, therefore, accessible to the mass of the people, including higher caste women who had previously been excluded from the Sanskritic education system. Thus, the history of the Bhakti movement reveals that it brought great solace to women and presented an alternative way of life to many individual women. Some even attained sainthood." (Ponniah, 1989, p 305)

[66] For example, the twelfth century epic verse, *Gita Govinda*, by Jayadeva, describes the ecstatic lovemaking by the divine couple Radha and Krishna. Legend has it that Jayadeva, hesitant to pen a few lines where Krishna had to playfully touch Radha's feet, left the poem to go out and bathe; when he was back, he discovered that Krishna had completed the verse himself (Kakar, 2007, p 83).

The whole universe, from Brahman to the smallest worm, is based on the union of the male and female. Why then should we feel ashamed of it, when even Lord Brahma was forced to take four faces on account of his greed to have a look at a maiden?[67]

supported my characterisation of Madhu, as well as the flirtatious courtesan's daughter, Rati Kumari, in the HF. Furthermore, and in a strange way, the characters of Madhu, Rati, and Paarvani that I had created in my novel not only helped me as a novelist but also enabled me personally to unlearn the taboos and morally restraining factors that were once part of my identity.

2.2 a) Pre- and post-colonial schooling of girls and boys

Of Indian schools and education provided to children in India prior to the 18th-century, the observations of Fra Paolino Da San Bartolomeo, in his *Voyages to the East Indies* (1796) are cited in Dharampal's study, *The Beautiful Tree* (1983). Bartolomeo was in India during the period 1776-89[68] (Bartolomeo, 1800; p 267) and his observations are

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[67] According to the myth in the *Shiva Purana*, the 'maiden' was none other than the Supreme Creator, Brahma's own daughter – the first woman he created – immediately after which he was overwhelmed by desire. The daughter circled around him with reverence, but Brahma, not wanting to lose sight of her, sprouted four heads, each in a cardinal direction. Disgusted by her father's display of unbridled lust, the daughter rose to the sky, and Brahma popped a fifth head to voice his intentions. Brahma's mid-born sons howled in horror at this misconduct; from this howl emerged Rudra (Shiva's violent form) who wrenched off Brahma's fifth, lustful head with his sharp claws (Pattanaik, 2003, pp 49, 102-4).

[68] According to Bartolomeo, "sciences and branches of learning* taught to the Indian youth were: Poetry, *Gavya;* Fencing, *Payatta;* Botany and medicine, *Vaydyassastra,* or *Bheszagiashastra;* Navigation, *Naushastra;* The use of the spear on foot (*Hastiludium)*, *Cundera;* The art of playing at ball, *Pandacali;* Chess, *Ciudarangam;* Tennis, *Coladi;* Logic, *Tarkashastra;* Astrology, *Giodisha;* Law, *Svadhyaya;* Silence** *Mauna"* (Dharampal, 1983; p 257).
*Bartolomeo could be referring to the subjects taught in Malabar, going by their Malayali names for the same, although this is not specifically mentioned in the text or its generic title.
**The brahmin students were instructed to observe the strictest of silence for five years, which, apparently constitutes the first degree of philosophy. Bartolomeo suggests that this could have been borrowed by Pythagoras in part from the Indian philosophers, or from others whose doctrine was

significant with regards to the notion that some of the subjects were caste-based and

vocational[69] in nature: a brahmin's offspring, for example, would be trained in religious

texts and scriptures and taught subjects as astrology and astronomy. A merchant's

children would receive training in commerce and economics; a blacksmith's child would

be trained in all the ritualistic and technical aspects of iron-casting and metallurgy

available.

In the novel, an example of vocational training in the 18th-century is portrayed through

the fictional character of Pankaja Amma. Although she is not a *devadasi* by birth, she

practises this tradition as a temple dancer because she was rescued by the devadasi

community when escaping from Haidar Ali's captivity. Paarvani's best friend, Rati

Kumari, originates from a traditional house of courtesans and is trained by her mother

accordingly. Paarvani, a devadasi's daughter, is an exception here as she chooses to be a

court dancer and, therefore, receives additional training in music and the seductive arts.

Dharampal's book *The Beautiful Tree* is a study of the indigenous traditional education

systems of precolonial India. It explores 18th-century British administrative records and

surveys with regards to schooling and education in the individual states of India. It also

reflects on the attitudes to gender segregation and sexuality during the period. Apart

from the European traveller Bartolomeo's observational records and surveys, the study

includes various documents (dated 1822, 1823) that reveal that 'institutional education'

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similar, 'as his scholars too were subjected to silence for the same number of years' (*Ibid,* p 257).

[69] "...a future Brahman, for example, is obliged, from his earliest years, to employ himself in reading and writing, and to be present at the presentation of offerings, to calculate eclipses of the sun and moon; to study the laws and religious practices; to cast nativities; in short to learn every thing, which, according to the injunction of the *Veda*, or sacred books of the Indians, it is necessary he should know. The *Vayshya* on the other hand, instruct youth in agriculture; the K*shetria,* in the science of government and the military arts, the S*hudra,* in mechanics, the M*ucaver,* in fishing; the C*iana,* in gardening and the B*anyen,* in commerce."

of the girl population was apparently negligible, as these were home-schooled or 'receiving private tuition'. There is also the mention of the fact that the 'female scholars' who went to school in south India included (Hindu) girls who were exclusively dancing girls, "or girls who were presumably going to be devadasis in the temples" (Dharampal, 1983, p 43; Dubois, [1816], [1906], 2000, p 380).

In Malabar, traditional dance forms vary from that of the rest of the country; these often tend to be story-oriented based on Sanskrit scripts and performed by male dancers, as in *Kathakali, Theyyam, Koodiyattam, Ottamthullal*, etc. The devadasi dance form[70] appears to have been introduced to Kerala from the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and is said to have survived a brief patronage. In *Memoirs of a Taboo*, the dancer Paarvani arrives as a refugee to Malabar in the 18th-century from Mysore (in Karnataka), for example. The current dance form of *Mohiniattam* is known to be directly inspired by the devadasi dance or *dasiattam* (*attam*: dance). Here, Bartolomeo's record suggests that, except for the Shudras and 'Nayris' (*sic* – actually – Nayar) girls, none of the other caste girls stepped out of the house until the age of 12, and even then they were accompanied by their mother or aunt. Bartolomeo here could be referring to the women in the high-status brahmin Namboothiri communities. Called '*antarjanam*' (person living indoors), the women of the Namboothiri community were considered well-educated in the Vedas and other subjects, but they were severely restricted from public view. On the other hand, one can reason that a Nayar girl who belonged to the warrior-caste attained education through formal 'schooling', considering that she

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[70] I came across limited reference to a section of women called 'tevadichi' in Kerala in my secondary research. Also known to be temple dancers, the *tevadichi's* dance was closer to the (more sensual) dance form of *Mohiniattam* than *Bharatanatyam*. Like the stigma of prostitution associated with the devadasi in the rest of India, however, '*tevadichi'* in present-day Kerala is considered to be a derogatory term.

belonged to a matrilineal family where it was normal for women to run the household.

There is evidence elsewhere to suggest that Nayars were among the few castes to provide education for the girls (Raj, 2016; p 105), albeit until the age of puberty. Education for Nayar boys took on a more vocational form as they were sent to train in martial warfare and gymnasiums called *kalari* from the age of eight onwards. According to Ramachandran, Kerala's (matrilineal) culture 'fostered female literacy' (2000, p 104), seemingly one of the primary reasons for Kerala's progress. "Kerala has a history of matriliny among a significant section of the population and it did not leave a tradition of female section, except among Nambudiris and a section of the Muslims" (Sudheerkumar, 2005; p 96). In his article about Kerala's developmental experience, Ramachandran mentions the notable influence of the young female ruler of Travancore state, Rani Laxmi Parvathi Bai, who, in 1817 as a 15-year-old, decreed 'universal education, paid for by the state' (Ramachandran, 2000; p 103). In fact, the gap, as he says, "between Malabar [under the British] and Cochin and Travancore [both princely states] in respect of literacy *widened* during the period of British rule in Malabar" (*Ibid*, p 105 [emphasis mine]). Eventually, mass schooling in Malabar was established after Kerala was formed in 1957.

2.2 b) Early Hindu attire and custom

We have thus far seen that while a 'sexual education' through music and the arts was apparently more specific to the daughters of women dancers and courtesans, other students were also not deprived of the *awareness* of the liberal notions of sexuality. This background, along with an appreciation of how sexual 'openness' was carried forward

through the generations over many centuries, is crucial to understand the present-day

perception of feminism in India today.[71] Despite the existence of patriarchy in ancient

Indian society, there certainly also existed women already empowered with almost-

equal status to men or, in some cases such as the devadasi or *Nagarvadhu,* even higher.

Early and pre-colonial Indian attitudes to sex were also literally embodied in their

clothing. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter (pp 96-7), the costumes of pre-

colonial Hindu Indian women and men generally comprised a single unstitched cloth of

six- to nine-yards wrapped around the body in various styles. Their ends were

sometimes bunched and tucked in from between the legs to behind the waist, or draped

like a saree across the chest and shoulders and tucked in at the waist in the front.[72] This

was thought to be auspicious and enhanced ceremonial purity. Men from the priestly

classes or brahmins even in the present day wear new, unstitched cloth as a dhoti while

performing a religious *pooja* or ceremony; during the traditional *haldi-kumkum* which

takes place among married women in their homes at festivals, female guests are still

offered unstitched cloth as their token gifts.

It is possible that the wearing of a single cloth could be because of the hot climate.

Women across many parts of Bengal and Kerala in southern India also left the upper

part of their bodies uncovered. The *melmundu*, or upper garment, for example, was only

allowed for certain women belonging to the upper castes in Malabar. Here, interestingly,

as Nivedita Menon says, 'sexiness' was produced "by the *covering* of breasts secretly at

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[71] *Also see chapter on Feminism*

[72] According to records by Dubois in *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* ([1906] 2000), this kind
of seamless clothing was "an undeniable convenience, considering how often they have to bathe and
wash their garments; for Brahmin women have to observe the same rules of purification as the men,
and are equally zealous in the performance of this duty" (p 385).

night in a cultural context in which bare breasts were ordinary and everyday" (2012, p 199 [emphasis by the author]). To wear a blouse in such a scenario was to be equated to a 'slut' or dancing woman or, a courtesan who, as the French missionary Abbe J A DuBois's travelogues from 1806 reveal, was the most 'decently clothed' of all women in India merely as a 'refinement of seduction': "Experience has no doubt taught them that for a woman to display her charms damps sensual ardour instead of exciting it, and that the imagination is more captivated than the eye" ([1816], [1906], 2000; p 663). In *Memoirs of a Taboo*, Saudamini, Ambilli's grandmother narrates one of her early memories as a Nayar girl in her monologue to the reader:

> *"When I grew up, I was forced to wear a melmundu, a clean white cloth*
> *to cover my swelling breasts. Servant girls didn't need to, but this woman*
> *here, Kunjulamu edathi, would mock me to tears. Sometimes hidden away*
> *in the dark of the pathayam, where the grains were stored, we would*
> *exchange our castes. I would wear her huge gold earrings and she would*
> *drape my melmundu on her bare upper body. It felt a relief to get it away*
> *from my chest in the heat. Sometimes Kunjumalu edathi stood behind me*
> *and held up my thick hair, while I fanned my torso and neck with that thin*
> *piece of cloth" (MOAT, p 77).*

Despite display or bodily exposure in a country with 'moral depravity'[73] according to Dubois, a house consisting women would be considered a "sanctuary which the most shameless libertine would not dream of violating" ([1816], [1906], 2000; p 384). This quote again indicates that women in the 17th- and 18th-century India

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[73] As a scholar and missionary who lived and recorded his experiences in India from 1792-1823, by 'moral depravity' DuBois is referring to some of the Hindu practices during the time: of treating oneself to sensual pleasures such as intoxication, keeping concubines, visiting prostitutes, courtesans or dancers (pp 348-355).

were not objects of sexuality.

During my primary research journey and through secondary reading material about north Kerala, or Malabar, I came across ample evidence (Barbosa, 1921, cited by Fuller, 1976, pp 2-4; Sheikh Zin-ud-din, 1833 and Hamilton, 1727, cited by Logan, 1887, p 136) that foreign visitors to Kerala in pre-colonial times had always been fascinated by the Keralite system of marriage. The Nayars, for example, enjoyed a matrilineal joint family system where it was considered an honour for Nayar women to take as many as three, four or even twelve (Logan, 1887, p 136) lovers as she wished; children born of this *sambandam* or union would be brought up by the woman's immediate family. This sexual arrangement enabled the Nayar men to take up positions of the militia away from home while the woman's brother fostered her children. The concept of the 'biological father' for a Nair child interestingly came to be significant only by the mid-1940s, as G Arunima's interview with a source[74] reveals (2003; p 21). Meanwhile, the Namboothiris, or the highest rank of brahmins in Kerala, enjoyed a patrilineal system where only the eldest son was allowed to marry another Namboothiri woman (or women), while the younger brothers consummated their sexual desires with Nayar women or other royal liaisons. The above customs of matrilineality, polygamy, polyandry and hypergamy in Kerala, and the fact that only an upper caste woman covered her breasts make a persuasive case that sexual freedom and bodily awareness prevailed for many generations in the state, lasting until the mid-18th- or early 19th-centuries.

Together these historical sources have helped shape the personality of Madhu in

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[74]   Parakkat Devaki Kutty's interview about her puberty rites in 1945, as told to G Arunima in 1997.

Memoirs of a Taboo. In chapter 15, for example, the sight of obscene posters on various

erotic and 'adult' films, plastered across a dimly-lit compound-wall in a dubious,

sparsely-populated area, sends shivers of shame and repulsion in a 30-year-old Ambilli.

Her friend of the same age, Madhu, is meanwhile fascinated. The contrasting

characterisations of Madhu and Ambilli dramatise the differences

between a woman with a powerful sense of shame around sex and Madhu who, as a

researcher studying the lives of women in ancient India, is aware of the vicissitudes

governing conventions around female sexuality in India over the centuries and

recognises that "the erotic in India...has begun to come full-circle" (*MOAT*, p 68).

In the same chapter, Madhu explains that she understands the role that Ambilli's

upbringing has played in causing her to recoil from the crude vulgarity of the posters

but points out that the act of love was always of significance in ancient India. She cites

examples of women in history and their literary representation by ancient Sanskrit

playwrights such as Kalidasa (chapter 15, p 69). The conviction behind Madhu's

statements is a direct consequence of my primary and secondary research study.

Another classic example of the contrast between the two generations of early 18th-

century, pre-Victorian Indians, and those living in the colonial, late 20th-century can be

seen in Muddupalani's epic poem, *Radhika Santwanam* ('Appeasing Radhika'). I have

adapted an excerpt from this poem for the HF element in my novel, as one of the

fictional Paarvani's memories during her escape to Malabar. Oblivious to the pressures

of the absent ruler, Tipu Sultan, who is away "on a rampage in the South," the

devadasis, courtesans, and eunuchs get together in the palace garden to indulge in some

moments of girly teasing. Here, they sing and taunt Rati about her newfound love

(Siva):

> *"Move on his lips*
>
> *the tip of your tongue;*
>
> *do not scare him*
>
> *by biting hard.*
>
> *Place on his cheeks*
>
> *a gentle kiss;*
>
> *do not scratch him*
>
> *with your sharp nails.*
>
> *Make love*
>
> *gradually:*
>
> *do not scare him*
>
> *by being aggressive."*

The original and unedited version – a collection of five hundred and eighty-four poems

– is believed to have been used to instruct Krishna on how to handle his young bride.

Allegedly, Muddupalani (1730-1790), a talented and popular poetess, courtesan, and

scholar attached to the court of King Pratapasimha in Thanjavur, was the only woman

poet to have written[75] this erotic epic (Tharu and Lalita, 1991, p 118). When attempts

were made to translate her works almost two hundred years later in 1911 (by another

courtesan, Bangalore Nagarathnamma), they became the subject of moral controversy

(Sriram, 2007, p 15). In effect, it can be said that an 18th-century erotic poem

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[75] Muddupalani is also reported to have translated 1200-AD-East-India-based Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (epic love poem of Radha and Krishna) into the *Ashthapadi* (Eight steps), songs of which are sung in the south Indian temples to date.

conveying a language of pleasure, turned into a *taboo* in the early 20th-century. To date, Muddupalani's poem is available only in certain academic texts. The intention to include an excerpted adaptation of *Radhika Santwanam* in the HF was deliberate, with the hope that perhaps this would resurrect Muddupalani's reputation and restore her to prominence among the wider Indian and international readership, albeit in a small way. Likewise, another purpose of the novel was the hope that it would dramatise changing mores and challenge popular perceptions of modernity and the past.

2.3 Sexuality in ancient India:

Historical idealisation vs representation

I would now like to reiterate the important point made in the introduction to this chapter with regards to differentiating between the 'fictional character's subjective idealisation of the historical past' and the 'need to seek a more objective historical knowledge'. As this amended version would have hopefully clarified, ancient Indian educational texts, epics, literary works and so-called historical genealogies in the form of ballads and folklore, normalised sexuality and associated it with pleasure. Despite the existence of patriarchy, my reading of a wide range of diverse texts and sources supports my hypothesis that women in ancient India enjoyed more sexual freedom than their descendants in the 21st-century who face moral constraints, patriarchal control, and misogyny. That said, a woman's sexual practice or activity during the era was not unbridled but *regulated* by means of her birth, caste and class differences or choice of profession.

In its 18th-century narrative, *Memoirs of A Taboo* thus uses fictional characters such as

Paarvani, and Rati Kumari – both of who belong to the profession of dancers and courtesans – to reflect the kind of sexual mores prevalent at the time. As a creative writer, in order to make this history come alive I have transformed my primary and secondary history research findings into a variety of narrative elements including the distinct voices of Paarvani, Rati Kumari and Shakuntala *chechi;* the settings such as Rati Kumari's seductive flirtations with Siva at the Kaveri river bank, or the palace harem occupants singing an adapted version of Muddapalani's erotic poem; the dialogues or conversations between Shakuntala *chechi* and Paarvani in Malabar that convey some of the customs of the Nairs and Namboothiris, and so on.

In the tradition of Indian oral narratives, these elements of fiction thus mingle with historical research to give it human agency, human experience, and emotions that together are intended to bring the past alive. In some sense Madhu represents in fictional form the 'voice' and findings of this study who, it is to be hoped, will encourage the reader to think historically about the processes through which sexual pleasure as a human need became taboo.

II

2.4 Contemporary attitudes (of sexual repression) as reflected in the novel

Recent and contemporary Indian proverbs represent woman as a vessel that can only give and not receive anything in return (*Aurat teri yahi kahani; aanchal mein doodh, aankhon mein paani*: Woman, this is your same old story; you have milk to offer [as blessings[76]], and eyes full of tears: popular Hindi saying). Ambilli's grandmother, or

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[76] The traditional meaning of the hindi word '*aanchal*' is the end of the saree worn by a woman, using which she gives and receives blessings in the form of *prasad* or offerings to god. There is no literal translation for *aanchal* in English, however.

Achchamma, in my novel cites another *pazhanchollu* ([Malayalam] proverb), that

compares the plight of a woman to a delicate leaf: regardless of whether the leaf falls on

a thorn or the thorn falls on the leaf, it is the leaf that gets damaged, she tells the reader

in chapter 16: *"Ela mullinmel veenaalum, mullu eleyinmel veenalum, kedu ellakku*

thanne" (*MOAT*, pp 74-78).

The novel uses everyday proverbs and familiar local anecdotes scattered in Ambilli's

narrative to evoke the social setting of her childhood and adolescence. It also inclines

towards the theory that majority of the metropolitan population in the early 1970s,

through to the 1980s, contained rural-to-urban first-time migrants. The intensification of

moral prohibitions imposed during this post-independent, postcolonial period continues

to shape the sexual attitudes of a generation of young women and reproduce a narrative

of shame. Kakar suggests that this 'deeply conservative, if not puritanical' contemporary

attitude to sexuality is in part due to "the Victorian morality of British colonial rule,

itself the consequence of Christianity's uneasy relationship with the body, for a state of

affairs where modern Indians are embarrassed by Khajuraho's sculptures and feel the

need to explain them away in convoluted religious metaphors and symbols or to dismiss

them as products of a 'degenerate' era" (2007, p 85).

The novel explores the possibility that, despite almost 70 years of freedom from British

colonial rule (1947), there exist many Ambillis in 21st-century India who are vulnerable

to sexual abuse. Curiously, still today, some households, especially those from the

upper-middle class or higher castes in Indian society, consider it a matter of family pride

to have a young daughter who is sexually ignorant about her body because it translates

to her being 'a good girl' and therefore a potential 'ideal' wife (Bumiller, 1991, pp 31-3; Kakar, 2007). The fact that the traditional, joint-family system (where a girl grows up among many male members of the extended family) has increasingly given way to small, nuclear family units (a girl here has access only to the father or male sibling) complicates this further for a girl. Kakar explains: "In the identity formation of most young women in India, the conflict between individual needs and social norms leads to persistent feelings of guilt around premarital sexual contact....Besides guilt, the (hidden) interest in sexuality can also lead to overpowering feelings of shame....After a certain age, most girls have never been naked in front of their parents, and they probably won't ever be with their husbands either; nor will they watch sexually explicit scenes on television together with other, especially male, family members." (Kakar, 2007; p 91). The prevalence of such shameful feelings contributed to the making of Ambilli.

2.5 Possible reasons for the changing status of women, with regards to sexuality

The traditional assumptions of female sexuality in ancient India have been demonstrated through secondary research and readings of early Indian literature and education, and some interviews during the primary research for this thesis. These have suggested that social attitudes in ancient or pre-Vedic India up to the medieval period (12th-14th-century) towards women, the erotic arts, and sexuality, were more accepting than those in contemporary India.

From the thirteenth century onwards, however, it appears that the after-effects of the Islamic invasion[77] pushed women into the background, perhaps in the interests of their own safety; many northern parts of India enforced the 'purdah' or veil so that women

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[77]   India was invaded by Islam in the eighth and again in the eleventh century by Mohammad Ghazni.

remained secluded from enemy forces. Historical records reveal the beginnings of

'*jauhar*', or self-immolation, where Rajput princesses preferred to jump to their deaths[78]

to avoid being taken as sex slaves by the Mughals. In the southern regions, several art

forms, such as the *sadir* dance of the devadasis for example, were stopped

(Sathyanarayana, 2010, pp 241-3 [research notes]) so as to prevent them from slipping

into prostitution. The story of the gradual shift in this culture (of art for the gods and

how it turned into entertainment for the masses) is an interesting one, as narrated by

music and dance scholar Sathyanarayana in an interview (2010) conducted during the

primary research process in Mysore. An excerpt from this discussion also briefly

explains reasons for the complete disappearance of dance from the royal Wodeyar

courts, which had witnessed rich and highly-paid performances by musicians, poets

(both men and women), courtesans and dancers each day until 11pm, up to the late

seventeenth century (Gayathri, 2010).[79] In recent years, some scholars and authors such

as Sathyanarayana have attributed the death of this passion for dance to the reign of

Haider Ali and especially his son, Tipu Sultan, who was allegedly responsible for

converting thousands of brahmins, until his death in 1799.

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[78] Unlike the practice of *sati*, where a widow joins her dead husband on his funeral pyre, the rite of *jauhar* (mass self-immolation) began as a means to protect the honour and dignity of a Rajput woman from enslavement and rape by Islamic forces. Jauhar was never committed, for example, when the enemy was a Hindu King. But in the face of imminent defeat by a Mughal enemy, Hindu Rajput queens, maids, and in some cases even children, have been united in their resolve to die with dignity; some palaces in central India also included a *jauhar-kund* (well) within its walls, which would be lit when the situation demanded, and women would jump in en masse. "In general, *Jauhar* is understood to accomplish closely related purposes. To begin with, it preserves female virtue...Rajputs are keen to protect the purity of Rajput blood. Because conquest brought with it the likelihood of rape, they have seen conquest as a threat to family integrity and caste identity.
"*Jauhar* also promotes caste duty...it inspires soldiers [husbands of the now dead-wives who committed *Jauhar*, for example] to fight [their enemies: the Muslims/Afghans] unto death, for they have nothing to lose" (Harlan, 1992, pp 184-5).

[79] Devadasis were also referred to as *bayaderes*. The term first appeared in the 'scholarly traveller', Peter Sonnerat's description of the devadasis of Surat (in Gujarat, West-India), in his book *Voyage aux Indes orientales et a la Chine* (1782). Prior to Sonnerat's *bayadere*, the Portuguese word for the temple dancers was *bailadiera*, which probably came from the French writer, Abbe Guillaume-Thomas Raynal's term *balladieres* in 1773. The word is still used in the Websters Unabridged Dictionary (1999) as 'a professional female dancer of India' (Bor, 2007, p 46).

2.5.1 Change from the matriarchal to patriarchal system in Kerala

Apart from the gradual dismantling of the native educational system from the mid-1800s onwards, two other seemingly unrelated legislative judgements (passed by the British) appear to hold clues to the change in the status of women in India towards the end of the century. The first of these, the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, served as a background to chapter 16 in my novel, where Achchamma directly addresses the reader. She narrates, in brief, the story of *Keralam* and how she has witnessed the gradual shift from a matriarchal tradition of *Marummakathayam* to a patriarchal system. "When I grew up I learnt that my mother had had about three *sambandams*, one of which was with a brahmin Namboothiri landlord. By the time I was born, there were new rules." The second Act, prohibiting Devadasi practice, was passed in 1934. Madhu's conversations with Ambilli concerning devadasis or 'sacred sex workers', and their caretaker in Mysore, Rajeshwari Amma, are representative of the possible effects of this Act in 21st-century India.

My secondary research on the Marriage Act revealed that the rising wave of chagrin among young Nayars in the late 1800s with regards to the *sambandam* practice led to their growing 'demand' that the (British) government should intervene by putting a stop to, or changing the ancient tradition. A commission was thus appointed in 1890 to "investigate the sexual practices of the Nayars of Malabar."[80] Among the legislators were the scholar and author of the *Malabar Manual* (1887), William Logan, and his protege, O Chandu Menon. (Arunima G, 1997). While Menon was grateful for the

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[80]   From the *Memorandum* to the Malabar Marriage Commission "containing a note of dissent to the proposed marriage legislation in Malabar, in 1891." (Arunima G, 1997, pp 270-290)

'virtues of English education, the technological superiority of the factories and the steam engine...benefits of the colonial encounter', he did not support the Marriage Act because he could foresee it as being a potential destroyer of the matrilineal, traditional joint family system. *Indulekha* (1889), Menon's debut novel, was perhaps an outpouring of his mixed feelings concerning 'modernity' and tradition.

To date, Menon's *Indulekha* is one of the subjects studied as part of the educational curriculum in the state of Kerala. Apart from the fact that it was the first (Malayalam-language) novel to be written and published in Kerala in 1889, perhaps, written at the cusp of social change, it still serves its younger generations a reminder of the erstwhile matrilineal traditions and the differences that ensued among the Malabarese on account of the Nayar and Namboothiri *sambandams*. According to Arunima G, "What English education, or 'westernization', did do for Indulekha [the protagonist of the same name] was to provide her with a mind of her own, and the discerning power to exercise her own rights" (Arunima G., 1997, p 280). The point made by Menon (who apparently was not inclined towards writing[81] until the Marriage Act) is a strong plea for Indian women to use the 'refining and liberating influence of English education' that would enable them to "...conduct [themselves] in matters of supreme interest to [them], such as the choosing of a partner in life' (*ibid*). Interestingly, this statement, along with the timing of Chandu Menon's 19th-century novel, in a strange 'reverse' manner strike me as being similar to the objective of my own practice-based research in the 21st-century. To illustrate, the message that Madhu in my novel hopes to convey is that the contemporary

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[81]   O Chandu Menon, by his own admission in his preface to *Indulekha*, had set out to translate Benjamin Disraeli's (1804-1881, 1st Earl of Beaconsfield) *Henrietta Temple* (1836) into Malayalam. However, he felt readers would not be able to identify with an alien culture and so rewrote it with new characters and social context for the local readers (Menon, 1889. [*Preface*]).

reader steps back (from the present), and re-examines the past 300-400 years with regards to traditional Indian perspectives on female sexuality and morality.

Just as Menon wanted the English influence to make the Indian woman independent in her decisions and further enhance her education, Madhu is urging a re-evaluation of Indian history and its ancient sexual culture which is now accessible both in a growing number of re-interpretations and in Sanskrit-to-English translations of Indian folklore and mythology. Madhu seeks not only to document this change from the language of pleasure to taboo, but also to study its *memoirs*, to understand its causes, which she does through the vicissitudes of Ambilli's life and her passage from victim of repressive social mores to victim of sexual abuse. While Ambilli is 'processing' the burden of her shame, she learns about a permissiveness in ancient Indian culture of which she is a descendant. It is this knowledge that reframes her experience and frees her from both shame and taboo. In effect it is not Shashi who changes Ambilli as he sets out to do (to 'make her a woman'). Instead, learning about the status of the women in ancient India is what effaces Ambilli's real ignorance.

Here we move on to impact of wider socio-cultural factors on matriarchal traditions. In the novel, Ambilli's grandmother successfully carries these reflections on Kerala's history and scatters them in its various chapters: in *Achchamma*'s stream-of-consciousness monologue, for example (pp 68-71), and the conversation or dialogue between *Achchamma* and Ambilli in chapter 45.

The onset of European colonial influence in the 16th-18th-centuries changed the socio-

economic history of Malabar with competitive power politics[82] played by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English with regards to trade (in spices) and commerce, etc. The growth of English public education in Malabar also saw a decline in its polyandrous practices and the setting of new boundaries for sexual behaviour. The traditional *sambandam* practice among the Nayars in Kerala, for example, had allowed the often well-educated Nayar woman the freedom to choose her sexual partner or partners with the complete consent of her extended family. The matriarchal community also allowed its women the liberty to live in their mother's *taravad* or ancestral property and to be its rightful owner after her death; the child or children born out of the *sambandam* unions with the Nayar warrior-men, or high-profile Namboothiri brahmins, were looked after by her maternal brother. These factors offered her an identity and security that was uncommon to women in the rest of the patriarchal country.[83]As a matter of fact, 'outside' men were needed 'only to father their children' (Pillai, 2015; p 181). The assertiveness and authority of Malabar's matriarchal women is demonstrated through the 18th-century *Veliya Ammayi*'s role in Ambilli's historical fiction segment in *Memoirs of a Taboo* in creating the refuge centre for the fleeing Nair women. Glimpses of the same are also seen in the monologue by the 21st-century Achchamma.

The fact that the Nayar men were always at the battlefield and thus unable to commit to any 'marriage' made it customary and acceptable that they 'visit' their 'wife' and children and not stay with her permanently. This practice changed over time with the introduction of gunpowder and firearms; the employment of lower-caste *Tiyyas*,

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[82] Trade in commodities like pepper, cardamom and other spices were most affected with each of the colonial powers trying to establish a monopoly over these products. More detail on the trade in colonial Malabar has been written in KKN Kurup's *Modern Kerala: Studies in Social and Agrarian Relations*, Delhi 1998.

[83] The Khasis and Garos in North-east India were also matrilineal communities. The Khasis reportedly continue to practice matriliny.

Mukuvas, and *Moplahs* in the British army who replaced the Nayars; and the establishment of a paid standing-army by King Marthanda Varma. Nayar militia, who were accustomed to working for various local chiefs, using traditional weaponry and warfare, were now encouraged to settle down and focus on agriculture and other occupations. According to K K N Kurup, the step "marked the transition from medievalism to modernism" (Kurup, 1988; p 8). Additionally, British administrators and Christian missionaries opened their doors for English education in Malabar to the *Tiyyas* (Sudheerkumar, 2005, p 95; Mateer, n.d, p 115-117) apart from giving them jobs, in the face of reluctance from the higher-caste brahmin Namboothiri communities. With this move, however, the Nayar (male) youth, now studying English along with the lower castes in universities in Madras and other places[84] in the country began to be exposed to derogatory foreign opinions about their traditional customs. The *sambandam* system, for example, was labelled a 'revolting' practice, and, "was equated to concubinage and women to mistresses and the children called bastards," according to K Saradamoni, cited in Manu Pillai's *The Ivory Throne* (2015). In response to demand for an official legislation against the *sambandam* system by the young Nayars, the Malabar Marriage Act was passed in 1896, but its consequences were not thought through. In Pillai's words, "while the young men, ashamed of their traditions, sought to emulate the 'civilised' world and cultivate women in the image of the Virgin Mary, society had far too much at stake to abandon the existing system without an alternative plan" (*ibid*, p 184). Even in this postmillennial age, a generation of Nair males continue to feel the shame and related resentment of the *sambandam* system. This is portrayed in chapter 9 of the novel, through the outburst of Unni, Ambilli's father, when she demands to know

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[84] Malabar reportedly had only elementary (English) education and no facilities for higher education. So for a higher education, students had to travel to Madras, Bombay or Bengal.

about the age-old tradition (*MOAT,* p 41).

2.5.2 End of the devadasi practice

"Is not what is immoral in England, immoral in India as well; and can any

custom of the people make it otherwise? We are convinced that if the

highest officials in India were to refuse to attend nautches [dance

performances] on moral grounds, their action would be an object lesson in

moral education to the whole country. Hindu hosts would soon be ashamed

and drop the nautch from the programmes of their public entertainments.

The fact that no protest is made, only encourages the idea that there is

nothing wrong with the custom" (Fuller, 1900, p 144).

Towards the late 1800s, an apparent mix of colonial factors such as the spread of the

English 'educated class' and Christian missionary schools; the arrival of Indian (Hindu)

social reformers and activists; and a general confusion with regards to the profiles of

devadasis, courtesans, and court dancers – all seem to have led to the complete

stigmatisation of Indian dance. Any reference to sexuality, poetic or otherwise, began to

be considered as indecent and 'immoral behaviour', and the majority of dancers came to

be branded simply as 'prostitutes'.[85] After waves of protests, the anti-nautch movement

in 1893 finally gained momentum and attracted the attention of the British governing

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[85]   Another hitherto unknown fact came to light through the ebook *Taken* by Hazel Thompson on
prostitution and sex slavery in India. Thompson's interview with *The Guardian points to the British
military who used native Indian girls (as young as 10) as their 'sex slaves' in various cantonments
across the north of the country from 1856 onwards. This, as she claims, led to the beginning of
prostitutionand the tradition of 'pimps' scouting for young girls in India. Ironically, this happened
around the same time that the Devadasi system was abolished by the British. More details on the latter
can be found in the document *The Queen's Daughters in India*, by Elizabeth W Andrew and Catherine
C Bushnell, 1899. A PDF link to the article can be found here:
http://www.godswordtowomen.org/queensdaughters.pdf
 *Hazel Thompson's interview accessed in 2013:
http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/28/trafficked-india-red-light-districts

authorities.[86]Indira Viswanathan Peterson has suggested that "In reaction to the British, Indians acted in two contradictory ways: they became great reformers; but also suppressed some of the more erotic and sexually liberated aspects of women's culture, thus turning Indian society more rigid and conservative. Devadasis, or temple dancers, were now considered obscene prostitutes, whereas earlier they were not. This was because Indian men had to prove to the British that they were moral, moral in a Christian, Victorian sort of way" (1993, cited in Jordon K, 1989).

Interestingly, this view seems to have now turned around, at least partly. At heritage sites in India, for example, I have personally witnessed local guides dismissing erotic sculptures in temples as a shameful culture of the past when addressing Indian tourists, and yet speaking highly of the exalted status of the same Indian art when in conversation with a visibly fascinated, white-skinned foreigner.[87] Nevertheless, it is regrettable that present-day textbooks about Indian history hardly contain a single respectful mention of the devadasi community, even though it was an integral part of the Indian traditional culture for over 1200 years (6th- to 19th-century CE). In the novel, Madhu, as a researcher, fulfils this role of being a fair 'observer' of the 'hypocrisy' of both the colonial and contemporary Indians as petitioners who helped abolish the ancient devadasi tradition, and as 'brown' upholders of the 'white' colonial legacy such as the judicial system/laws, bureaucracy, education system, etc.

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[86]   The Devadasi Abolition Bill was finally passed in 1947.
[87]   In present-day India, foreigners, especially whites, are still treated with awe and subservience in most parts of the country. However, there have been many instances when they have also been fleeced of money (at places of tourist interest, for example; or means of transport such as private autorickshaws) because they happen to belong to a 'developed' and apparently richer country. In the novel, these observances (from a German ex-colleague and room-mate and her friends) findings from historical research are presented via incidents drawn in the life of Ambilli's eighteenth-century fictional character, Paarvani, the daughter of a devadasi and court dancer in Mysore, who escapes to Malabar. On her way, she is helped by Thomas, a British artist who takes advantage of the effects of his white skin on the natives (in this context, Tipu Sultan's Muslim army) and passes himself off as a French ally.

2.5.3 Post-colonial education and doubly-colonised Indian women

In the larger context of India in the 19th-century, modernisation through the imposition of and exposure to Western values and education began, but this burdened the Indian woman with a new kind of patriarchy. In his essay, *The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question*, Partha Chatterjee explains that, in the face of the rapidly changing internal and external situation especially for the middle-class family, female education began to be seen as a threat, because the early schools and arrangements for teaching women at home were organised by Christian missionaries. Concerns were raised with regards to both 'proselytization' and the exposure of women to 'harmful western influences' ([1989], 1993, p 245).

The nationalist ideology further divided the colonial situation of the contrasting 'West' and the 'East' into the 'world' and the 'home'. The *world* stood for the material, Western, modern world to which it was necessary to adapt and even imitate. The *home* stood for the East, which, despite its colonial subjugation, was superior because of its unparalleled spiritual and cultural strengths. While this was considered important to maintaining the unique Hindu traditional identity,[88] it was also primarily crucial that the Indian women, representatives of the inner, spiritual self or the home, were not 'corrupted' into Christianity.[89] The *woman's question* was thus resolved by nationalism:

"...the woman must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this

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[88] This claim was not apparently without its basis. While women's movements in England and Europe in the 19th-century were on the rise, female missionaries who felt that womanhood in India had to be 'protected' began to spread the message of Christianity by making Hindu women converts their messengers. In her book, *The emergence of Feminism in India*: 1850-1920, Padma Anagol cites the work of Antoinette Burton, Geraldine Forbes and Barbara Ramusack who analysed the complex picture of roles of these missionaries in India. "They assert," writes Anagol, "that white women who went to colonies in the nineteenth century constructed and relied on the notion of 'enslaved' Indian women to serve the purposes of their own programmes and emancipation (Anagol, 2005; p 22).

[89] Some examples of learned Hindu converts (to Christianity) were: Pandita Ramabai, Krupabai, Soondarbai Powar, Anandibai Bhagat, and others from the lower classes and castes. (*Ibid*, p 25)

[spiritual] quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. Feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially *westernized*" (Chatterjee, [1989], 1993; pp 243, 245).

Ironically, this resolution, according to Priyamvada Gopal, is limiting in its patriarchal assumption that 'the nationalist mind was always already male' (2005, p 62). It further prompts questions about the longer-term consequences of this symbolic line physically dividing the increasingly *westernised* modern Indian man and the essentially *traditional* Indian woman into two separate areas.

2.5.4 The connection between migrant population and sexual ignorance (in Mumbai)

In general, first-time migrants appear to exercise great caution when it comes to their daughters, especially with regards to friendships made in a new multicultural city. In the decades following independence and given the continuing colonial hold over the country, the task of delivering the time-tested, age-old *samskaras* (culture or tradition) of Indian thought processes to the next generation invariably fell on young, inexperienced parents in an urban adopted homeland, and without the help of their extended families. In addition to this, the new schooling system since the 1950s was heavily influenced by both Macaulay's legacy[90] and the elite Harrow and Oxford education of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Indian prime minister.[91]Part of *Memoirs of a*

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[90] Macaulay's infamous speech in 1835 stressed on his objective to 'form a class who may be interpreters between us [East India Company] and the millions we govern: a class of persons, Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'. In his *Minute on Education in India*, he wrote: "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy the relative position is nearly the same" (Varma, 2010, p 39).

[91] It was interesting to note, in the words of the first prime minister of independent India in his *An*

Taboo is set in India's economic capital city, Bombay (or Mumbai).[92]Between 2001 and

2008, over 60% of the city's population were migrants (Tembhekar, 2013), speaking

over 16 languages, and hailing from as many as eight different religions and sub-

cultures.

With the majority of the migrants' increasing preference for the nuclear family system,

the sexual development in girls has been affected. Kakar relates this to Freud's universal

themes of 'infantile psychosexual development in terms of the vicissitudes of the libido',

which differs according to social influences and cultural variations. In a communal

living household, for example, constant close contact with family members of both

sexes and varying ages is inescapable. This contributes to the early bodily experience of

the girl, "...where the infant girl is frequently caressed and fondled by the many adults

around her; and where playful exploratory activities of an explicitly sexual nature

among the many cousins living in the same house or nearby in the neighbourhood are a

common early developmental experience, often indulgently tolerated by the more or

less 'permissive' adults—a promiscuous sexual excitation, as well as the fear of being

overwhelmed by it, looms large in the unconscious fantasies of an Indian girl" (Kakar,

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Autobiography, the influence that the 'West' held for his family. According to Pavan Varma, author and ex-Indian Diplomat, a noticeable feature of Indians 'who found employment in the sarkar, particularly in the slightly elevated echelons...was the manner in which they tried to model themselves on their English superiors.' In the context of Nehru, Varma says that: "As always, the emulation of the British was accompanied by a denigration of what was one's own." He quotes from Nehru's autobiography (Bodley Head, 1936; p 23): "His father, Motilal, 'was attracted to western dress and other western ways at a time when it was uncommon for Indians to take to them except in big cities like Calcutta and Bombay...He had a feeling that his countrymen had fallen low and almost deserved what they got...He looked to the west and felt greatly attracted by western progress, and thought that this would come through an association with England'." *Becoming Indian* (2010, p 65).
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Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), placed a heavy emphasis "on the role of science, technology, and industry in modernizing India, while religion was deemphasized as part of traditional, premodern India." (McLain, 2009, p 27).

[92]   The name 'Bombay' was changed to 'Mumbai' in 1995. The novel uses the two names interchangeably depending on incidents dated in Ambilli's story.

1978, p 79).

This experience is denied to many second-generation migrant girls, however, who grow up, often as the only child, in a nuclear family. In addition, although the present generation enjoys more relaxed social rules, it is common for some girls nearing the age of adolescence to hear from their parents that they (the girls) are weak and vulnerable, 'unable to resist determined male advances or the promptings of their own sexual nature' (Kakar, 2007, p 55). A daughter's occasional indulgence in recreational activities that involve going out of the house, such as visiting friends or a cinema, is thus eventually prohibited by many families, as it may entail her coming into contact with a member of the opposite sex.

This gender segregation is possibly reflected in many of the public spaces in contemporary India such as its supposedly 'mixed' educational institutions where classrooms have separate seating for girls and boys (and interaction is often discouraged), in its gender-specific security check queues at the international airport terminals and more significantly, modes of public transport like trains and buses. In the novel, Ambilli moves through some of these 'ladies-only' spaces in the trains with other women commuters and occasionally, *hijras,* and young urchin boys - deemed harmless perhaps because they fall into the category of the 'third' gender, and on account of the pre-puberty age (of the boys). The novel also displays that, as in the case of Ambilli, when these women move *out* of such sheltered spaces and *into* the public mixed areas again, for example, soon after the train reaches a crowded railway platform, the threat of them (the women) being groped and violated in some way is also very real. Gopal

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connects this 'imagined sexual chaos' with Chatterjee's nationalist resolution argument earlier in this chapter that 'women and tradition were both contained through seclusion' and, reasons that in a contemporary reality, the replication of this idea is impossible (2005, p 62).

This is the social setting for my protagonist, Ambilli: not only is she a Kerala-to-Mumbai, second-generation migrant and Unni and Indu's only daughter but additional social restrictions are also imposed on her as a teenager. In effect this leads to her being sexually ignorant and also naive with regards to making new friendships or connections, especially with the opposite sex. Ambilli's best friend, Madhu, on the other hand, has an older male sibling and is the daughter of more liberal-minded, Keralite parents who are perhaps more secure in their traditional status. This makes Madhu unusual in the migrant Hindu community. Madhu, already a student of Indian history, is familiar with Ambilli's rather protective and conservative upbringing. When Ambilli meets her after many years, Madhu realises what Ambilli herself is ignorant of and urges her to find her roots. She senses that the only way to 'undo' Ambilli's cultivated inhibitions is to systematically go back, all the way to the early Indian period, and examine what caused them in the first place. Unknowingly, Madhu not only helps Ambilli forgive her parents and grandmother, she also provides her with the opportunity of redemption and the chance to overcome her past.

2.5.5 Kerala's migration towards patriliny

The early 1900s saw more men from the Nayar communities migrating along with their 'legal' wives and children towards the cities and central towns further north of Kerala in

search of non-agricultural work. This further appears to have fissured the joint or

extended family system and led to 'patriarchal' nuclear family units. The hitherto

socially and financially-independent Nayar woman was now without the security or

property of her mother or maternal brother's family and, moreover entirely dependent

on the husband as the breadwinner. By 1912, in perhaps what was one of the most

punitive acts passed with regards to women, the Nayar wife was apparently eligible for

'maintenance' by the husband - as long as she did not 'live in adultery'.

Matrilineality as a system was finally abolished by 1923 under the colonial authorities

by a Western-educated Nair called P Thanu Pillay who called it 'evil': within five years

as many as 32,903 matriarchal *taravads* were reportedly partitioned and disintegrated.

Furthermore, womanly qualities such as 'sexual virtue' and 'loyalty to a single husband'

were stressed and publications especially for Malayalam women were introduced. For

example, the *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* (literal translation: enlightener of good values)

in 1892 published magazines encouraging the values of motherly love and dedication,

with writings about moral conscience, cookery or biographies of 'ideal women'.[93]

Thus, the British colonial incursion in Kerala on the one side effectively terminated the

matriarchal way of life, thereby effacing, in a sense, the Nayar woman's identity and

sexuality and doubly colonising her. On the other, more positive side, it appears to have

unwittingly set the Namboothiri *antarjanam* free from her severely restricted social life,

about which not much appears to have been written so far. These women in the

patriarchal Namboothiri families were called *antarjanam* as they lived a secluded life

within the walls of the house- therefore, *antar-janam*: person living indoors. The

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[93]   J Devika, cited in Manu Pillai, 2015; p 185

women often had to endure underage marriage with men much older than them; they were thus widowed early and allowed "no control or rights over their own sexuality; a Nayar woman – within certain limits, mainly of caste – did" (Antarjanam, 1938, p 218;[94] Hawley and Narayanan, 2006). If an *antarjanam* was found to have crossed her barriers of morality or religious codes or behaviour, she was known to be charged with a morality inquisition or *smarthavicharam*, by the male Namboothiri members. According to Agnisharman Namboothiry, one of the primary research interviewees based in Cochin, in such a scenario "the lady as well as the accused (who is/are proven guilty) stand to be excommunicated from the Namboothiri caste" (*ibid,* 2010).[95] The *smarthavicharam* incident in *Memoirs of A Taboo* was inspired by one such actual case in 1905[96] which led to a widespread furore in Kerala around morality and the constraining rules of the Namboothiri community. By the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries, English education in Malabar led to the rise of Namboothiri reformists, who called for widow-remarriage for women, more intra-caste marriages for younger Namboothiris, "equitable distribution of sexual pleasure between the sexes" (Devika, 2002; p 19), etc.

Ambilli's *Achchamma*, Saudamini, is placed in the novel within this strategic historical background as she refers to the independent choices made at different time periods by the different women in her family - by her ancestor, the dancer, Paarvanendu, or Paarvani, for example; and by her own mother, who had had multiple *sambandams*. She

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[94]   From Lalitambika Antarjanam's chapter *A Brahmin Woman* and short story *Revenge herself*, 1938.
[95]   See Research Notes for more excerpts from this interview, pp 265-70, 273.
[96]   The case revolved around a Namboothiri lady of exceptional beauty, Kuriyedattu Thatri, who was facing excommunication for adultery. In a bold step that was unheard of earlier, Thatri went on to name 65 male members of high profile who upon questioning were proven equally guilty of indulging in physical relationships with her. It is believed that the king, who was adjudicating the by now infamous trial, made her stop the accusations at 64 (men). It has since then been speculated that the king himself was the 65th-yet unnamed paramour!

also anticipates the possibility that Ambilli would probably have to face her turn too.

The inescapable reality, according to Achchamma, is that of her responsibility of that

choice, and the fact that: *"No matter what you choose...there will be no one to thank you*

for it" (*MOAT*, p 77).

Section III

2.6 Characterisation in the novel regarding sexuality

i) The need to create an HF element, and 18th-century Paarvani

During the process of uncovering primary and secondary research details about the

status of women in early India, I began to realise that the task of bringing to light the

lesser-known ancient Indian culture to the reader via Ambilli could potentially crumble

under its own weight. In addition, there appeared the risk that Madhu's role would

become too preachy, one-sided, and boring. It was thus necessary to look for a different

approach that would hopefully achieve the same effect: of imparting research findings

to the reader without sounding like a history textbook. Thus, Ambilli's historical fiction

(HF) was created as a novel within the novel. While Madhu and Ambilli's exchange of

history-related conversation remains limited in the main body of novel, in the HF

Ambilli creates Paarvani who practically embodies the early 18th-century past.

Although this was an instinctual step during the writing process and not deliberate, upon

reflection it appears to have managed two fictional challenges: firstly, a temporary

suspension of Ambilli's emotional anguish over the sexual incident with Shashi. This

she revisits at progressive intervals, but the reader is made to observe (through Ambilli's

journal entries) that the psychological effects of the trauma are ebbing away from her,

and making her more accepting of her past. Secondly, the use of Paarvani led naturally

to the adoption of show-not-tell techniques in the metafictional narrative, making the characters in the HF more believable but also allowing the distant past to be reanimated so that historical evidence is played out in human form.

ii) Incidents of abuse in the novel

During my early years in the UK as a newly married young woman, I came across other, similarly 'displaced' first-time migrants from various states across India; together, we shared casual conversations regarding our growing up years and family life. A common thread that tied these stories and nostalgia was, interestingly, the lack, or even absence, of sexual preparedness for married life, doubly intensified due to the geographical distance from any family support. For example, one woman, married at the age of twenty-five, had refused to hold her newly-wed husband's hand as she believed it would make her instantaneously pregnant. Another, a Keralite law postgraduate, cringed with embarrassment as she recalled her experience of falling victim to a prank played by the senior male students: she was made to read aloud a biology class text that explained the entire process of sexual intercourse, which she did, unaware of the biological terms for the body or the context. This sense of naivete and ignorance associated with female sexuality is echoed by Kakar, who mentions the case of "a college-educated patient [who] believed well into her late teens that menstrual blood, urine and babies all came through the urethra" (Kakar, 2007; p 92).

During the writing process, it felt imperative to fictionalise and transpose some of these anecdotes and observances into the novel, as they seemed to be important contextual strands that built up to the episode describing Ambilli's eventual sexual abuse by Shashi.

To illustrate, the classroom discussion between the teachers in chapter 6, where they mention the suicide attempt made by a former student, Hemangini, was influenced by one of these personal accounts. Chapter 8 has the teacher, Mrs Iyer, make Ambilli stand up and chant just the word 'sex' 25 times to desensitise her to the taboo associated with merely uttering it. The fact that, at the end of her 'ordeal', the class of over one hundred 18-year-old students sympathises with her predicament was written to convey the idea that the majority of them probably themselves have shared this taboo (*MOAT*, pp 36-8). This incident, drawn from personal experience, was crucial to me and the story in the sense that, in a small way, a well-meaning teacher (Mrs Iyer) temporarily liberated Ambilli, as well as other students of the class from the 'rules' of their own families. Nevertheless, for Ambilli, this singular step of initiation into the world of taboo proves inadequate and instead, in a strange twist of fate, her sense of shame is casually violated by her colleague and supposed friend Shashi seven years later. He befriends her, gradually isolating her from her close circle of other girlfriends and tells her that he will 'change' her and 'turn her into a woman'. Only six months into their friendship, unbeknownst to Ambilli, Shashi places a bet with his male (and some female) colleagues that he will strip her naked and yet she will not complain. The friends dismiss it as another of his bluffs but Shashi succeeds. He betrays her trust in him, using her to masturbate himself on successive nights. Just as he had predicted, and as is common with victims of sexual molestation or abuse (especially with a known molester), Ambilli is 'frozen' and unable to protest. Akin to her experience of repeating the word 'sex' 25 times and despite her emotional anguish, each time she resigns herself to her helplessness and lets him have his way.

Although there were some initial doubts in my mind regarding the plausibility of a sociopathic character like Shashi, his presence in the novel animates Ambilli's storyline effectively. A number of primary and secondary sources informed Shashi's characterisation.

iii) The making of Shashi

Just as there are many gullible Ambillis, so there are also many manipulative males like Shashi. The inspiration for Shashi came from various sources. In the initial character-conception stages, I had a vague idea that Shashi would – to some degree - share the dual-personality trait of Robert Louis Stevenson's protagonist, Dr Jekyll, who, upon taking a potion, turns into the murderous Mr Hyde. Although the novella, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1931), was part of my high-school syllabus in the late 1980s and I had not re-read it since, the notion of the transformation of its main character from good to evil and back to good remained with me. Secondly, I recalled the presence of at least one or two male senior colleagues during my early career who had a reputation of being narcissists, or couldn't be trusted because of their overtly flirtatious nature. Women colleagues who were more ambitious colluded with them (especially if the man in question was their boss). I exaggerated some of these personality traits to create two characters, Shashi and the 18th-century Jamaal. While Shashi, after a neglected childhood, charms his way around women, the orphan Jamaal lusts for power: he is dangerously ambitious and will do anything to reach his goal of a higher position to overrule the Sultan.

In addition, even as I mentally debated the plausibility of a character such as Shashi, I read Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), a unique perspective into the mind of an amoral

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paedophile. Interestingly, the fictional Humbert Humbert's remorselessly selfish deeds and the way that he used Lolita to his advantage clarified and added credibility to the stories I had heard about certain disreputable 'womanisers' in the office environment. I had already written most of the sections concerning Shashi when a rash of stories about sexual harassment at work began to emerge with reference to Jimmy Savile, Bill Cosby (Holpuch et al, 2015) and, in India, the politically influential editor of the *Tehelka* magazine, Tarun Tejpal (Seervai and Sugden, 2014). Effectively, Savile, when he was alive, had got away from multiple cases of sexual abuse (allegedly more than 1000, Boffey 2014), despite the fact that majority of the incidents took place within the BBC premises: the testimony emerged only after his death. In my novel, Shashi's misdeeds never come out in the open, and in fact it is implied, in chapter 35, that he serially carries on womanising.

With regards to the narrative in my novel, Shashi does not have a first-person voice, as Humbert did in *Lolita*. At first the reader is encouraged to sympathise with Shashi, by being made aware of his family and upbringing through Ambilli's words. Later, Ambilli begins to write (but doesn't complete) in her journal (*MOAT*, pp 146-148) an account of the first time Shashi told her to take off her clothes. The chapter that follows (*ibid*, pp 149-151) uses flashback to re-narrate the incident to the reader in the third person. While Humbert is completely obsessed with Lolita in Nabokov's novel, Shashi gives the impression of being a spoilt, insensitive playboy who uses different girls for his sexual needs and then discards them. This is demonstrated when we find Shashi on a long-distance train seducing another woman by his charm (*ibid*, pp 188-192), which also happens to carry Ambilli and Madhu on it. Shashi's situation has now become pitiable:

he tries to woo Madhu while his 'girl' waits alone at their unreserved seat, even as she (Madhu) sets a trap for him by calling the local 'moral police' who extract a fine from the couple before forcibly throwing them out at an isolated railway platform.

As the novel concludes, it is not revealed whether Shashi is eventually forgiven; this is left to the reader's imagination. But Ambilli's act of creating Paarvani's HF story, using Madhu's research material about women in ancient and pre-Victorian India, somehow purges Ambilli of her own feelings of guilt and shame. Ambilli accepts, in the true Indian tradition, her past as her karma, and progresses to make a fresh beginning with her husband, Manu.

2.7 Response to the Viva feedback with regards to chapter additions in the novel:

Memoirs of a Taboo concentrates on the protagonist Ambilli's journey from a sexual violation and betrayal of a friendship to her reconciliation or acceptance of them. By creating another fictional character, Paarvani, who faces a betrayal - not of sexual abuse but of trust, Ambilli is able to distance herself from her own wounds, disguising them as words and events. In the end, she emerges as a survivor; Shashi's sexual abuse is a scar but it does not hurt her anymore.

Ambilli embodies the colonialised India in a way: the novel thus suggests that for a country such as India to truly go beyond the postcolonial, it must engage with its pre-colonial past and draw lessons from it.

For any debut novelist, the first readers' comments and criticisms are extremely important. In this respect, I am grateful for the examiners' feedback for *Memoirs of a*

Taboo. I have taken on board many, although not all, of the comments and suggestions in the viva concerning Ambilli's abuse and have added sections that I hope deepen this aspect of the novel. This section examines the amendments made to the novel following the thesis revisions and further study over the last year.

i) Ambilli's relationship with Manu:

After her abuse, Ambilli withdraws into a shell. Within the world of this shell she fills herself with shame because of her past association with Shashi and anxiety about building new relationships. Therefore Ambilli's interactions with the well-meaning but almost intrusive-Seema are limited. Ambilli also keeps aloof and does not socialise with her office colleagues outside of office hours. With Manu, who she chose to marry despite her confusion, Ambilli ironically feels stifled. This is because, having grown up with instructions and prohibitions all her life, for the first time, she is left alone: Manu gives her space and lets her be who she is. Yet because of the memory of her traumatic and systematic abuse, she cannot establish any physical or intimate connection with him after marriage and thus feels doubly guilty.

In contrast to Ambilli's self-doubts and guilt-laden personality, Manu's portrayal as a mature and clear-headed individual is intended to heighten what is missing in their marriage, which nevertheless is based on a deep gratitude and mutual respect. This is shown through some of the settings surrounding Manu and Ambilli, and through dialogue that also leaves many things unsaid between them. Chapter 18, for example, begins with Manu's phone call to Ambilli where he informs her that their house has been burgled. There comes a point in this chapter where they are both silent: "She

swallowed hard, not knowing what she could tell Manu to make him feel better. He was silent too, searching for something else to talk about" (*MOAT*, p 95) yet they do not hang up. The examiners were justified in pointing out to the omission of scenes that gave a deeper sense of Ambilli and Manu's marriage. As a writer I felt it was also necessary to retain the subtlety of their relationship with each other as in the above example. To do this but at the same time, to reveal what kind of touch Manu was allowed, I decided to use the medium of 'girl-talk' between Ambilli and her best friend Madhu.

Chapter 25 begins with Madhu probing Ambilli about her childhood and, regrets. The conversation leads to the subject of Manu; Ambilli's response that she is 'lucky' to have a friend like Manu prompts Madhu to directly ask Ambilli:

> "Friend? *Friend?* Hullo? Aren't you married to the guy?...When I asked if
>
> everything is okay between the two of you I meant, your
>
> relationship...and all the... *jiggerypokkiri* in between. You have....haven't
>
> you?" (*MOAT*, p 140)

The reader here is given a clue and, hopefully, made aware through Ambilli's obvious unease on being asked questioned that, despite the nine months that have passed since their wedding day, their marriage has not yet been consummated. Although this addition is short, it conveys how limited is the physical contact that Ambilli permits Manu. By retaining Ambilli's perspective, the segment also does not divert the reader away from the main theme of the novel, that is Ambilli's journey to a reconciliation with her past.

ii) Shashi's role in the novel

Shashi and Ambilli's 'relationship' is that of sexual predator and vulnerable adult. Ambilli's vulnerability comes from her experience as overprotected child, the incompatibility between certain of her family members (her mother and grandmother) and their consequent inability to understand her bodily needs or sexuality. In other words, she is *naive*. Unbeknownst even to the reader, Shashi 'grooms' both Ambilli and those surrounding her, wins her confidence, isolates her from her friends and tells her he is going to make her a woman (*MOAT*, p 53-4).

Shashi does not rape Ambilli – but he violates her innocence and naivety on the very first night that, as the reader learns later, is part of a bet. The scene of the abuse – the removal of her clothes one by one, and Shashi's eventual act of masturbation, saying "This, Ambilli, is education for you," and then his instant falling asleep, is subtle, almost borderline. This was intended to shock the reader; as a writer, my aim was also to communicate the victim Ambilli's 'frozen' response.

Like Ambilli, the recent victims of sexual abuse after the revelations about Harvey Weinstein and the emergence of the #MeToo hashtags, for the most part did not come forward earlier to report the incidents that they felt were 'shameful'.

Ambilli buries her shame inside her and as a consequence grows quieter. But in a way Ambilli was already *taught* to be ashamed during her growing up years. For example, she was always told to stay away from the opposite sex. She did not, so there is guilt as well as shame. The experience of abuse, however, curiously ruptures that concept of 'shame'. She thus continues to meet Shashi, and admiringly explores the contours of her body in the mirror when she tries out snug-fitting clothes (p 154). I included these scenes – controversially, perhaps – because I wanted to show the complexities of a

growing woman's relationship with her own sexuality: Shashi's abuse of her was undoubtedly a violation but at the same time it played a role in activating Ambilli's hitherto dormant sexuality (which of course does not legitimise the abuse).

This thinking process also led me to consider whether victims of grooming and sexual abuse in some way related to the 'Stockholm Syndrome' concept, where a kind of bonding can take place between the victim and the offender. The criteria for this effect, as defined by the criminologist who reportedly coined[97] the word in the 1970s, include an experience "out of the blue that makes them certain they are going to die," followed by "a type of infantilisation where, like a child, they are unable to sleep, eat or go to the toilet without permission" (Westcott, 2013). Thus small acts of kindness (by the perpetrator) make the victim feel immense gratitude towards their offender.

Shashi had a similar effect on Ambilli. To win her trust completely, he had begun by confiding in her the details from his own life. His 'sympathy' stories of the brother who would not share his room or toys (*MOAT*, p 147) make the gullible Ambilli look forward to the jokes and company of her *first* male friend.

Returning to 'grooming', this relatively recent concept has been recognised as a "growing concern" (Agarwal, 2011) in the Indian media too. In the light of the examiners' suggestions to add to Shashi's role in the novel, I felt it necessary to highlight the term in Ambilli's letter to Shashi where she is already searching for a word to describe their "brief but memorable relationship" (*MOAT*, p 53). Along with 'sexual abuse' and 'acquaintance or date rape', she mentions she has found a 'perfect match', and adds:

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[97]   Nils Bejerot, criminologist and psychiatrist. The term 'Stockholm Syndrome' was later defined by another psychiatrist Dr Frank Ochberg in the 1970s.

> **"Grooming:** 'Process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and
> the environment for the abuse of a child.' *This looked more like it. I read further. It
> said: '*There is a four-stage continuum to the grooming process: stage 1: identify
> the vulnerable child/person, stage 2: socially isolate, stage 3: develop an emotional
> attachment, and stage 4: isolate and develop progressive control over the child."
> *Did you come across this manual, Shashi, before you picked me out, and diligently
> ticked all these stages? How did your mind work? How did you know I was the
> one? (MOAT*, p 54*).*[98]

The examiners' feedback after the viva, to add to further scenes between Shashi and
Ambilli have been appreciated, and taken on board. A few attempts were made to this
effect and the option of Shashi 'blackmailing' Ambilli was also considered. However,
after much trials and thought, I felt that any further addition to Shashi's scenes with
Ambilli would tilt the focus to a more brutal form of abuse rather than the more subtle
and implicit form that I had intended and to which my mind throws up many intriguing
questions. It also risked diverting narrative away from Ambilli's journey after the abuse,
which is what the story is primarily about.

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[98]   Definition taken from Chase, 2005, cited in Julich, Oak, 2016, p 50.

Chapter 3. The process of Ambilli's redemption in the novel

> "Funny thing is, in the end, all our stories – your life, my life, old
> Husain's life, they're the same. In fact, no matter where you go in the
> world, there is only one important story: of youth, and loss, and yearning
> for redemption. So we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details
> are different." – *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry, p 221.

The 'redemptive arc' is a fairly common element in most narratives of fiction. A traditional redemptive sequence, for example, would involve a narrative wherein a 'bad', or negative character undergoes a transition into a 'good', positive character; a character who has 'sinned' earlier in the story might redeem himself or herself towards the end. In this novel, Ambilli is a person who is not pretentious; she is not ambitious about her career, and thus represents a character who is 'consistent' in her naivete, rather than someone who is 'bad' or 'evil' or seeking redemption. The turning point in Ambilli's life appears when a male friend and colleague, Shashi, takes advantage of her quiet upbringing on both the emotional and physical level. However, while Shashi's sexual abuse forms the 'contaminating factor' in Ambilli's narrative, her conflict in the novel really reveals itself almost seven years later when she writes a letter to him. Her journey since then, towards a reconciliation of sorts, is what forms the core of the novel.

Ambilli's seven years are revealed to the reader via intermittent episodes of flashbacks, third-person point-of-view chapters, and her journal entries, all of which interpret her private process of 'getting over' the sexual abuse. The symptoms she exhibits within

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these various narratives (avoiding all her contacts; working longer hours and harder; starving herself of food; 'bunking office' on the pretext of a headache, and "wandering along the stone parapets of Marine Drive, sitting by herself and watching the sun go down;" the dark circles under her eyes indicating sleepless nights [chapters 27-29]) are comparable to Sigmund Freud's description of the distinguishing mental features of melancholia: as reactions to a loss 'of a more ideal kind' (1914-16, pp 244-5). In his paper, *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud suggests that the same traits containing the above 'painful frame of mind' are met with in mourning. He explains, however, that "when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again." In the context of the novel, Ambilli's depressive state reaches its lowest when she learns (*MOAT*, pp 160-163) that another best friend, Fiona, was part of Shashi's bet in getting Ambilli 'to strip naked'. The chapter that follows contains a gruesome incident on the train where she comes dangerously close to losing her life in that state of shock, and yet an unknown person dies instead of her. This 'alters' something in Ambilli forever. She resigns from her current job and shortly, takes up another that demands less frequent deadlines but more involvement on her part: as a feature-writer for a quarterly magazine. Two years later, despite her aloof behaviour towards family members and a 'simmering' anger that 'strangely has no face', she accepts a marriage proposal from someone she hardly knows but intuitively, feels safe with. These actions indicate to the reader that perhaps, Ambilli's period of 'mourning' the loss of her innocence is over. The above reference to Freud's psychoanalytical theory perhaps can be thus applied here to explain that: in a sense, the 'redemptive arc' in Ambilli's case deals less strictly with redemption itself but more with her "yearning" to be free from her past.

Over the course of the novel, Ambilli's encounter with Indian history, with regards to women's sexuality through Madhu, results in a peeling away of the many layers of ignorance imposed on her and enables her to make a fresh beginning. Thus, while Ambilli simultaneously sees a welcome change in her parents' and Achchamma's attitudes as well, her reconciliation (with her past, as well as the Indian past) is in some sense also transferred to the reader, who it is hoped will find this historical information equally enlightening.

The subsections in this chapter examine how the theme of redemption in this novel is influenced by the Indian notion of *karma*, and carry an interpretation of how other characters in the novel, such as, Achchamma, Madhu and Rajeshwari Amma, come to accept their own realities, respectively.

3.1 Reconciliation in the context of the Indian narrative

Ambilli's course of recovery begins at the point in the novel when she accepts, in her letter to Shashi, what he has done to her in the past. Ambilli's act of writing the letter to Shashi is privy only to the reader, because she tears it up into pieces as soon as she completes drafting it, rather than sending it to him. For the first time in the novel, the reader, who so far has not been told why Ambilli has left her husband, or why she wanted 'to get away' for a while, is provoked to empathise, and therefore 'connect' with Ambilli.

In the letter, Ambilli has said that she does not blame Shashi for what he did to her: "You were an animal anyway." The letter ends with the words: "I hope you are a man

now. I hope you are happy. And someday, Shashi, when you start a family, I hope you

have a daughter. And I hope you worry for her." (*MOAT*, p 54-5) Despite the

understated sarcasm or hurt implied in the above statement, Ambilli gives the

impression to the reader that she wants nothing to do with him anymore. In a behaviour

that is in sync with the Indian tradition, Ambilli appears to 'abandon' Shashi to his

destiny, or *karma* (Bhaskarananda, 1998).[99]

The late folklorist, scholar and poet, A K Ramanujan, has explained how Indian

folktales and narratives with women as the protagonists, or tales about women, deal

primarily with the Indian or Hindu doctrine of karma. He defines karma as a

combination of three variables: causality (a result of previous actions); ethics (of good,

or virtuous deeds; or bad, or sinful ones); and re-birth (the idea that souls have to endure

many lifetimes to 'clear' this ethical account of self-deeds). Interestingly, in addition to

karma, Ramanujan also acknowledges the prevalence of the alternative notion of

talaividhi (fate, or destiny) in Indian narratives (1989). To illustrate, the epics of the

Ramayana and Mahabharata consist of meta-tales and frame stories where the

characters suffer on account of their previous deeds.[100] The characters in mythology,

legends, and folktales (of south India, especially) by contrast – of kings reduced to

paupers, childless couples faced with testing boons from their gods[101] – cannot evade the

---

[99] The doctrine of *Karma*, in Hinduism, can be understood as just one of the many forces acting on an individual's life. Karmic forces are segregated as follows: accumulated actions during a person's lifetime that is, *Sanchita Karma*; the karmic actions from a previous life acting on a person is *Prarabdha Karma*; and *Kriyamani Karma*, wherein if an individual commits a heinous offence, he or she will face its consequences in the same life (Bhaskarananda, 1998, pp 79-87).

[100] "...celestial Urvasi's curse makes Arjuna serve as an effeminate dancing master for one year in Virata's court. The exile itself is caused by Yudhistira's wager at the dice-game, which in turn is caused by Sakuni's vengefulness and, in some versions, by the acts of his and others' past lives." (Ramanujan, 1991/ch.1 [page not marked])

[101] The story of King Harishchandra, who only spoke the truth; the legend that Adi Shankaracharya's parents were visited by god in their dream. In the dream they were given a choice: to choose between a dull child who would live long, or a saintly boy with a short life. One of the mythological tales of Shiva and Parvati contain an argument between the couple with regards to a beggar who is a great

overwhelming 'mysterious power of a 'fixed fate', which can only be obeyed and allowed to run its course'. Taking this theory further, I believe that as the majority of Indians follow the teleological[102] school of thought, there is always a moral lesson for the reader or listener at the end of a story about the consequences of karma, or free will-versus-destiny.

From the point of view of psychoanalysis, Sudhir Kakar defines karma as "not just a doctrine of 'reincarnation', 'fatalism' or 'pre-destination'," but as a promise of hope, "even though there are apt to be many setbacks [in the form of rebirths/lifetimes] in the process" (1978, p 54). Such ideas are, according to Kakar, absorbed early in the life of an Indian's psyche. As a novelist of south-Indian origin, perhaps the above-mentioned theories of Indian narrative as well as psychoanalysis are both reflected to some extent in my novel, albeit this was not a deliberate attempt. Nevertheless, Ambilli's 'reconciliatory' process thus involves a gradual understanding of the reasons for her traumatic experience, a need to tell a story (of the Indian past), and thus, working through her sense of shame.

3.1.1 The idea that 'stories that are not told take revenge'

> Daughters, wealth, knowledge, and food must circulate, these are *danas*,
> or gifts, that, in their nature, must be given. Communities and generations
> depend on such exchanges and transfers. Stories are no different

---

devotee of Shiva. Parvati questions why Shiva does not grant him some money for his basic needs but Shiva reasons that he is 'destined' to be poor. To test Shiva's theory, Parvati lays a fortune along the path that the beggar normally takes. The beggar, pre-occupied with his misery, broods how he can walk the path with his eyes closed, and thus misses the pot of gold.

[102] The philosophy that everything is a means to the purpose. The point about the Indian teleological attitude has been mentioned in chapter 1 of this thesis: Historical context.

(Ramanujan, 1991).

Adèle Kohanyi's essay about 'mood regulation in creative writers' cites J W Pennebaker's theory (2004) that disclosing a trauma in writing may seem beneficial to a person, whereas repressing it only leads to stress-related disorders: "...once an experience is transformed into a story, it becomes simpler and more manageable and can be assimilated more readily, thus allowing the individual to move beyond the traumatic experience (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Spera et al., 1994). In addition, when events are visited and revisited time and time again in writing, the emotional response to the events becomes dulled (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999)" (Kohanyi, 2009, p 47).

Interestingly, Kohanyi appears to be echoing the thoughts of Ramanujan, indicating the universal appeal of storytelling traditions. In the Indian context of oral narratives, Ramanujan expresses the idea that when sections from the Ramayana are recited, they bring with it *phalasruti* or good results for the listeners. A woman's tale is different in that it has an existence of its own; it must be told "otherwise it can change into something else and take revenge," says the scholar (1991). In his essay, *Toward a Counter-System: Women's Tales*, Ramanujan has translated a number of interesting stories and folktales of south India that are about why stories must be told. He elaborates on the narratives motivated by karma and those by inevitable destiny, and how stories are the means by which a woman can reconcile to her reality: "This latter kind of reality, the uncontrollable part of it, cannot be rationalized, especially in a moment of crisis. It can only be accepted, or watched, laughed at or sidestepped and bypassed by human ingenuity. In these tales, this reality is not reasoned away, but faced.

Here actions, even human actions, are seen as events. They have causes, no reasons. By enduring them, and watching for a moment of change that is the apt moment for action, and then acting, usually by speaking out and telling one's own story—one comes through. That is why many of these tales end with the heroine telling the story to the "significant other" (often through a device, such as a talking doll or lamp), resolving the crisis, enduring her separation, reuniting with her husband and her kin. The tale has now become her story. ...This may be why it is crucial that stories should be told, and why there are stories about not telling stories and why *they* should be told" (Ramanujan, 1991; p 42).

In a way, Madhu's conversations with Ambilli with regards to the parts of Indian history that are 'forgotten' or 'selectively' remembered, are also tales that need to be told, because, as she explains: "Everybody suddenly seems to have forgotten where we have come from..." (chapter 24). Some of her examples include: the prominent role of independent-minded women in the Mahabharata; the rich, ancient Indian mythological stories that over the centuries have gained a solely-patriarchal flavour in the 21st-century; Indian historical personalities, some of whose stories have been suppressed post-independence; the loss of regional languages, as well as the mad, commercial race for unnatural, 'fair' skin tones (*MOAT*, p 133). Madhu's research in the novel, along with Ambilli's re-interpretation of history concerning 18th-century Mysore and Malabar through the protagonist, Paarvani, are my attempts as a novelist to bring these stories to the reader, as realities that have to be faced and reconciled with. It is hoped that Ambilli's journey from shame to acceptance in the novel, and Paarvani's story in the metafiction element, will mirror the historical journey that India herself has endured,

and continues to make. As we will see in a brief commentary in section 3.3 of this chapter, two other novels have successfully revisited different areas of Indian history with a similar intent: of disseminating historical information.

3.2 A brief interpretation of reconciliation for other characters in the novel

In the novel, Ambilli's letter to Shashi is the metaphor symbolising her need for 'release' from her feelings of shame and guilt, or regret. Everything that happens in the course of Ambilli's life after this letter, such as her trip to Mysore with Madhu; insight (through Madhu's research) about ancient India and its women; and, eventually, her HF story about Paarvani, are the means to attain a sort of salvation, or private reconciliation.

In the meantime, Ambilli's grandmother still resides in rural Kerala which is not yet fully transformed by modernity as the metropolitan Mumbai. Here, her interactions with Shwetha (the grand-daughter of her long-time friend and domestic help, Kunjumalu *edathi*), bring her into contact with a new and changing mentality with regards to social conventions almost 15-20 years after Ambilli was made to face the *manthravadi* for 'straying' away from the rules. No longer mobile and often resting on her bed, old Achchamma keeps tabs on the changing world through Shwetha, who has become her 'eyes' and 'ears', reading newspapers to her, or relaying interesting girly-gossip and information. In these relaxed circumstances, Achchamma realises that perhaps she had needlessly been too harsh on her own grand-daughter, Ambilli, after all; that Shwetha would never agree that a woman is powerless, or that the proverbial 'leaf' will get damaged regardless of whether it falls on a thorn or vice versa.

> "...the young generation I hear from Shwetha is different again. She tells
>
> me about life in the cities, not any less bold than it is here in the village,
>
> mind you. About young, unmarried boys and girls living together under a
>
> roof, and doing everything that any married couple would engage in.
>
> About the increasing number of women choosing career and education
>
> over a life partner and children. If this is not like the olden times, what
>
> is?" (*MOAT*, p 232).

It is interesting to note that while Achchamma had been sceptical and protective of her own granddaughter in the mid-1990s, she relies or completely trusts the 14-year-old Shwetha's words two decades later. Ambilli is relieved, nevertheless, that 'her Achchamma and she were talking like old friends again'. Furthermore, Achchamma asks Ambilli to forgive her, for she "was only doing what (she) knew then was right." With this act, Achchamma has also reinstated the history that she already knew and was a part of (with regards to the sexual freedom that women enjoyed in Kerala until a little over a century ago).

We return to another central character in the novel, Madhu, who wastes no time brooding over failed relationships, and ends her abusive marriage with Vinod within 18 months. She also promptly engages herself with her research assignments. Despite her knowledge that her mother would not approve of a live-in relationship, Madhu considers herself mature enough and practical to buy time while both her partner, Anand, and she decide on whether or not to get married 'officially' – an event that is still considered as a union of two families and their extended communities in India, rather

than limited to a union between two individuals. As regards the ex-devadasi in Mysore, Rajeshwari Amma, she was born in the devadasi community that in present-day India continues to face the stigma of prostitution and cannot be legally practiced. The fact that she adopts a Muslim child, and is financially supported by her earnings as a cook and caretaker, is a sign of progress that eventually, helps her claim her status as a self-made, respectable individual in society (*MOAT*, chapter 19).

The only 'bad' or consistently immoral character throughout the course of the novel is Shashi. During the writing process I wondered if this would be a potential risk in the narrative, by not letting his character change or transform into a wiser person. However, as the novel is more about Ambilli's transformation or reconciliation, and a marked change in her perspective, I thought it appropriate that Shashi, who does not feel any remorse for his pervert acts and taking advantage of Ambilli, never seeks redemption.

3.3 Redemption in other, similar novels by Indian authors

At this point it might be worth discussing the differences and similarities between my novel, which is the practice-element of this doctorate, and *Aavarana: The Veil* (2007, 2014), by the bestselling Kannada author and philosopher, S L Bhyrappa. Originally written in Kannada, the novel caused many debates and controversies within the literary circle in Karnataka on its publication. Nevertheless it achieved a record-breaking ten reprints within five months of its release, with thirty six editions in Kannada, and even three editions in Sanskrit, apart from eight, five and two editions in Marathi, Hindi and Tamil, respectively (*TNIE*, 2014). As I am not versed in the vernacular languages, the book was unnoticed by me until it was recently launched in the English language

(2014). *Aavarana*, which means the act of concealing truth, firstly, highlights the importance of unshackling oneself "from the bonds of false knowledge" (Bhyrappa, 2014 [*Preface*]). As one reads through the pages of the novel, the veil is lifted. The 'knowledge' in question here, is about the distortions in modern history school textbooks, wherein the ruins of Hampi (one of the oldest temple monuments of the Vijayanagara Empire [1343-1565 CE] in Karnataka) are attributed to sectarian violence between Hindu communities. The historical truth, that the pillaging Muslims were in fact responsible for the ruins, is suppressed, and this is what the *Aavarana* sets out to unveil. The novel reveals this history through a metafictional element (a historical fiction set in the Mughal kingdom of Aurangzeb), which is akin to the narrative technique I have used. Apart from this, *Aavarana* is a tale of a daughter's reconciliation with her estranged father, 28 years after his death. The protagonist, Razia, is originally a Hindu film-maker and social activist, who converts to Islam much against the wishes of her father. Over two decades later, when Razia is faced with a divorce from her husband and has no hold over their only radicalised son (which her father had prophesied), she hears of her father's death. In his house, she finds reams of research material with regards to the Muslim atrocities and historical distortions made by contemporary historians. She learns that her father had planned to write a book, and thus takes up the task herself. The writing process of Razia's historical fiction, based on the research material collected by her father, brings her closer to him after his death. She begins to view her life with a new perspective and is thus redeemed. Furthermore, through Razia's historical fiction, Bhyrappa has cleverly included the relevant sources and bibliography as part of the story. This, in anticipation of the furore it would create in the literary and academic fields. As the novel concludes, Razia is also reconciled with her estranged

husband who, despite being a Muslim, stands by her, supporting the cause of her book.

The second similarity between *Aavarana* and the novel presented as the practice-part of this thesis is to do with the narrative technique: *Aavarana* also deals with the creation of a HF novel within the main novel, and often uses the flashback element. While both the novels contain historical fiction, the difference lies in their content and treatment of the genre. Bhyrappa's highly-regarded *Aavarana*, for example, uses fictional characters to unravel historical and philosophical points of view which go against the prevalent historical narrative in India. My novel is different in that history is not its central narrative, even though history plays a pertinent role in it. It is rather, the personal journey of the protagonist, Ambilli, in search of release from her burden of anger and shame for having allowed, not one, but two close friends to betray her.

Another recent novel that probes into the Indian past and its influence on present-day India is Aatish Taseer's *The Way Things Were* (2014). The story traces the journey of a young academician, Skanda, as he travels to India from Geneva to fulfil his father's last wish, that his ashes be immersed in India. While *Aavarana* deals with the distortions in Indian history textbooks, *The Way Things Were* laments the loss of the Sanskrit language in India. The novel is said to explore the theme of a linguistic redemption, with Sanskrit as its 'central metaphor'. In an essay (2013) about how Taseer discovered an 'historical sense' when he was introduced to Sanskrit, he says: "In India, where history had heaped confusion upon confusion, where everything was shoddy and haphazard and unplanned, the structure of Sanskrit, with its exquisite planning, was proof that it had not always been that way. It was like a little molecule of the Indian

genius, intact, and saved in amber, for a country from which the memory of genius had

departed" (2013). According to Taseer, *The Way Things Were* (the title itself is a

translation of the Sanskrit term for history: *iti-haasa*) dramatises a cultural problem: that

despite being a democracy, India has lost her voice (Sanskrit) that can connect the India

of the past (through the centuries-old traditional rites, ancient literature) to the present

(modern, "shabby and dwarfish"). By his own admission (2014), the novel 'came out of

a feeling of euphoria' when he discovered the ancient, classical language as a private

student at Oxford. This feeling is transferred to Toby, Skanda's father, who is never able

to look at present-day India the same way again, once he has glimpsed the ancient India

through Sanskrit. Like Taseer's Toby, in relation to my own novel, Ambilli's discovery

of women's sexuality in ancient India presents her with a new perspective. Her act of re-

interpreting a part of this history as the fictional Paarvani's story, essentially works in

setting her free from the bondage of her past.

Chapter 4: Narrative

> "First, a note of caution. To slice up fiction into categories such as 'plot', 'voice', 'point of view' or 'character' is to risk presenting it in a way that neither writer nor reader normally experiences it. The suggestion might seem to be that the writing of a story or a novel is a strongly segmented or layered activity, something orderly, dry and technical. But stories, when they come, come in organic gobs, as though gouged out of the living fabric of world – character tangled with plot, plot with setting, setting with scraps of language embedded and so on" (Miller, 2011).

Most well-established and amateur authors perhaps have a distinct individual process of creating their own fictional or non-fictional narratives. The fiction-'writing process' has been variously defined in 'how-to' columns as: 'unnamed' and 'natural', with fictional characters and settings arising out of a 'deeper understanding' of human beings (Miller, 2011). However, studying or understanding these was not part of my research agenda. The practice-element of my doctorate study constituted, rather, the task of writing a fictional novel. In my role as a research student and debut novelist, therefore, the creative process entailed my responsibility to focus on the research findings derived with regards to the contrast between the status of women in ancient and pre-Victorian south india, versus present-day Indian women, and to give them a voice in the shape of various characters and settings relevant to the period. Deliberate thought was not given at this stage to the techniques of narration involved, as these appeared to fall into place

naturally. However, in this thesis-chapter or commentary about narrative, my attempt is to revisit the completed work of fiction, re-trace and analyse the creative writing process specific to my novel.

A 'narrative' can be broadly defined as, the way a certain story is told (Mullan, 2006, p 170), or the representation of an event or series of events (Abbott, 2002, p 13), albeit true or fictional. My novel, which is the subject of this creative-writing practice-based research study, appears to be complex with its disjointed events and varied narrative devices, but they all follow the protagonist, Ambilli, in her quest to be free from her past. The novel opens with a vivid flashback: of herself from seven or eight years ago, moving along with a swarming mass of people at Mumbai's Chhattrapati Shivaji Terminus railway station, and the sudden realisation that she is being groped by someone just behind her. The scene evokes a sense of helplessness through the 'rows of perspiring, swearing, stubborn heads' unable to move their hands due to the peak-hour rush; in addition, the precarious location of the steps that lead to the exit through the subway. The flashback abruptly enters another, more recent memory, when the disgust and uncomfortable recollection of this groping incident coincides with the moment Ambilli's husband, Manu, playfully sneaks up on her while she is in the kitchen of her London apartment. Ambilli is initially startled, but the awkward embarrassment soon melts into a tender, affectionate spell when she gives in to him and surrenders to a hug. At this stage, Ambilli reveals to the reader that she has 'kept him [Manu] away for no fault of his' for over six months of her new marriage. The concept of *touch* – 'how a touch never fails to arouse the intention behind it,' and, 'how the body never forgets that intention' – thus sets the tone for Ambilli's story in the novel.

4.1 A brief background to the novel

> "All creativity starts on a personal level (with interpretations, discretion,
> and intentions) and only sometimes becomes a social affair" (Runco M.,
> cited in Kaufman and Kaufman, 1995, p 291).

The idea for this novel was initially a personal thought-experiment inspired by a family legend. According to this story, in the late 1700s, a woman was found hiding in the paddy fields that belonged to a Nayar *tharavadu* in north Kerala; the owner of the fields was an old authoritarian man, but he took her in, sheltered her in an outhouse and eventually, raised another family with her. As a 21st-century descendant of the woman, my thought-experiment was regarding the mystery surrounding her origin. I wondered if the society that prevailed in 18th-century Kerala would be as socially restrictive as contemporary Indian society – urban, but with roots in traditional India. The result of this exercise was a concept for a story that I would have liked to read but I had not come across before: about two women protagonists set in different places in India, 300 years apart. Each of the women would face a similar situation of betrayal in their individual lives; how they reconciled to the circumstances would reflect the changing attitudes of the society around them. The idea necessitated some amount of historical reading and research, the results of which in turn would need reinterpretation in a form that would essentially be non-academic in its approach.

In his essay, 'Reporting Qualitative Research as Practice' (1997), Donald E

Polkinghorne has encouraged research students to experiment using a narrative format to report their studies. He explains: "In the conventional [Qualitative Research] format, which is mandatory for publication in most research journals, researchers are required to assume the voice of a logician or debater. By changing their voice to storyteller, researchers will also change the way in which the voices of their 'subjects' or participants can be heard. As logicians and debaters, researchers codify, objectify, and fragment what their 'subjects' have to say into factors and themes. As storytellers, 'subjects' appear as actors in a research narrative. They are given their own speaking roles in the drama and interact with the researcher protagonist as contributors to the story's denouement" (1997, p 3).

Returning to the context of my project, both the primary and secondary investigation examined Indian attitudes towards women in ancient and pre-Victorian south India, alongside those in contemporary Indian society. Findings from the process revealed the former to be more liberal and open with regards to women's sexuality. It thus became essential that, a 'narrative account' of this research in which the central subject is the change in Indian attitudes in Kerala over 300 years, was represented by one protagonist in the 21st-century and another in the early 18th-century. Effectively, the creation of other supporting characters facilitated the expression of important background data, such as historical events, geographical and socio-cultural information relevant to the period. The narrative discourse constituted the order or arrangement of these into pertinent 'factors and themes' that were reconstructed and unified into a story, using a beginning, middle and end, through explanatory 'emplotment' (White, 1973, pp 5-11).[103]

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[103] *"Emplotment* is a way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind" (White, 1973, p 7).

4.2 Narrative in the context of the novel

The chapters in the novel, written in instalments over four years, were challenged by the simultaneous demands over my time as novelist and researcher, a new mother, and in addition, frequent displacement between UK and India. During this time nevertheless, the idea that the narrative belongs to Ambilli's perspective, was not lost. It follows Ambilli in her quest to Mumbai, Mysore and Kerala in the present-day; it also accompanies her as she revisits her past, and as she records her thoughts. Thus, the majority of chapters in the novel begin with a framing narrative, of a diary- or journal-entry by Ambilli. These are intentionally free-floating and not numbered, symbolising the fleeting nature of unrelated thoughts in her restless mind. As Ambilli shapes the fictional Paarvani's story in the latter half of the novel, her need for 'outpouring' her own feelings is gradually satiated. Some of these journal-entries are her memories, or folk-parables narrated in the form of first-person, stream-of-consciousness accounts and they connect her thoughts to the event that is narrated in the subsequent chapter by 'leaps of association' (Mullan, 2006, p 247). For example, Ambilli remembers the interaction between her twelve-year-old self and younger cousin, Biju, who 'educates' her about the business of 'people who cut tails of birds so they cannot fly, and then put them in shiny little cages'. In the next paragraph, the context jumps to a 30-year-old Ambilli likening her position to that of a tail-cut parrot, as someone whose wings were clipped before she learnt to fly. The flashback-chapters that follow (chapters 6 and 7) are dated to her time as a college-student in 1992, and paint a picture of a changing youth and society: young boys with high testosterone-levels sneak copies of porn magazines into the classroom; the girls are confused and scared of confronting their emerging sexuality; and the teachers find themselves to be helpless spectators, inexperienced as to how to handle

this new generation. The chapters generally use the inner-limited point of view. This

gives the readers access to the events in Ambilli's life and simultaneously reveals her

psychological state of mind in response to them.

The narrative uses the characters of Unni and Indu, Ambilli's father and mother, to

highlight the social isolation faced by first-generation Kerala migrants in Bombay as

they hold on to their roots, 'through the Malayalee community at an Ayyappa temple in

the suburbs'. Unni and Indu are also representative of the vast, often-stereotypical, gap

observed between the attitude of Keralites (simple, practical) born in their native land

and those (smug, sceptical) who grow up in metropolitan cities. In the novel, while the

rural-Kerala-born Unni is desperate that his wife should respect his family's age-old

native traditions, the city-bred Indu prefers Bombay's 'mini-Kerala, minus its dark

mysteries', of *manthravadis* (exorcists) and *velichhapaads* (oracles), the easily-angered

bhagavathy (goddess), and serpents who first 'had to be appeased if a house and its

occupants were to remain happy and healthy'. However, despite Indu's differences with

Unni and his mother, the ubiquitous nature of unconditional love between grandparents

and grandchildren is evoked through Achchamma and Ambilli. This delicate and

affectionate relationship is nurtured in Ambilli's childhood by Achchamma's narration of

oral folk tales, myths, stories, and evening prayers with her. When Ambilli returns to

Bombay after visiting her grandmother, she repeats the same stories to 'the

Maharashtrian, Gujarati, Telugu and Punjabi children of her age' residing in her

apartment-block. Enraptured by Ambilli's description of the *Odiyan* - 'evil magicians of

Kerala, who applied potions on themselves to turn into animals', the children listen to

her with open mouths, 'seated cross-legged and clutching each other's arms and sleeves

and lumpy cushions'. (*MOAT*, p 20) Later, when Ambilli writes her 18th-century-HF

story, her nostalgic love for Achchamma is reflected in *Veliya Ammayi*'s warm and yet,

watchful, treatment of the 'refugee' outsider, Paarvani.

As a second-generation Kerala-migrant myself, much of the above context mirrors my

growing-up experiences in Bombay, and the distinct feeling of being a city-bred

'outsider' to my Kerala cousins even as a child. Although these are heavily fictionalised

in the novel, the essence of the native Malayalee traditions, the occult practices, and the

pull of the timeless, vernacular children's stories narrated by my grandmother and

father, remain true to their nature.

4.2.1 Structure, and narrative devices in the novel

i) Episodic structure: The dominant emotion in Ambilli's narrative seems to be 'regret',

at least up to the point when she starts writing her HF story. Her personal

contemplations in her journal thus frame the event or episode in the immediate chapter

following her thought process, which, in turn, is based on one of her many memories

(tail-cut birds, to cite an example; pp 26-27), or an anecdotal-folktale (*The bald king

and the green mangoes*; p 134). Given the nature of Ambilli's journal entries coming

from the emotional upsets in her past, it would be easy for the narrative to slip into a

victim-oriented, sad or monotonous, melodramatic story. This challenge is met by the

presence of other major and minor supporting characters, such as Manu, Madhu, and

Rajeshwari Amma, the teaching staff in the flashback episodes from Ambilli's college-

and later, office-environments. A pattern thus repeats itself through the first section of

the novel: of frame-narratives leading to varied chapters connecting to the above-

mentioned cast. The function of these diversions, apart from lending a distance to Ambilli's heavy narrative of sexual abuse, is to present an insight into other lighter themes: of history, of friendship. Furthermore, in a sense they also represent an 'unlearning' of past inhibitions (through new knowledge), and the subtle awakening process of an individual's will to survive.

ii) Use of an Interval chapter: In the earlier section about the novel's historical context, we have already come across the aspect of a selective 'lapse' in public memory with regards to certain historical facts gathered as my study progressed (chapter 1 of this thesis, pp 121-5). During this primary and secondary research and, at times, the simultaneous writing process of the novel, there came a point when, as a novelist, it was necessary to stop and absorb this newly discovered historical information. I also felt that, in order to effectively dispense this data (concerning traditional sexual practices in Kerala, and the change from matriarchal to patriarchal system, for example) in a manner that would serve the purpose of pushing Ambilli's narrative forward, another new, indomitable 'voice' was necessary.

Considering the historical and geographical positioning of the fictional character of Achchamma, I calculated that Ambilli's grandmother would probably be exposed to the mores of her society and culture going back at least fifty years before in the past, and maybe less than a hundred years after her birth (i e, 1915). Achchamma was thus considered the ideal candidate to break Ambilli's flow of episodes by providing an 'interval' in this novel, in the tradition seen commonly not in books, but in Bollywood films. To illustrate this in brief: a three-hour Bollywood movie typically comprises, like

most stories, a beginning, middle, and end. However, the plot reaches a sharp twist or cliff-hanger towards the end of the first 90 minutes (just before the interval, or snack-break) by way of introducing a new sub-plot, or a different, promising actor. In most cases, during this 15-minute break, the viewer trusts that the new element will take the story in a different direction and towards its denouement in the second half of the movie. As a person of Indian origin, I have been influenced as much by the narrative techniques used in Indian films as by the traditional oral stories of mythology and folklore. Although I had not come across the idea of a conscious/deliberate 'interval' being used in other novels, in the context of my novel, I intuitively felt that this will work as a narrative device. The 15-minute-break, or transitional element, is thus, Achchamma not as a character, but as the historical reality she personifies: how Kerala was formed; some of the Namboothiri and Nair customs; and, to an extent, the brief description of the difference in clothing worn by the upper and lower castes (derived from old family photographs, and secondary reading material) through her voice in the novel.

Achchamma's chapter appears when much has already been said about the fictional Ambilli's conflicts, and the possibility that her friend, Madhu, can in some way, take her beyond them. By adopting the second-person point of view, Achchamma speaks directly to the reader in a stream-of-consciousness narrative; thoughts and instructions are placed together to resemble the disjointed speech patterns of the manner by which some old women may communicate:

> *Ahh... now, before I speak any more, did I forget to say who I am again? My name is Soudamini. You know Ambilli...yes? She is my grand-daughter. A very sweet girl.*

Very proud. Oru paavum kutty [a naive child]. *Here, why don't you take that chair*

and sit close to me. I cannot see very well these days; the light behind you hurts my

eyes.... How long is it that someone has sat by a wheezing old woman like this...let

alone listen to her? I know...I must smell. I am sorry. It is the smell of my rotting

body, child, what can I do? No amount of elekkya helps. Here, you have one...I

always carry some in my hand. Just pop it into your mouth. Bite it now. See?

Cardamom is good for everyone. Or, wait. I will ask Kunjumalu edathi to get you a

cup of ginger tea. Till then just let me take a deep breath and talk to my heart's

content (*MOAT,* p 74).

The history-interlude also fulfils another purpose in the novel through Achchamma: that

is, it draws readers' attention away from Ambilli's contemporary problems, in order to

involve them in the forthcoming historical timeline of the novel (18th- and 19th-century

Kerala). The descriptions of the dark store-room or *pathayam* of Achchamma's house

are inspired by childhood memories[104] in my paternal grandmother's ancestral home in

Kerala, and her friendly interactions with the female-domestic help, Kunjumalu *edathi*

(of the same name in the novel). Towards the final chapters, the interesting convention

of connecting a person's name to his or her job or place of birth is also typical of

Keralites, as observed during the few visits to my father's hometown. Auto-Rajan, the

'faithful family rickshaw-driver' (p 226), for example, or Bhaskaran-*Manthravadi*, the

exorcist and astrologer named Bhaskaran (pp 17-18, 24). Incidentally, it was noticed

that one other prolific Malayalam- and English-language writer from Kerala, Anita

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[104] As a child, entry to the *pathayam* or store-room was generally barred (owing to the lack of ventilation and probability of rats and insects behind the gunny bags stocked with rice, tamarind, mangoes and coconuts that were cultivated at various seasonal cycles of the year); this often would lead to nervous, secret explorations by my cousins and myself, armed with torches that soon invariably ran out of battery, and a wild imagination.

Nair[105], is also known for her use of nicknames for characters in her fictional works (such as 'One-screw-loose Bhasi', 'Powerhouse Ramakrishnan', 'Barber Nanu', etc [*The Better Man*; Nair; 2000]).

iii) Use of the painting as a narrative-connecting device: In both the novel and HF element a painting is used as a kind of 'unreliable' narrative device (Szeman, 2001, p 45) that connects the past and the present, and yet this connection is not revealed to the reader until the novel concludes. To illustrate this: in part one of the novel, the 21st-century-teenager Ambilli notices, "from the corner of her eye, ...a firefly light up a painting she had never seen before. It was of a woman with beautiful eyes that flickered at her and died" (p 24). This vague, fleeting reference to a painting repeats itself in the fictional Achchamma's stream-of-consciousness nostalgia-narrative (pp 77-78) about her childhood (probably in the mid-1920s), when she and her companion Kunjumalu *edathi* first discover a portrait set in a canvas frame in the storeroom, and give it a name for the reader: Paarvanendu. Ambilli is unaware of this identity of the portrait, although in writing her HF story over a decade later, she uses a shorter version of the same name (Paarvanendu), Paarvani, for her protagonist. While on the run from Jamaal's (or Tipu Sultan's) Muslim army, Paarvani finds herself in the forests of Malabar and is saved from exhaustion by Thomas, an English artist. In her HF, the narrator/writer-Ambilli establishes a connection between the escaping Paarvani, the encounter with Thomas, and the Namboothiri who eventually sends Nayar warriors to rescue her from her hiding place. The evidence for this falls into place in the concluding chapter of the HF, when the Namboothiri, now Paarvani's husband, reveals to her that it was actually Thomas

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105 Incidentally, the Kerala-based writer Anita Nair happens to be my distant cousin, although we haven't yet interacted personally or professionally.

who had led him to her, and shows her Thomas' painting (her portrait) as proof (p 241-2). Outside of the HF in the novel, the protagonist-Ambilli discovers a bag of canvas scroll-paintings (with the help of Kunjumalu *edathi*'s grand-daughter, Shwetha) that she had barely glimpsed as a teenager:

> One of them was a portrait of a woman with the most arresting dark eyes, hair that flowed in curls around her shoulders. Despite the worn out paints and sketch lines that had faded around the borders, the face had sharp features. Ambilli vaguely remembered having seen it sometime in her childhood. Achchamma only smiled in response. "This is my great-great-great-grandmother. There were no cameras then, so I guess some artist had her portrait painted. She was a beautiful woman, and a popular dancer too" (p 245).

It can be said, for the purpose of this thesis, that Ambilli's protagonist, Paarvani, is in fact a product of her own collective unconscious. By not openly stating it in the novel, the reader is free to imagine the connection between the three paintings: firstly, if they are indeed of the same woman, Paarvani; and secondly, whether Ambilli has, unknown to herself up until that point (discovery of the painting), been writing about her own ancestor. This aspect of the story inserts a touch of mystery and surprise in the novel, and is intentionally left unresolved. The idea of the 'collective unconscious'[106] was inspired by a personal experience with the writing process, wherein I had 'invented' or

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[106] The term 'collective unconscious' is most famously used by Carl Jung, although I do not think his formulation of it is entirely appropriate in the context of my writing. It does however carry some resonances in relation to collective memory with regards to history and culture, and how this is passed on through the Indian oral tradition of storytelling.

imagined a couple of historical settings in the HF such as, the Kaveri banks, or river

ghat, where Paarvani first spies on Rati Kumari as a 10-year-old, and the temple ruins

where Paarvani hides for the night. Upon physically visiting parts of Mysore and Kerala

(for the first time) in order to trace the geographical route as part of the research field

trip, I discovered them to be identical to their fictional descriptions in the HF. The

element of surprise that I experienced at this point, was transferred to my protagonist,

Ambilli, with regards to *her* protagonist, Paarvani.

4.3 Influence of the Indian oral narrative tradition

> "Indian novels, for the most part, except those written in imitation of 19th
>
> century Victorian novels avoid the linear flow of events: they appear to
>
> favour a cyclical time concept: there is apparently no neat and clear-cut
>
> beginning or end" (Paniker, cited in Rajendran, 2010, p 4,5).

In the previous chapter, we have already seen the healing potential of stories and

storytelling, in both the non-Indian (Kohanyi, 2009) and Indian-contexts (Ramanujan,

1991). This sub-section briefly comments on a few more aspects of Indian narratology

and its influence in my novel.

K Ayyappa Paniker, in his essay, 'India narrates itself' (2010) differentiates the Indian

word for narrative, *purana* (old, traditional) versus the British term novel (new; Hindi

naval, or Sanskrit *navina*). According to Paniker, modern prose fiction in Indian

languages is close to the traditional approach to fictional narration and therefore an

'inherited' form, as a 'continuation of the narratology found in the Purans, Itihasas and

the Jatakas' (Rajendran, 2010, p 9). The majority of Indian novels are thus retellings of

old stories in a new way. He cites some prominent English-language examples among

many other Malayalam- and Kannada-language novels: *The Great Indian Novel*, by

Shashi Tharoor (1989): a parody of the Mahabharata story with contemporary

characters from the Indian political scenario; and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

(1981), a 'very Indian tale' that uses the oral narrative pattern. By 'resorting to archetypal

narration', Paniker suggests, Indian writers 'circumvent the use of stereotypes'.

In my novel, as one of the examples of the blending of old and new approaches, we see

the protagonist Ambilli quote a few lines from the 2nd-century BC Kama Sutra in her

journal as she contemplates its meaning in the context of the current day:

> "*...(the Kama Sutra) lays down a traditional principle: that a girl,*
>
> *whatever her social standing, must know how to seduce a boy, and learn*
>
> *the erotic arts. 'If a girl has studied erotic science,' the book reads, 'she*
>
> *will know how to behave in her married life as well as in her youth, and*
>
> *will not fall into the snare of ignorance.' I put the book down. No wonder*
>
> *courtesans were respected in early Indian society. I think about morality*
>
> *during the time. Where would they have drawn the line? I pick up the*
>
> *book again, and open a random page. It answers my question with*
>
> *another: 'What is the benefit of practicing a virtuous life if the future is*
>
> *uncertain?*" (p 123).

There are a few more illustrations in this context. Achchamma's 'interval' chapter that

we saw in the previous subsection, for instance, explains to the contemporary reader the

sexual customs between the communities of the Namboothiri brahmins and the Nayar

warriors prevalent at least until the late 17th- or early 18th-century. Another example is

the novel's metafictional HF element about the devadasi's daughter Paarvani, which

reinterprets the ancient social standing and profile of the traditional temple dancers that

is recorded from the 6th-century onwards in various parts of India. By letting the

fictional Paarvani train as a courtesan with her friend Rati Kumari, the reader gets a

brief glimpse into the changing role of the lives of entertainers and performers in the

Hindu courts of the Royal Wodeyars and later, of the Muslim ruler Tipu Sultan.

Additionally, the exchange of conversation between the 21st-century Madhu and

Ambilli about ancient attitudes to female sexuality – with regards to devadasis and the

Kama Sutra – is in a sense, a retelling of Indian history. This is another illustration of

how the novel has been influenced by the Indian oral narrative tradition.

Spatial narrative mode: Unlike the Western narrative, where the evolution of the plot

is based on time, the Indian narrative is rooted in space, and is contextual. The needs of

the novel, as an example, are defined by events or episodes in the character's life, and is

not chronological. (Ramanujan, 2004; Rajendran, 2010) "No Indian text comes without

a context," explains A K Ramanujan: "The Ramayana and Mahabharata open with

episodes that tell you why and under what circumstances they were composed. Every

such story is encased in a metastory. And within the text, one text is the context for

another within it; not only does the outer frame-story motivate the inner sub-story; the

inner story illuminates the outer as well..." (Ramanujan, 1989, p 48).

Furthermore, the structure of the narrative is not linear with a definite beginning or end,

but cyclical (patterns get repeated at intervals like the seasons); or 'labyrinthine', where the end of one sequence is the beginning of another, and there is no definite closure (Paniker, 2010, p 5-6). This cyclical paradigm is also one of the prominent features of Hinduism where the outlook is that whatever happens in life is considered to be pre-destined (*karma*) and therefore, nothing is unique or a consequence of free will. It is also believed that the four Hindu *yugas* (eras) or cosmic life spans of *Krita, Dvapara, Treta and Kaliyuga*,[107] represent a single wheel of childhood, youth, maturity and old age, which rotates, again and again.[108] The theory of a cyclical vis-a-vis linear paradigm (Pattanaik, 2003, pp 34-9) can be applied to the unravelling of events in the novel as well. Here are a few examples: Ambilli, the central protagonist, faces a betrayal from her friends, Shashi and Fiona. In Ambilli's work of fiction, which is set almost three centuries earlier, Paarvani goes through the same intensity of betrayal: her intimacy with Jamaal comes at the cost of the life of her best friend Rati; of her mother (Pankaja Amma) and Ajji, among many others of her village; and her own identity when she moves away from Mysore. In another context, the trader's daughter, Pankaja Amma's escape from the *natakashala* and eventual submission into a travelling devadasi troupe foreshadows the act of her own daughter's (Paarvani) escape from the courts of Mysore

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[107] "In the Golden Age (Krita yuga) when the world was in its prime, everything was perfectly regulated, people were less involved in the process of becoming, lived longer and in harmony with natural law. We now live in the fourth and final age of the cycle (Kali yuga) in which everything is approaching its nadir. The wars, heresies, decadence, materialism, moral laxity, and insubordination that characterise the present era are all looked upon as an inevitable consequence of the passage of time" (Entwistle, 1985, p 6).

[108] This can be demonstrated with the help of a popular parable, from a folklore based on the Ramayana: "At the appointed hour, it was time for Rama to die. But Yama, the god of death, could not enter his city, as Hanuman, the mighty monkey, guarded it. To distract Hanuman and let nature take its course, Rama dropped his ring into a crack on the floor and asked Hanuman to fetch the ring. The crack led Hanuman to a subterranean realm where he found countless copies of Rama's ring. The guardian of the subterranean realm explained, "Whenever a ring falls here, a monkey follows it and we know it is time for Rama to die. Such rings have fallen from above for as long as I can remember, and will continue to do so in the future. As long as the wheel of existence rotates, old worlds die and new ones are reborn." Not only does the cycle of life rotate endlessly, but also each rotation is countless copies of the previous one" (Pattanaik, 2003, pp 38-9).

years later, and her surrender to a community (Namboothiri) which is drastically different to that in which she grew up.

Back in the twenty-first century, Indu as a young bride, endures the exorcism-ritual by the *manthravadi* or black magician Bhaskaran Nair. However, when her daughter Ambilli is subjected to the same ritual on account of her rebellious spirit, she (Ambilli) flings the end-product (an amulet) imposed on her out of the moving train into the river below.

The point of these parallel narratives between mothers and daughters (Pankaja Amma and Paarvani, and Indu and Ambilli) belonging to different periods is to show the similarities in the fates they endure and the discrepancies in their reactions. When 12-year old Paarvani, for example, comes of age (*MOAT*, pp 113-115) and is asked what she wants as a gift, she naively tells her mother, Pankaja Amma: "I want the moon." True to her deepest wish, she soon befriends a courtesan's daughter of her age and trains to be one herself, growing up to perform at the royal courts. When she escapes from Mysore, she eventually reaches a refugee home for Nair women and in the end, is married to a Namboothiri who belongs to the highest-regarded brahmin community in Kerala. The reader at this stage recognises that the artist Thomas who had helped Paarvani on her journey was carrying a portrait of the same Namboothiri brahmin. On their wedding night, it is Paarvani's portrait (drawn by Thomas) that her husband has in his possession as well. The epiphany that Paarvani has at this juncture (pp 236-7) results in a narrative that alternates between her childhood memory (italicised) and her present, and demonstrates to the reader the price that she has had to pay in the process of

fulfilling her destiny:

> Paarvani closed her eyes and surrendered to the cool waters rushing down her body from the top of her head. She heard laughter, child-like and far-away, like a memory from many years ago. *Rati Kumari.... A skinny girl, refusing to step out of a palanquin, coaxed by the dozen maids and eunuchs come to pamper her.* She [Paarvani] was dried and dressed in a silk, gold-bordered ivory mundu that the Namboothiri had sent for her as part of the pre-*sambandam* procedure. *She* [Rati Kumari] *rests on a mat, bathed, dried and hungry. The attendants spread out her long hair on an overturned basket behind her head, the incense and coal underneath mingling with her long black tresses.* The usually stoic *Veliya Ammayi ...* touched her forehead with a dot of sandalwood paste and blessed her.
>
> "May you always be protected from the evil eye," said *Veliya Ammayi* at last, suddenly bringing Paarvani back from her ten-year-old self when she'd hid behind the mango tree, watching a courtesan's daughter being pampered and bathed. She had wished for her fate then. Now Paarvani had been granted that wish, and how.

Font variations in the different narratives: As a novelist, I initially found it easier to invent Ambilli's personal, short journal entries and anecdotes, than to think in terms of a larger structure or plot idea. The context of the diary-entries then led to a thought process that created the chapters in the novel. However, halfway into the novel it was felt necessary to differentiate between these different narratives: of flashbacks, journal entries, unlimited point-of-view narratives, as well as chapters and flashbacks in the HF section. While this challenge has currently been met by using italics for Ambilli's

journal entries and not numbering them, it appeared that the novel's reader-friendly context makes redundant the need for any further explanatory framing. The fact that, in the recent past, modern readers have accepted other, contemporary novels with a similar treatment also supports this theory. Examples of such novels include Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1993), which cleverly juxtaposes the two contexts of mythology (more specifically, with the story and the characters of the Mahabharata) and Indian political history (of the 1950s) almost constantly throughout the narrative. Anita Nair's *Mistress* (2005) won international acclaim for its narrative structure, which used the nine *rasas* or emotions of the renowned art form of Kerala: Kathakali. While Nair's novel itself is a mix of mythology, history and dance research in a story about adultery and the life of a Kathakali performer, Koman, the reader is in the end additionally rewarded with information about the oriental dance form. S L Bhyrappa's *Aavarana: The Veil* (tr., 2014) – briefly discussed in the previous chapter – is another novel which is frequently interspersed with a historical-metafictional context. As mentioned earlier in the introduction, an emerging generation of writers are exploring post-postcolonial themes of ancient Indian mythology and history while simultaneously being available to connect with (their readers) via blogs and social media. It thus appears natural that contemporary readers also are unfazed by the mix of the past and the present (ancient and modern) or even experimental narrative structures in a novel, as long as they are being given a good story.

Conclusion

The initial journey of this research study began with the idea for a novel that would reflect on a woman's journey as she tries to come to terms with her experience of sexual abuse. The impetus for my story was the imaginary premise of two different women protagonists 300 years apart and their reaction to a similar situation – a betrayal - in their individual lives in the 18th- and 21st-century. The novel explores the different ways that they find to make their peace with it. My research around one of the characters, however, began to reveal a dichotomy in Indian attitudes to sexuality between the early- and contemporary periods in the story. History thus naturally formed a crucial part of both my project and my research, the purpose of which was to explore the contrasts as well as the connections between the status of women in the traditional Indian past and modern Indian society. The task of working my way through Indian history, a subject that I always struggled with at school as a child, had initially seemed daunting. Nevertheless, this fear gave way to intense curiosity when I narrowed the territorial area of history down to two states in the south of India. Firstly, Kerala: familiar because of the few but vivid memories and stories associated with my paternal grandmother who belonged there; and secondly Karnataka: more specifically, the city of Mysore.

In terms of geography, Karnataka and Kerala are divided by only a forest along the Western ghats (mountain range), but they are also deeply connected by their historical pasts. These places, along with the multicultural city of Mumbai where I grew up, were to form the settings for the novel, the *practice*-part of my research. Character sketches

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were drawn up for two fictional women protagonists, one of them representing 21st-century Mumbai, the other, an 18th-century dancer in Mysore. Following my research based on the above criteria, in the creation of these two protagonists and the settings in my novel I narrativised my hypothesis that Indians in pre-Victorian and ancient south India enjoyed an open attitude with regards to sexuality. And that, by contrast, urban modern India is shaped by male power and interests and imposes social and moral restrictions on its women.

The discussion during the viva based on the original thesis (September 2016) and subsequent feedback from the examiners raised some concerns about an idealisation of the historical past and whether mine was a subjective rather than objective reading of early Indian history. Upon revisiting my primary and secondary research sources, I can come to see that my core hypothesis was not made explicit in the previous thesis: while a certain language of sexuality (one that perceived sexuality as any other basic human need) *was* transmitted orally from generation to generation, there was in place at the same time the *regulation* of women's sexual practices and activities by the community, caste and class that they were born into, and by their choice of profession. The freer language of sexuality, conveyed via traditional education and oral narratives that formed cultural reference points for the Indians, was lost during the British colonial period with the spread of Western education through the English language. Additionally, the new education entrenched patriarchal domination more firmly in the society. This contrast was especially visible in the devadasi community, and in Kerala where, *post-*colonialism, the Nayar matriarchal community turned patriarchal.

The viva feedback also maintained that the original thesis repeatedly claimed that colonial incursions of the 18th- and 19th-century were the primary cause of present-day sexual restraint and decorum in Indian women. The examiners' impressions are understandable, given that the thesis analyses the use of history in a work of historical fiction, part of which is set in 18th- and 19th-century India that was then under the British colonial rule. The original thesis and the post-viva research thus point to the *effects* of the British colonial laws and Acts passed[109] during that period. The novel's HF section also points to changes in the socio-cultural fabric of Karnataka and south-India due to Tipu Sultan's incursions in Malabar. Overall though, these are the threads running through the novel and not its central theme, which is about Ambilli's post-abuse journey. In the revised thesis, I argue that, although colonial incursions were not the primary cause of the sexual prohibitions that govern the behaviour of contemporary Indian women, my post-viva research confirms that they played a significant role in further effacing women's sexual freedom such as it was in India, particularly in Kerala.

My original research pertained to the 17th- and 18th-centuries and remained true to the *practice*-part of my study (aptly titled *Memoirs of a Taboo*) which portrayed the sexuality of fictional characters such as Pankaja Amma and Paarvani from the devadasi sect in India, the courtesan Rati Kumari, as well as an actual (non-fictional) excerpt from 17th-century courtesan Muddupalani's poetry. In addition, Malabar's matriarchal customs have been revealed in the post-viva additional conversations between Shakuntala *chechi* and Paarvani, and patriarchal Namboothiri systems through

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[109] In the context of my study, these mainly include Western education in the English language in 1835, the Malabar Marriage Act in Kerala in 1896, the Kerala Matriliny Act in 1923 and 1933 and, the anti-nautch movement in 1893 leading to the Devadasi Abolition Bill in 1947 - by British abolitionists *as well as* Indian (Hindu) reformers.

Narayanan Namboodiri in the novel. My argument is supported by ancient myths and traditional oral stories from folk literature, and historical evidence. The primary and secondary research focused on the south of India, and explored the reasons for the effacement of female sexuality and waning status of women there over the past three centuries. I hope that the revised thesis makes it clear that I am not extrapolating from this that all women in pre-colonial India lived lives of unfettered, unregulated sexual freedom.

Another suggestion made by the examiners in their feedback was to consider the contemporary political implications of the novel. As a creative writer, my emphasis has been more on the effects of external situations on my imagined 18th- and 21st-century protagonists and characters. In the HF, for example, political debates (that continue still today) surrounding Tipu Sultan's reign, were de-emphasised and the actual, albeit lesser-known, historical events based on findings from my visit to Mysore and Kerala in 2010 were used. In the novel's main story, my observations about India being in a heightened state of flux is portrayed through Madhu's characterisation as a self-respecting woman who lives independently on her terms, and questions the norms experienced by her mother's generation. As a single woman and divorcee, Madhu is not afraid to explore further relationships although she *also* has faced sexual abuse in her past. By contrast, it is precisely Ambilli's resistance to the new India through both background and sexual abuse that is part of the subject-matter of the novel. Having recently re-examined my work with regards to both early and contemporary periods, I would like to clarify that, while there are indeed political undertones among certain scenes or settings in the novel, these are but fleeting backgrounds and may appear political when seen through

the prisms of colonialism or feminism. The novel is based on rigorous historical research and sound sources, as I hope the revised thesis and notes indicate, but of course this has subsequently been shaped to fit the imperatives of fiction.

a) The novel and its critical analysis

In the novel, 21st-century Ambilli is taught to be wary and afraid of men all her life – a training that has unconsciously subjugated her and instilled in her a fear of patriarchal authority. When she meets Shashi, the consequences are exactly those of which her family had warned her: a betrayal of the friendship that takes the form of sexual abuse. Ambilli's (meta)fictional protagonist, Paarvani, is a devadasi's daughter and a courtesan in the royal courts of Mysore in the early 18th-century. Despite her years of training in the art of seduction, Paarvani faces a betrayal of trust that costs her closest friend, Rati, her life, and a brutal massacre involving the death of 700 innocent members of the Iyengar community by Tipu Sultan. Here, original historical material resulted from a research trip to Mysore and Kerala. As Ambilli thus shapes Paarvani's character, supported by her friend Madhu's historical research, her growing understanding of the status of Indian women in ancient and pre-Victorian India allows her to be reconciled with her own troubled past.

Bringing history to life

In her introduction to *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*, Margaret Atwood dedicates over a page-and-a-half to the reasons a writer writes. Foremost among these are

'To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is forgotten. To excavate the

past *because* it has been forgotten" (Atwood, 2002; p xx [20]). In the context of this

creative-writing practice-based study, the bulk of my 'practice' element – the novel –

came from research that questioned the contrast with regards to attitudes to female

sexuality between the 17th- and 21st-century-south India. However, in order to portray

the findings from this study in a manner that would bring them alive, I added human

agency to selective historical contexts via fictional characters. These characters were

further assigned imaginary, though identifiable, human experiences of friendship, loss,

loyalty, betrayal, personal violation through sexual abuse and the need for redemption.

All of these attributes were, it is hoped, made more credible through the use of

dialogue, literary devices of framing narratives, flashbacks and journal entries,

interspersed at strategic plot points with real historical events such as the massacre of

the Mandyam Iyengars in 1783, the looting and destruction of Hindu temples, and the

southward flight of several communities from north Kerala/Malabar from Tipu Sultan.

During the research process, I was also aware of political conversations that pitched

Tipu Sultan as a hero, while others maintained him to be a villain. By choosing to use

the historical events as a background to dramatize the lives of Jamaal, Rati and Paarvani

in Mysore, my writing neither lends to nor takes anything away from these debates. In

Malabar, the drama is added around everyday Nayar rituals and Namboothiri customs

such as the *smarthavicharam*. As the matron or caretaker of the fictional refugee house

for women in Malabar, for example, the character *Veliya Ammayi* (elder mother) is

responsible not only for the lives of all the Nayar women who have taken shelter under

her, but also for upholding their endurance and faith by strictly adhering to the

traditional morning and evening prayer rituals. On the other hand, when the otherwise

orthodox and higher-caste brahmin, Narayanan Namboodiri, decides to emigrate to the

south due to Tipu's growing atrocities on the people of his community, he finds it in him to accept a dancer of an unknown caste (Paarvani) as his bride and takes her along with him. The characters' response to change in the face of the enemy's brutalities, despite their socio-cultural attributes, are what I believe, makes this fiction intriguing for a reader.

Postcolonialism and Feminism

The original thesis identified some classic postcolonial characteristic and tropes deployed by prominent Indian English-language novelists from the late 20th- to early 21st-century, particularly their representation of the female characters (female protagonists generally face sad lives of sexual oppression or victimisation). Based on the viva feedback, an additional section in this resubmission now examines in detail the theories behind the concepts of colonialism and postcolonialism. The study of colonial representation in writings and (often, stereotypical) imaginings about India, followed by the postcolonial, made for fascinating reading and furthered my interests in how they contrast with writing that has emerged *by* Indians and from *within* India. Most definitions of postcolonialism, it transpires, have been written by Western scholars. Although Indian scholars, living in an ex-colony, have been trained in these (Western) concepts and have reproduced them, they have also critiqued and diverged from them.

My readings into this potentially vast subject raised questions concerning the usefulness of the term postcolonial and how it has been deployed. While I do not wish to get too entangled with the attribution of labels, in my revised thesis, for example, I ask whether a work by an Indian writing in English can still be called postcolonial if, for example, it

does not share the common themes and features attributed to dominant Western definitions of 'postcolonial' merely on account of having been published in a *post-colonial* age, or whether it is the inclusion of those common themes that mark a work as postcolonial. Secondly, and by extension, I ponder if a work of Indian writer in the Indian vernacular language can be deemed *postcolonial* purely through its avoidance of the use of the English language – itself a product of colonialism. This interrogation has led to the addition of a new scene in one of the chapters in the practice-part of the study. In this revised segment, Ambilli's journal reflects on one of the stories from the *Upanishads* on 'Bondage', used here as a metaphor to represent the deep imprint of colonialism and postcolonialism on the mindsets of colonised Indians that has outlasted independence by at least two generations. A part of the subsequent chapter carries what is intended to be a poignant conversation between Madhu and Madhav Tripathi, a retired Hindi professor-cum-entrepreneur[110] whose many roles include that of a translator of Indian language works. The creation of this narrative was also part-inspired by the anger in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* ([2006], 2014) about internal conflicts and civil war in a postcolonial Nigeria, expressed at different times by the various characters of Odenigbo, Kainene, Olanna, Ugwu, and Richard.

Memoirs of a Taboo is also an attempt to overcome the postcolonial fatigue brought on by stereotypical cliches in contemporary Indian English novels (by Aravind Adiga and ArunurDhati Roy, for example). It thus adopts a *post*-postcolonial approach, defined by E Dawson Varughese as post-millennial Indian fiction in English, or, the writing of a New 'urban' India: "...fiction from the turn of the millennium (that) demonstrates new

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[110]   In the previous version of the novel submitted in September 2016 the professor Madhavji is a sugarcane farmer and dealer in cut- and stained-glass for clients who are interior decorators.

departures in writing in English, often in genre, form and voice and... contemporary

film" (2013, p 15). This 'shift' from literatures located in the West was also identified

and in some sense, predicted by Boehmer (1995) as a 'coming-of-age for postcolonial

writing'.

The novel identifies with treats of the overlapping themes of postcolonialism,

patriarchy, and feminism. Madhu, for example, is an example of a modern woman who

refuses to bow down to her abusive husband's whims. Despite her guilt and inhibitions,

Ambilli too is a 'survivor' – a trait which eventually helps her to let go of the past. The

minor characters of the ex-devadasi Rajeshwari Amma, the *navvari*-clad[111] domestic

help, Shobha *tai*, and the office-peon Ganpatrao represent fictional characters

attempting to 'better' their social living conditions in urban cities while remaining rooted

in their Indian culture of origin. The female characters in the novel – Ambilli, Madhu,

Paarvani, and Rajeshwari Amma – thus, in their determination to overcome their

difficult circumstances, serve as a challenge to the dominant representation of women in

the postcolonial novel and show femininity in modern India as a contested site.[112]

In exploring whether and how the novel can be read in feminist terms, I have tried to

tease out the complex relationship between Indian homemakers and patriarchy – to

acknowledge at the same time the patriarchal constraints that help shape women's lives

but also the limitations of applying a Western model of female oppression that ignores

the high cultural value placed on homemaking in India by both women and men. I also

suggest that contemporary Indian women's experience of 'eve-teasing', stalking and

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[111] *Navvari*: a nine-yard sari

[112] This possibly extends to some other contemporary South Asian writers as well. For example, the
      novels written by Kamila Shamsie (*Salt and Saffron, Broken Verses)* of Pakistani origin, show: 'the
      operations of patriarchal ideology and its suffocating mechanisms which subordinate women and
      entrap them while also depicting the inner strength of women to counter these pressures and to
      liberate themselves." [*sic*] (Yaqoob and Hussain, p 15, 2012)

sexual harassment are influenced by their effective normalisation and glorification in some Bollywood films where the woman's body is objectified through 'item' songs. Approaching the novel through this feminist dimension led to another additional significant segment where Madhu highlights the ancient language of sexuality in India as one of pleasure, contrasting it with sexual restraint in the present day.

The other chapters in this thesis, on historical background, sexuality, reconciliation, and narrative in the novel, explore the techniques through which research was transformed into fiction.

b) Research challenges and limitations

The original thesis was based on research in the areas of history, ancient Indian women's sexuality, narrative and literary elements, as well as some psychoanalytical concepts with reference to Ambilli's withdrawal and state of melancholy in the years post the abuse.

It has been a challenge to re-visit the novel through the lens of postcolonial and feminist theories, which were latent but insufficiently explicit in the original submission. Indeed, the additional reading greatly widened my knowledge and offered new insight into issues such as patriarchy (of which my own cultural upbringing had made me uncritical) in a new light. It has been a challenge to integrate the new material into both the thesis and the novel in a way compatible with the novel's original narrative, I think that both have been enriched by the process.

Early in the research process, I undertook a research trip to Mysore to trace Paarvani's already fictionalised (but not written) escape route to Malabar via the forest at the

Karnataka-Kerala border, as well as to explore more information about temple dancers or devadasis. One of the major highlights of this exercise was the discovery of the 'off-stage history' – about the Iyengar killings from a well-placed interviewee. I was also surprised to learn of the prevalence of various sects of temple devadasis, all of who were branded as 'prostitutes' despite protests from the affected communities. Secondary readings confirmed that, post-independence, many of these incidents were suppressed or hidden away from school history textbooks so that they did not pose barriers to 'national integration'. The postcolonial readings also illuminated the current deep political divides in the country produced by the interplay of power, resistance to Westernism, corruption due to economic inequalities and, significantly, by a collective sense of inferiority vis-a-vis white superiority as one of the remnants of colonial rule. While recognising these factors, as a novelist I have limited them to subtle undertones in the novel through incidents like the moral policing of Shashi on the Bangalore to Mumbai train by an unnamed local activist party. Furthermore, in the same chapter, although the dialogue between Madhav Tripathi and Madhu has political echoes, this is interrupted by passers-by on the train or by Ambilli who arrives at the scene looking for Madhu. My intention, by not highlighting the political factors, is to retain Ambilli's fear of Shashi, six years after the abuse, as the dominant narrative, and to break up the political material so that it didn't bear the hallmarks of a novelist's historical research or so-called 'info-dump'.

For another challenge as a writer of historical fiction was to use the research findings effectively. Here I made use of the history-gaps in public memory to my advantage: my characters could be as plausibly ignorant of pre-colonial India as my (Indian and British) readers mostly will be, enabling me to integrate information about it into the different narratives in the novel. When Madhu and Ambilli visit the temple where the

Mandyam massacre took place, it thus was entirely credible that

Madhu would need to fill Ambilli in on the history. Similarly, in the meta-narrative, the

fictional Paarvani escapes from Tipu Sultan's (fictional) commandant-in-chief, Jamaal,

across the state-borders and into Malabar, where the Nayar chief's daughter, Shakuntala

chechi, the matron *Veliya Ammayi*, and the brahmin landlord Narayanan Namboodiri,

and other characters provide narrativised backgrounds to Kerala's socio-cultural

practices of 18th- and 19th-century matriarchal and patriarchal systems.

Any reading of contemporary patriarchy or feminism in India needs to consider culture,

traditions and customs, educational background, region, class and social practices

among other factors. Ambilli's upbringing in the novel is contrasted to Madhu's,

although both are second-generation Kerala migrants from 21st-century Bombay. So are

Manu and Shashi. In a multicultural, permeable and increasingly diverse country such

as India, all generalisations can be misleading. Nevertheless, the novel reflects the

evolving feminist ideas through the socially and economically different characters of

Madhu, Rajeshwari Amma, Seema, Indu, and Ambilli. Manu's role as a mature and

supportive feminist husband is indirectly acknowledged by Ambilli in her journal entry,

a new addition to the novel. This acknowledges the patriarchal ideology of 'compromise'

into which Indu has been socialised by her domestic role as a wife, homemaker, and

mother.

As someone brought up in the mid-1970s and 1980s in a traditional Kerala-migrant

family in urban Bombay under restrictive rules on issues of morality and social

behaviour, I faced a challenge in writing about sexual abuse. Interestingly, my research

about sexuality in ancient India – through its education, literature and social life – was highly illuminating and was not only invaluable to the narrative of my fiction but also helped me overcome some of my own self-consciousness. During the writing, it became clear to me that the protagonist in my story would experience a sexual assault that was not exactly rape and yet equally traumatising. The resultant chapters took several drafts and rewrites. Shashi in the novel thus – on many occasions – does not rape Ambilli but he strips off her clothes and stimulates himself for sexual pleasure using the sight of her naked body. Ambilli's predicament is made more complex by the fact that, on one rare occasion when she goes clothes-shopping with her colleagues Fiona and Amruta, she chooses dresses that are snug-fitting, rather than the loose, baggy *kurtis* she normally wore. Furthermore, in the ladies' changing room, perhaps for the first time she gazes at her own naked body and traces its curves. With this description the reader gets the impression that the character Shashi's claim to Ambilli – that he has turned her into a woman – was probably correct: his repeated sado-masochistic acts (he derives sexual pleasure by denying himself the sensation of touch) have replaced her sheltered upbringing with an exposure so formidable that it is close to rape. The various shades of Ambilli's feelings culminate in a kind of guilt that overpowers the rest of her life until, soon after her marriage to Manu, she decides to confront it. The range of emotions portrayed through the fictional Ambilli's abuse are suggestive of the complex internal conflicts between 'individual needs and social norms' (Kakar and Kakar, 2007, p 91) that most young women in India experience with regards to premarital sexual contact. Supported by psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar's theories about the identity formation of girls in India, the thesis alludes to the possibility that this could be a consequence of the culture of the modern, nuclear family where a young girl's interaction with the opposite

sex is limited to the father or brother, leading to ambivalent feelings or embarrassment with regards to sexual or bodily awareness. (2007, pp 90-1)

c) Original contribution to knowledge

The novel follows the teleological structure common to the majority of Indian narratives of ancient literary works, mythological stories or folktales, where the function of history embedded in the work of fiction is markedly intentional – in order to preserve it and to inform and educate the reader about certain historical events. The fiction and HF elements in the novel, for example, convey historical information to the reader in the form of a story, with the aim of making it more memorable and vivid than the history textbook version. To illustrate, while the character of Paarvani is used (by Ambilli) to revisit the life of women in 18th-century south India, 21st-century Madhu's role is critical in that it objectively reinterprets, re-examines and questions the life of the contemporary urban Indian woman in comparison with her pre-Victorian counterpart. The interplay of this connection and its investigation – between the Indian past and the present – along with the juxtaposition of research and fiction in a single novel is original in its approach and yet barely explored in Indian English writing. The inclusion and adaption of a few verses from 18th-century-Muddupalani's poem in the novel's HF element is also deliberate, so as to resurrect her forgotten place among the wider Indian and international readership.

In the light of the viva discussions, further reading on postcolonialism, sexuality, feminism, and patriarchy in early Indian history and the novel lent new perspectives into the existing research. It led me to theorise about an entire *language* of sexuality that

ancient Indian texts, literary works, oral mythological narratives and educational

content conveyed. At the same time, a woman's caste, profession, and birth were factors

involved in the regulation of sexual activities and practices. This sexual language - that

connoted pleasure and companionship in the rich works of Kalidasa or divine love in

the verses of the *Gita Govinda*, and which was transmitted down generations - was all

but erased by the arrival of Western education in the English language. Versions of the

older texts thus were modified by the English-educated Indians to accord with Victorian

norms of taboo and morality. Madhu mentions the mythological legends of Sati, for

example, whose devotion to Shiva almost led to cosmic destruction, and Savitri, who

even compelled the god of death to return her husband back to her. Sati's tales are now

reduced to symbolise self-sacrifice and self-immolation, while Savitri's stories are

exemplified to new wives, urging them to gain piety by fasting for the long lives of their

husbands.

This study, seen in this light (of a language of pleasure and a language of shame or

taboo), identifies a link between ancient and contemporary India with regards to the

rising cases of violations to women's sexuality, between the literary past that is forgotten

and what versions of it are remembered and how. While this link was always there, this

research, seen through Madhu's and Ambilli's eyes, brings an entirely new approach to

it. Madhu's examples from mythology and the literary epics demonstrate that in ancient

India, most women were empowered by their education and social freedoms, while

some could choose their lovers and husbands. She observes that the present-day Indian

woman, by contrast, is more morally-bound in a restrictive society condoning sexual

repression. This can change, she argues, if the present generation is reminded of the

status of women in ancient India, and able to access information about – or reasons for –

the changes that have taken place over the centuries. The novel thus touches upon one

of the reasons for a 'selective' lapse in public memory which concerns Indian history:

the alleged distortions or suppression of historical facts by eminent historians,

perpetuated in school textbooks. Madhu's analysis could not have been more timely,

given the recent rise in media reports of rape and incidents of sexual assault in India.

In a sense, Ambilli's sexual violation by Shashi can also be interpreted as his

colonisation of her. As she learns more about the Indian past that she herself is a part of,

she begins to understand her own self. She pours these understandings about her body

and the feelings of hurt and betrayal and acceptance into a new story of Paarvani that

takes on a life of its own. The scars left by Shashi thus turn into healed *post*-colonial

memories that enable her to start her life afresh. The narrative through Madhu suggests

that in order to understand the postcolonial, one is required to go beyond it (hence, post-

postcolonially) by first revisiting the pre-colonial past and accepting it for what it is.

The context of the novel with regards to its connection to ancient Indian literature is

partly in keeping with the current trend to re-interpret mythology as narrativised by

successful India-resident writers such as Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, and

Ashok Banker.

One unusual narrative device that the novel borrows from Bollywood cinema is that of

the interlude. To illustrate, Ambilli's Achchamma in chapter 16 acts as the connecting

device between the present that has already been narrated (Ambilli's story) and what is

going to come – in this context, a reinterpretation of a few aspects of the south-Indian

past (Ambilli's work of HF). In a way, Achchamma's second-person point-of-view

narration personifies the history of Kerala in a single chapter that includes an

explanation about the sexual customs between well-learned Namboothiri brahmins and

lower-caste Nayar women. This blending of old and new approaches extends a sense of

everlasting immediacy with regards to the events in the novel. Moreover, the narrative

in its descriptions of ancient temples such as – Srirangapatna's Lakshmi Narasimha

Swamy temple, situates the story in real modern and historical locations. In addition,

references to the characters from mythology and the Mahabharata epic by Madhu in the

novel – usually transferred from one generation to another orally – act as a symbolic,

narrative framework in which contemporary conditions of women are re-interpreted.

These are some of the elements of 'Indianness' in the novel that contribute to the aspect

of timelessness associated with the Indian historical tradition: they also lend an

impression of a 'shared past', especially to the Indian reader.

In my position as both research student and novelist, the process of creating the fictional

21st-century-Ambilli's journey into Indian history as well as tracing the 18th-century-

Paarvani's place in the Indian past has created several potential aspects for future

exploration. While this latter section of the novel does not strictly fit into the genre of

historical fiction, it draws its inspiration from real historical incidents that are not yet

widely known in my native country. As present-day India counts over seventy years of

independence from colonial rule (which itself lasted only for about 150-200 years),

several debates concerning gender and history are being foregrounded. The point of this

exercise, therefore, is to hold a small mirror to the ancient and pre-colonial Indian past

and experience what one of the oldest civilisations in the world was like, so as to ask

new questions and draw new answers from it. As Atwood has said of the novel writing

process, it "possibly... has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to

enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.

This book is about that kind of darkness, and that kind of desire" (2002, p *xxiv*).

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Appendix

Research Notes

Discussions, Interviews, and Photographs from the Research trip

Karnataka & Kerala, 2010.

Contents:

List of people interviewed

List of photographs[113]

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[113] Photographs by Radhika Praveen

Notes from the Primary Research trip

The main objective of the primary research trip undertaken in September 2010 was to verify some of the secondary information with regards to Mysore, its dancers and the devadasis, as well as Tipu Sultan. With the majority of the novel underway, another endeavour through the journey was to trace the HF-protagonist, Paarvani's escape route from Mysore to Malabar in order to get an idea of the physical geography of the region. The following pages contain a transcript of the discussions, interviews and some photographs from this trip.

September 14, Mysore/Mysore palace

M G Narasimha, Secretary to the Maharaja of Mysore, Srikanthadatta Wodeyar (now deceased):

The secretary and superintendent of the Mysore Palace board and Jaganmohana Palace, M G Narasimha, clarified that Haider Ali had the Wodeyar royal family imprisoned at Seringapatam during his rule. This brought a halt to the dance and entertainment sessions that the Wodeyars had patronised earlier (13th- to early 17th-century); Haider Ali however encouraged dancers and opened a dance school or *natakashala*. The dance durbar (Ambavilasa Palace) and royal courts were open for performances only during the Navaratri festival and on royal birthdays. Narasimha suggested that I see the director of the Archives department, Ms Gayathri, who recently helped edit a book containing letters of correspondence between the last ruling Maharaja Jayachamaraja Wodeyar and the dancers and drama troupes visiting the Palace. This would let me have an idea of

how the entertainment business was conducted under the Wodeyars.

Narasimha was one of the few interviewees who agreed that Haider Ali was a better ruler and administrator than Tipu Sultan, although he insisted: "both were very brave soldiers...it was Haider Ali who expanded the Mysore kingdom up to Malabar," he said. "But Tipu, in the name of Islam, had brought more destruction to south India than any other contemporary – killing thousands of people, converting many to Islam and plundering and looting temples for gold."

Narasimha then asked me if I had heard of the Mandyam Iyengars' slaughter. This was something I had never come across in any of the books or research so far and so he narrated how Tipu, in a furious rage over the captive Maharani's spies - brothers from the Mandya village, Tirumala Rao and Narayana Rao – gheraoed the entire village and slaughtered 700 members of their community one Diwali evening (1783). The Rao brothers used to slip letters from the Maharani to the British secretly. The followers of the *Bharadwaja gotra* or community, according to Narasimha (to which his wife's family belongs), still don't light lamps on the fourth day of Diwali (*Narakachaturthi*) on the said day as a mark of respect.

Why was this event not mentioned in any of the history books?

"Because the government wants to portray Tipu as a hero," said Narasimha quite matter-of-factly. He added that he and his family have been trying to bring this event to light but that it was a losing battle against the contemporary Indian historians.

The Maharaja's secretary recommended a meeting with his brother-in-law, M A

Narasimha or Chinna Narasimha, for more details about the incident.

Mysore Palace Temple priest on Devadasis

The priest in the Mysore palace temple confirmed that until as late as 1973, devadasis

lived in the temple (Mysore palace) premises. He did not know where they moved to, or

why, but suggested that probably it happened due to change in perspective, as the

profession was looked down upon. According to him there are remnants of devadasi

system in the Jagannath Puri temple in Orissa (East India), where their customs are still

practised:

"The role of the Devadasi, according to *Agamashastra* or the science of Tradition, was

to preserve the cleanliness of the temple everyday, provide hand-made garlands of fresh

flowers for the temple deities, and in the evenings, sing songs of praise for them (the

gods) and dance in the *Navarasa Griha* (a hall placed in front of the sanctum for the

display of the nine emotions through dance/drama) made especially for the purpose.

Temple regulations set by the brahmins required that the sanctum sanctorum be

untouched by someone who was 'polluted' – this meant someone who had had a birth or

death in the family, where the individual is not allowed to enter the temple for 11 days;

in the case a devadasi/woman had her periods she was considered 'impure' for the five

days of the month. The presence of many devadasis in the *Garbhagriha* or chambers for

devadasis in the temple, ensured there was always at least one of them available for

routine temple duties. A monk was assigned the everyday priestly activities as he would

be untouched by any of these attachments or 'impurities.' It was often a brahmin who

taught or educated the devadasis in the art of lovemaking and sensual pleasure."

"These days, however," the priest in the Mysore palace added, "all temple duties are shared and undertaken by men alone."

During the time of Haider Ali and Tipu, explained the priest, the capital of the kingdom was Seringapatam [now, Srirangapatna], "but the temple and dance rituals continued to take place in Mysore as usual."

September 15, Mysore

-Professor R Sathyanarayana, renowned music 'vidhwan'/scholar and teacher, author

-Dr J V Gayathri, Deputy Director (Archives), Archaeology, Museums and Heritage, Govt. Of Karnataka

-M A Narasimhan – M G Narasimha's brother-in-law and Director of '*itihaasa bharati*'

Professor R Sathyanarayana, author and music and dance scholar, discussed in detail about devadasis and how the system died down. He said that "dance was divided into *nrtya* (dance/technique) and *rasa* (emotion).... The devadasis belonged to the Sani caste, an ethnic tribe. ...The brahmins in temples, or priests, encouraged this profession; the brahmin helped support the devadasis and their dance. While the shastra was taught to devadasis by the brahmins, the dance itself was taught by the 'nattuvas'; it was the music and dance scholar or *shastrakara* who paid (sexual) favours to the devadasi.

"In the 16th century, dance was highly prevalent in the courts of the Wodeyar kings. The maharaja Wodeyar would team with artists from Kerala..."

"Narasaraja Wodeyar (ruled from 1704 – 1714), a deaf and mute king, would line the entire streets with dancers during the nine-day festival of Navaratri. Dancers from north and the south practised together... this continued till Haider Ali and Tipu took over the reigns of the kingdom. Tipu encouraged Muslims over the others in everything. He converted thousands of brahmins ... the state's passion for dance diminished until it completely disappeared."

The dance durbars were held in the Ambavilasa Hall in the palace during Navaratri celebrations and birthdays, which continues even today.

During the rule (1902 to 1940) of Nalwadi Krishnaraj Wodeyar IV, a law abolishing the devadasi system was passed. "The diwan at the time, Seshadri Iyer, had a good vision... and did not want women to sell their bodies. This at the time was restricted to temples (that the then government could see). Nearly all the temples had devadasis... Gradually the stigma (of prostitution) attached to devadasis made them disown their own culture."

There were many schools of dance during the time and each of them had a unique style. "Nalwadi Krishnaraj Wodeyar IV also wanted to find out if uniformity was possible in dance practice. The *nattuvas* or dance teachers from five or six schools were brought to him at the palace...he gave them each the same song and asked them to teach their students the same dance. The nattuvas opposed but were financially obliged...the experiment didn't work and ultimately court performances died out."

"When Rukmini Arundale (1904 – 1986) of an upper-caste India began to revive the

bharatanatyam or sadhir dance of the devadasis, the dance for the gods shifted to ceremonies for the rich people and a public audience. Here began the shift in culture..."

What about the time when Haider and Tipu had imprisoned the royal family...were dance performances unusual at the time in their court or routine?

"If you visit Daria Daulat Bagh, the summer palace of Tipu where the royal family was also imprisoned (Seringapatnam/Srirangapatna), you will see a mural depicting a woman dancing to the violin. These murals were painted in 1784 – seven years *before* Muthuswamy Dikshitar (one of the trinity in carnatic music, the others being Shyama Sastri and Thyagaraja) learnt to play the violin. This means there *was* dance and music in Tipu's courts as well."

Dr J V Gayathri, Director, Archive Office

Being much of a researcher herself, **Dr J V Gayathri** was very helpful and eager to guide me in any way in the information I was seeking. She let me access the Archives' and Heritage offices in Mysore and suggested that I should refer to a book of correspondence (letters) between the Maharaja and various artistes in the 19th and 20th century kingdom. The book is significant as it gives the reader an idea of the folk and traditional dance artist's life and how much they were paid during the Maharaja's rule.

M A Narasimhan, the brother-in-law of M G Narasimha whom we met the previous day, is a Sanskrit scholar and director of *Itihasa Bharati [*http://itihasabharati.org/]. The project aims to collect historical data related to India from 3102 BC onwards, and rewrite Indian history from a 'national and unbiased perspective'.

Could history-writing be unbiased? *Yes*, Narasimhan insisted. He gave examples of the great epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, whose writers (Valmiki and Vyasa) list the positive aspects as well as failings of their mostly-divine heroes like Rama, Bheeshma and Krishna and so on. He compared the same to the contemporary history textbooks that children read in their schools, which present a one-sided view of the incidents in Indian history.

When asked about the Mandyam Iyengar slaughter, Narasimhan confirmed the incident and referred to it as "the forgotten chapter in the history of Mysore." He mentioned that he and his sister Dr Jayashree, descendents of the 'Pradhans' whose families were slaughtered in the 1790s by Tipu Sultan, are constantly endeavouring to bring this event to light. Following is an excerpt from their paper on the same subject:

> "As an example we would like to take up the forgotten chapter of Mysore history during the period of Hyder Ali and Tippu sultan. That is about the heroic role played by the Dowager queen Rani Lakshammanni and her incessant battle for the restoration of the throne to the rightful heirs for nearly three decades. It is a pity her persistent effort and courage despite being confined behind the curtains of the royal palace and constantly threatened by the mercurial temper of Tippu sultan in bringing about the promise that she had made to her husband Immadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar does scant mention by the

historians. We do not have even an authentic biography of this grand dame of Mysore. She lived most of her life in Mysore under house arrest.

This brings us to the episode of the "Pradhans of Mysore" who are given a passing mention by the writers of history. The history of the Pradhans of Mysore is all the more endearing to us for we belong to the family of one of the Pradhans Sri Triumalaiengar who is referred to by the British as Tirumala Row. Incidentally Sri M.A. Srinivasan who was the first minister of the democratic Mysore was one of the descendents of Narayana Row, the brother of Triumalaiengar. Without these two courageous brothers Rani Lakshammanni could not have achieved her cherished goal. Despite repeated disappointments, these two brothers were loyal to the throne of Mysore, risked their lives, and sacrificed their families for the sake of their queen Rani Lakshammanni.

The effort of Rani Lakshammanni starts from the time of the ascent of Hyder Ali. To be precise she started negotiating with the British in the 1760's with the help of Tirumala row and Narayana row. Maharani Lakshammanni had assured these tow [*sic*] brothers of the Pradhanship of Mysore and 1/10th of the income of the state as their salary in perpetuity, if they were to

succeed in their endeavor. On coming to know of this, Hyder Ali imprisoned all their relatives. It was their misfortune that their mission to the different powers in the British hierarchy failed repeatedly. It was in the 1790's Tippu sultan coming to know of the agreement between General Harris, the then Governor of Madras and Tirumaliengar, herded nearly seven hundred relatives, men as well as women and children of the Pradhan brothers living in the region between Srirangapatna and Mandya, and put them to a cruel death. Is this a fact or fiction created by the enemies of Tippu sultan, one may ask? For, no mention of it is there in any history book. But we would like to mention that even today, that is even 200 years after this ghastly event, the families of Mandyam Iyengars who belong to the Gotra of Bharadwaja, the lineage of the Pradhans do not celebrate the festival of Naraka Caturdasi, for it was the day on which Tippu Sultan killed their ancestors. Every child of those families is told that story on that day. We all know how important for a Hindu the celebration of a festival is and here we find a small community discontinuing such a celebration. Perhaps that itself is a strong indication how true the event is and how strongly they felt about the cruel end that their ancestors fell in to for no fault of their own." [*sic*]

As for the social life of women in pre-Victorian India, Narasimhan discussed in length

about the caste system prevalent during the time, the role of devadasis according to the *Agamashastra* (that the Mysore palace temple priest also mentioned). He also said, "...interestingly, despite the sexual freedom enjoyed by women in India in the ancient days, there were no sexually transmitted diseases from prostitution like HIV or so on..." Narasimhan said the "devadasis were equivalent to priests in their social status: they were holders of art (music and dance) and their duties were... to clean the temple, make *rangoli* or colourful designs that are considered sacred to the temple, light the lamps, and so on." At a very young age, a girl who was ordained to be a devadasi would be trained in all these aspects. She would be married to the god and at an appropriate age, beget a patron who would look after her maintenance and other expenses. "Sex was considered as one of any bodily function – eating, defecating – in those days, unlike today, where everything begins and ends with sex. It was not unusual for the brahmin priest to have sex with a devadasi..."

The role of the prostitute or *veshya* too was one of high profile. "A *veshya* was a cultural representative of the royal court or palace. She would be loyal to her husband or amour till his death or till he deserted her, after which she would still be treated as his second wife with respect and in the case of a child being born, she would be considered the mother.

"A ganika" or courtesan on the other hand, "would only be after money," and she would follow the patron who paid the most. "The royalty would send their children to *veshyas* to learn about sex."

There were a lot of traders or *mahajanangala* in South India. Trade boosted an individual's wealth, which was poured into the temples or/ the arts. (This was also one of the reason why a lot of gold and wealth was found in temples.) The kings too - like the Cholas, 10th and 11th century India - encouraged the cultural scene by offering tax exemptions to dancers and devadasis. ...When the British destroyed the trade pattern of India, this economy collapsed; temples got poorer, either due to lack of patrons or looting by the mughal forces or Haider and Tipu...the devadasis were pushed further into prostitution than their priestly activities..."

Despite the atrocities of Tipu in Mysore, Narasimhan was of the opinion that Tipu was not a Muslim fanatic. "He was short tempered, yes, but he merely used the excuse of Islam - unlike the Mughal king, Aurangzeb, who was clearly a fanatic." Tipu was also jealous of the admiration that his father, the illiterate Haider Ali, had for a Malabari convert named Sheikh Ayaz; Haider sometimes openly admitted he wished he had an able and intelligent son like Ayaz, and this greatly angered Tipu. So much to the extent that as soon as Haider Ali died, Tipu set out to kill Ayaz. The latter learnt of Tipu's intentions and escaped to Bombay with the help of the British. (This incident is also detailed by historian William Logan in his *Malabar Manual* and by Vikram Sampath in *The splendour of Royal Mysore: The untold story of the Wodeyars*)

I expressed my suspicion that the Wodeyar kings' chief minister, **Diwan Purnaiya**, was a traitor to Tipu (from a painting by Thomas Hickey in 1801 – post-Tipu's death - where Purnaiya, the minister for the newly-reinstated Wodeyar king poses for his portrait looking very pleased and smug). Narasimhan said that I was right. Purnaiya was traitor

not only to Tipu but also to the Wodeyar king when Haider first snatched the crown

from his (the king's) head. This information however, has not been used in the novel or

its HF element.

1. Thomas Hickey's portrait of Purnaiya (1801)

One of the research links online (JSTOR article) mentioned the reason for Purnaiya's

treachery as that of revenge for his daughter who was raped by Tipu's soldiers. Tipu,

instead of being sympathetic mocks him and asks him to let the girl join his harem.

Narasimhan corrected me saying that it was not Purnaiya's but the daughter of Anche

Shamanna who was raped. Purnaiya was purely interested in his own welfare and that of

his family...so in the end Tipu was betrayed by Purnaiya and also by Mir Sadiq, his

trusted confidante.

September 16: Srirangapatna (Mysore's capital city during Haider and Tipu's

rule)

Vijay (priest in the Ranganatha temple)

It was not on my agenda to make enquiries with the priest at the Ranganatha temple, who was carrying on with his routine tasks of offering the flowers we[114] had brought for the gods, giving us the *teertha* (basil-leaf infused water) and *prasad* and sending us on our way out. But when I noticed the nine pillars in front of the sanctum decorated with dancers' motifs and carvings, I could not resist asking: "Is this where the devadasis used to dance for the gods?"

The priest's (named Vijay) eyes lit up and to our surprise, he talked for over 20 minutes about the devadasis and how much the temples have lost without their humble services, about the atrocities of Tipu towards the Hindus...even as the queue for receiving the *teertha* began to grow longer. He also talked about the different groups within brahmins, each assigned to a particular vocation: Priests who perform pooja in the temple don't do the same in houses, priests who make the daily prasadam or offerings to the deity and devotees, and so on. He directed us to the house of the local tour guide, V Sathyanarayana, and told us we would find more information there. Vijay also told us to visit the Jama Masjid that Tipu built in 1787, and asked us to pay close attention to the walls, for "they belonged to the Hanuman temple."

We visited this Masjid later in the day, and saw that it had indeed been built over a temple: the walls still had the Hindu motifs and carvings that had been plastered and painted over in an effort to hide them. Two hundred years after it was built, the walls are now beginning to reveal their origin:

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[114] I was accompanied by my husband and three-year-old son during this research trip.

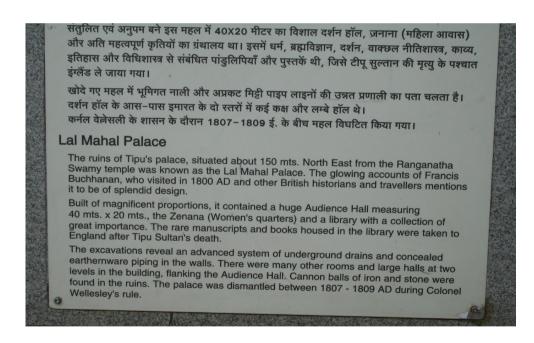2. Jama Masjid mosque walls beginning to reveal the Hindu temple motifs underneath

I had also asked Vijay, why Tipu had spared two temples and destroyed every other in

Mysore and Srirangapatna. "Haider Ali was more tolerant of the Hindu religion even

though he had taken over the throne from the Wodeyar kings. From his palace, he could see the main Ranganatha temple and during the pooja time, bowed his head every morning to the god residing there. As a young boy, Tipu had grown up watching his father and developed a sentimental attachment towards anything that had the name 'Ranganatha' or 'Ranga.' After the death of Haider Ali, when Tipu began destroying all the temples (we learnt later that this was mainly to find the gold and money hidden inside; Tipu had run out of finance thanks to all the fighting campaigns with the Malabarees and the British), he would spare the Ranganatha temples. The locals had learnt of this and mislead him to believe that the god in one of the temples was Ranganatha too. And therefore Tipu spared this second one."

As we said goodbye to Vijay for the second time, we were surprised to see that the priest was choked with emotion. "Nobody comes asking for historical information nowadays, madam. You are doing a good deed...," he said joining his hands together. He blessed us for a successful journey and went back to collect his *teertha* vessel.

V Sathyanarayana, writer, 'Approved Tour Guide'
We asked Mr Sathyanarayana to confirm the story of the Mandyam Iyengars' slaughter, and he said it was indeed, a fact and one that the government and current historians liked to ignore. He told us that the incident took place in the now-deserted Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple, which lay within the fort walls of Srirangapatna.
I tried to follow-up on M A Narasimhan's story of Anche Shamanna's daughter who was raped, and asked Sathyanarayana about Tipu's taste for women.

Like his father, Haider Ali, did Tipu abduct women to the Natakashala/dance school and harem, and yet have eyes only for his wife, Fathima? Or was he more of a women's man?

"He was not like his father," said Sathyanarayana. The local guide added that "when Tipu was killed in 1799, they found over 600 women in the Lal Mahal (Tipu's palace) zenana or women's quarters. The women were slaves, brought or abducted from all over the south of India, mainly from the Coorg and Malabar regions.... among them there were court devadasis, temple devadasis and also court dancers...they lived in the *zenana*...took bath in the Kaveri river waters that they travelled to everyday (about 3 kms)."

संतुलित एवं अनुपम बने इस महल में 40X20 मीटर का विशाल दर्शन हॉल, ज़नाना (महिला आवास) और अति महत्वपूर्ण कृतियों का ग्रंथालय था। इसमें धर्म, ब्रह्मविज्ञान, दर्शन, वाक्छल नीतिशास्त्र, काव्य, इतिहास और विधिशास्त्र से संबंधित पांडुलिपियाँ और पुस्तकें थी, जिसे टीपू सुल्तान की मृत्यु के पश्चात इंग्लैंड ले जाया गया।

खोदे गए महल में भूमिगत नाली और अप्रकट मिट्टी पाइप लाइनों की उन्नत प्रणाली का पता चलता है। दर्शन हॉल के आस-पास इमारत के दो स्तरों में कई कक्ष और लम्बे हॉल थे। कर्नल वेलेसली के शासन के दौरान 1807–1809 ई. के बीच महल विघटित किया गया।

Lal Mahal Palace

The ruins of Tipu's palace, situated about 150 mts. North East from the Ranganatha Swamy temple was known as the Lal Mahal Palace. The glowing accounts of Francis Buchhanan, who visited in 1800 AD and other British historians and travellers mentions it to be of splendid design.

Built of magnificent proportions, it contained a huge Audience Hall measuring 40 mts. x 20 mts., the Zenana (Women's quarters) and a library with a collection of great importance. The rare manuscripts and books housed in the library were taken to England after Tipu Sultan's death.

The excavations reveal an advanced system of underground drains and concealed earthenware piping in the walls. There were many other rooms and large halls at two levels in the building, flanking the Audience Hall. Cannon balls of iron and stone were found in the ruins. The palace was dismantled between 1807 - 1809 AD during Colonel Wellesley's rule.

3. The plaque outside Lal Mahal palace

4. Remains of the Lal Mahal palace ('dismantled' by the British troops post Tipu's death)

I asked Sathyanarayana if he could pinpoint **when in history did the once-respected devadasi system turn into prostitution**, and he said it certainly was not an overnight incident. "From the

14th century onwards, when the Muslims attacked and destroyed temples in south India, the kingdoms of Vijayanagara and Mysore faced an economic downfall...survivors were not the kings but rich landlords who took every advantage of the devadasis' position. The main centres of temple-worship with devadasis were the Tanjore Brihadeeshwara temple, Nanjangud near Mysore, Pattadakallu in Karnataka which still has a street named after the devadasis who once lived there, and the Veerupaksha temple in Hampi.

"Nanjangud was the first place where the devadasi practice was stopped (by Mysore's Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar) when the king learnt that their profession had turned more into prostitution."

On our way out of Srirangapatna, we visited the **Kaveri** river. The view from the river bank was spectacular and I realised it was exactly how I had imagined it in my book. There were also the huge trees from where the 12-year-old Paarvani would have watched Rati Kumari being bathed by her troupe of servants. The locals use round, tar-bottomed boats (like the Welsh 'coracle', only bigger, and without a bench for a seat – you sit cross-legged on the floor of the boat. It seats about six to eight people at a time, including the person/s to row the boat).

5. Steps leading to the Kaveri *Sangam* (meeting of two rivers)

6. Snake worship on the banks of the Kaveri7. The round-coracle-shaped boat at Kaveri

8. View of the steps from the river boat

The small gate to the **Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple** was rusty and creaked open to freshly-mowed lawn and huge, white and maroon striped walls. The small square sanctum, however, was closed and perhaps has been unopened for many years. The silence looming over the statues and the temple, along with the knowledge that something very gruesome had taken place on the ground that we were walking on, covered me in goosebumps from head to toe. This led to my decision to bring the Mandyam Iyengars' massacre to light through the protagonist in the HF, Paarvani.

9. Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple – building on the left is the site of the massacre

10. The vast and deserted Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple grounds

Oriental Research Library, Mysore

I was back in Mysore in the evening, waiting at the Oriental Research Library, to refer

to a book recommended (and written) by R Sathyanarayana, the music and dance

scholar and author.

The bureaucracy displayed by the library staff there gave me an idea of why history is

not documented well in India...perhaps because it is just too much of a hassle.

After a two-hour wait and lot of arguing and explanation I still could not photocopy the

single, 15-page chapter on devadasis. I had no permission as the deputy director did not

arrive till library closing time; the staff claimed the intact-hard-bound edition would get

damaged if I tried to get some pages copied, and also that the flashlight from the camera

– if I tried to take a picture - would damage the pages! (Luckily, in the last few moments

when I was pleading my case with the staff, my husband had found another copy of the

same book and quietly used his mobile to capture some of the relevant pages.)

September 17: Sultan Bathery, Mysore-Malabar border

Shishupalan, Heritage-site-Jain temple caretaker/Guide, ASI (Archaeological Survey of

India)

"Haider Ali initially came through the Palghat pass; he was called by one of the kings in

south Malabar to help him (the king) fight another king from the north (Malabar).....

Haider and Tipu have used the Sultan Bathery route only twice. It was mainly Tipu's

army who came to Malabar during the campaigns...

"From Mysore there are three ways to reach Malabar; through the Palghat pass, through

Coorg and through Sultan Bathery (which was a major trading route). The local traders

here were called: Naikas, Kurumbas, Chettiars and Jains...”

And how did they travel at the time? (It had taken us about three hours to reach

Sultan Bathery from Mysore by car, through the forest route.)

The traders used camels...the Jains used to walk... (prescribed by religious belief; strict/

orthodox Jains today still always wear white, and believe that they should not harm any

creature – however big or small – so they avoid any mode of transport and walk).

“Tipu's *padayottam* (army running on foot/war) was always led by the *Kalasees*...a

Kalasi would run ahead and clear/destroy everything in his path, be it trees of the forest

or wild animals, and the army followed close behind....From Sultanbathery, they would

go up to Panamaram Kota (wooden fort)...there were no brahmins in Sultan Bathery,

only traders in the area. Brahmins preferred the plains.”

Why is this place called Sultan Bathery?

The original name of this town was Ganapathyvattom. Since the time of Haider Ali, this

temple was used to store ammunition...Tipu continued to do the same. It is not

established whether the temple was in use before the arrival of Haider/Tipu. The town

began to be known as the Sultan's Battery by the British, and now it's officially called

Sultan Bathery.”

11. Temple ruins at Sultan Bathery, where ammunition was stored (ASI-Heritage site)

12. Steps leading to sanctum of the main temple

K Mohan, Travel consultant, "Approved Tourist Guide," INTACH (Indian National

Trust for Arts and Cultural Heritage) Convener, Calicut chapter.

K Mohan was the one of the first 'guides' I had contacted over email; considering the lack of time and knowledge about Malabar, we decided to hire Mohan knowing fully well that he was a self-confessed 'fan of Tipu Sultan.' He accompanied us to the places we had already shortlisted, and gave his opinions about Tipu and Haider, but was unable to justify any of our counter arguments (which he did not probably expect) or provide evidence for his own. Despite his high fee and impressive biography on the INTACH website, we could see how commercial tourist guides like Mohan mislead foreign tourists into 'selling' India with exotic and hyped-up stories of the land.

Ajith Swami, local historian, Nadavayal (somewhere between Sultan Bathery and Manantavady).

I had to rely on my husband to be the 'research student' when we met Ajith Swami; thrice, the 70-year-old local historian sent me indoors to stay with the other women members of his family. Each time I ventured out in the verandah where the 'men' were seated, he politely asked me to wait inside till they were done talking.

The following are excerpts translated from my husband's notes in Malayalam:

When asked if a lot of temples were destroyed by Tipu in and around Nadavayal, Ajith Swami was of the opinion that it was not Tipu but his army that created havoc among the people staying there, mainly the trading community. "You can make out if a place has traders by the name of the town. For example, this area was first called Manickyapuram (town of jewels), then called Muthangadi (pearl trade market). Currently the place is called Puthyanangadi (new market). There were no brahmins

here; the temples were built by the traders... they travelled by bullock carts (apart from camels) bringing heavy pillars for the temples all the way from Mysore and Bangalore. The pillars were placed *under* the carts so they (the carts) wouldn't topple over.

"...all non-Islamic communities lived here (Hindus, Jains, Buddhists) and built their own temples which was their way of showing opulence. Each community vied with the other to build bigger temples. There were several temples with interconnecting stone paths between them...devadasis were not prevalent in these private temples. Tipu Sultan's army destroyed and looted all the temples and subsequently, the communities deserted the place leaving the ruins...

"After the defeat of Tipu, the area came under the Kizhakke Kovilakam Chirakkal Thampuran (Chirakkal king). Some of the communities re-settled but the temples still remained in ruins, so the State Archaeological Department of India (ASI) has taken over. ASI continues to gather information about these monuments and preserve them, but they take their time."

13. Jain temple site at Nadavayal - not yet marked by the ASI; ruined by Tipu's army (likely place where the fictional Thomas - the artist - in the novel, stays for the night with Paarvani hiding close behind)

14. Entrance to the sanctum which was dug out, probably to look for hidden gold

September 17, Calicut

Tali Kshetram (ancient Shiva temple): The locals believed that Zamorin (anglisised from *Samudri:* title for the King) built the Tali Kshetram, which speaks for the wealth at the time. Calicut was a major trading port at the time. Ancient ponds and lakes are existent but none of the signs of the palace exist as it burnt down with the last official king, who preferred to commit suicide rather than fall in the hands of Haider Ali.

Thiruvannur Shiva temple – Damodaran (priest)

One of the ancient, apsidal-shaped temples in Calicut: As per Hindu chronology, there are four *yugas*/eras. Local legend has it that the architecture of the temples changed every *yuga*...for example, in the first *Satayuga*, temples were constructed with a circular base for the sanctum...the pillars, dome/pyramid roof shapes were built around this base. In the *Tretayuga*, temples had an apsidal-shaped (like an elongated 'D') foundation, the *Dwaparayuga* saw the construction of diamond-shaped temples and in the current *Kaliyuga*, temples have a square-shaped base.

According to the local priest there, Damodaran, the Thiruvannur Shiva temple is believed to have survived the *Tretayuga* and *Dwaparayuga*, evident from its apsidal shape. Unfortunately, photography was not permitted here.

15. Wayanad hills and the scenic route to Calicut from Sultan Bathery

September 18, Mammiyur

Guruvayoor, in the South of Malabar, is renowned for its Krishna temple. It is believed

that the Krishna's idol was taken by the Hindus to Ambalapuzha (further South) for

safekeeping, where it was hidden for 12 years until Tipu's death. Local legend has it that

the nearby Mammiyur temple was also attacked and partly damaged by Tipu's army.

We visited the Mammiyur temple twice for information but returned unsuccessful both

times as the relevant people were unavailable for comment. However, the colourful

art/paintings on the temple walls (*chumara chitram*) showcased an ancient India of

myths and legends, and free of social and moral constraints. As in the ancient dance

form of Kathakali, the colours used for a character in chumara-chitrams depict his/her

guna or nature (for example: green/*pacha* represents sattvic or pure and good qualities;

red represents *raajasic* or material attachments and desire; white is for the *taamasic* or

lazy, sloth-like attributes. Green figures will typically represent the gods, red for the

demons, and so on).

16. An example of temple-*chumara-chitram* art or *kalamezhutu*, on display here at a hotel in

Kerala

September 20, Keezhillam

B Agnisharman Namboothiry

We reached Perumbavoor, where my in-laws live, not really expecting any research-

work for two days. Interestingly, everybody we came across connected us to some

important link or had something to contribute towards my project. One such casually-

mentioned connection led us to an old, 85-plus-Namboothiri brahmin, a treasure trove

of information who appeared to have jumped right out of the *Malabar Manual*, written

by William Logan in the 1800s. We paid him two visits, one on the 20th and again on the

22nd of September, after we met the writer M G S Narayanan on the 21st in Calicut.

B Agnisharman Namboothiry (spells his name with a 'y'), is a retired advocate and Sanskrit scholar. The octogenarian spends his time seated in the verandah of his house, reading or even attending to solitary cases that come his way, and supervising the routine activities in his house. At no time however, is he physically-touched by any member of his family, or outsiders – unless he knows that they're brahmins who regularly practice their rituals, or are wearing 'kodi' / new, unwashed/starched clothes. His hair, white and sparse, is unkempt and tied around the left top-side of his head. Like most men in Kerala, he wore a white lungi (waistcloth).

We watched, fascinated, as he cheerfully shared stories related to our questions and his own hand-drawn maps and notes – not once passing them to us with his hand: the material would be thrown, gently, on to the clean floor from where we would pick it up. We had to return it the same way... he asked us to simply put it on the floor so he could pick it up.

His family at home at the time – daughter-in-law and wife – followed the same customs perhaps more out of habit, and reverence for the man. Tea was brought on a tray and left on the floor in front of us...when we finished we had to leave the empty glasses (tea and coffee is served in steel glasses called 'tumblers' in the South; these have a curved rim as one is expected to slowly pour the liquid into the mouth and not touch his/her lips to the glass while drinking/sipping from it) aside for them to pick up. One also had to keep a distance of at least two feet from him or his family members. For example, each time we got up to pick up something from the floor, the Namboothiri would step behind as a reflex action. We also observed how his four-year-old grand-daughter walked at least two feet ahead of her caretaker/uncle, who was going to drop her off at pre-school.

Aren't all these self-imposed dos' and don'ts' rather restricting for young girls and boys, I asked, being under the impression that the *antarjanams* (people living indoors, the women) must be living a very constrained life. "On the contrary," smiled the old man, "we find them quite liberating, and..." he added, "also, hygienic!" He admitted though that it was difficult for today's young generation for follow these ideals: his sons, both, doctors in different fields of homeopathy and ayurveda, cannot afford to not-touch a patient or walk two feet away from them.

What happens if someone accidentally does brush past...?

"I starve," the Namboothiri laughed, and explained that if such an incident did occur, he would have to take a bath to be 'pure' again, and not eat... as atonement for the 'accident.'

Later, Agnisharman Namboothiry admitted that he did realise time had moved on, that this was the 'modern' age. But he said he preferred to stick to old customs and traditions, because he believed this was his 'dharma' and it would only bring his family goodwill; the 'brownie points' he had earned would be passed on to the next generations, he said.

When I told Agnisharman Namboothiry about the information I was seeking, he misheard 'pre-Victorian India' for 'pre-historic India' and promptly started getting out all his ancient maps (some wrapped in transparent polythene paper and stuck to the wall). He began at 2000BC India, and showed us on the map the migration of the Nairs – originally a 'Naga' tribe from around the north west of India...(also mentioned in the

Malabar Manual).

"Namboothiris had entered Kerala (then called Chera kingdom) around 5000 years back (3000BC) bringing the Nairs along with them.... Brahmins also... when they migrated from Tamil Nadu to Kerala (1260CE), they brought along with them the *ezhutachchanmaar* or educationists; the *Konkanis* when they migrated from the coastal areas (displaced probably during the time of the Portuguese conquest of Goa) brought with them *moopars*...to Kerala. The *vattaezhutu* (oldest Malayalam script) was common among the Nair and Tulu (now part of Andhra Pradesh) communities and originated about 4700 years ago.

"There have been other migrations to Kerala, eg, the *embrandiris* or brahmins are alleged to have come from present-day UP... around 300 CE. Kings were also facilitating migration...King Mayuravarma of Kadamba for example...went to Hrishikesh and met the brahmins there...brought Ramachandra Swamiyar back with him..."

Why...?

"....because the Namboothiris of Kerala did not approve of the kings intermingling with the lower castes....the Kollathiri Raja for example, was a Kshatriya... Hence they (Namboothiris) refused to cooperate for religious and spiritual activities. This compelled the kings to get more brahmins from outside Kerala to perform religious ceremonies etc. (This Kollathiri Raja didn't have a female child...another King, Udayavarman, gave his own daughter to the king. The girl was called Unnithiri and grew up to be a renowned dancer...).

Most of the information that Agnisharman Namboothiry had given so far was not really covered in any of the reference books I'd read, and certainly not in any of our school textbooks. This led me to the next question:

Why is history so poorly documented in India?

"We have reached the stage where, whatever is taught as current history we are unable to disbelieve it, even if it is false... The *Rigveda* (and he narrated a couplet from the Rigveda that mentions the names of all the Indian rivers and where they originate from) has described the prominent rivers of India; and history is also represented in texts like Mahabharata, Harivamsam (lineage of Vishnu-stories) etc...But historical documents like these (Rigveda, Mahabharata) are discounted as they are assumed to be literary works..."

I wondered why Agnisharman Namboothiry didn't write history himself, considering he was so learned. Catching my thought, he added "We Namboothiris always speak the truth. If I were to write something ...and if somebody else criticised or questioned it, it will be an insult to the whole community...so, we don't write. But we do have our poets. You'll find that a lot of history, anecdotes about people, and information in general is recorded by Namboothiris in the form of clever poems," he said smiling.

Coming back to where we left off, "...Kshatriyas generally belong to the *Kaushika gothram* (clan) or *Vishwamitra gothram*...there have been lot of adoptions within the Kshatriya community. Sometimes, to get a progeny/to father a child, Namboothiris were

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approached and it was considered a privilege .... Initially they (the Namboothiris) were

reluctant to do it but they were provided with gifts, gold etc, and apparently, this is how

the *Sambandam* system originated...” The Sambandams were an ancient custom where a

Namboothiri brahmin was permitted to sleep with a ‘Nair’ lady of his choice (provided

she gave her consent).

Were these restricted to Nair women only, or did it also extend to women of a lower

caste as well?

“Anyone the Namboothiri took a fancy to,” Agnisharman replied matter-of-factly. “At

first it was certainly restricted to upper-caste Nair women, but as you find in the novel,

Indulekha, where the servant girl is sent to spend the night with the Namboothiri instead

of the Nair protagonist ...incidents like these became frequent, and soon enough, a

Namboothiri brahmin would even sleep with the cook or the cleaning girl...”

The women in your community, the *antarjanam*, can you tell us about them?

Namboothiris are the only brahmin community in India who still have *upanayanam* for

the female members. The women in our community are entitled to perform a *pooja* even

today. They are called *antar-janam* because they always need to stay indoors... “The

father ties the 'tali' for his daughter (a sacred chain around her neck), aged between eight

and 12, and vedic education or the *yagnasutra* commences for the girl. Among

contemporary Hindus, boys are given the similar upanayanam ceremony (where the

sacred thread or *poonool* is worn across the torso)...girls were given this vedic

knowledge too, but in the Kaliyuga, the rishis (sages) admonished giving of mantras to

women as time was changing. Girls now are prohibited to wear the sacred thread, or

receive the yagnasutra..." (Some pockets in Maharashtra however, are beginning to revive this culture, but it is rare).

September 21, Calicut

M G S Narayanan (MGS), Writer, Historian, SOAS fellow

The meeting with writer and contemporary historian (who, it turned out is uncle to my friend in Mumbai) was very interesting as it threw up some contradictory points in the research and what I'd learnt so far. Having travelled four hours just to see him, we had three hours before we got the train back to Cochin (Perumbavoor) and so we had ample discussion time. MGS gave me a list of books I could refer to and would be useful in my research. Most of them however, are written in Malayalam and don't have English translations.

Halfway through our discussion though, I realised we would require to meet Agnisharman Namboothiry again for his opinion about the arguments that MGS was presenting before us:

"It was not until the 9th and 10th centuries that brahmin hegemony was fully established in India. They began to migrate from the Narmada valley/west coast only in the 8th century onwards...the Namboothiri (brahmins') migration was unlike the rest of south India.... there was no such place as the 'Kerala' we know today. Kerala history begins only with the beginning of the iron age and the megalithic period..."

We asked how that was possible...as Adi Shankaracharya, the Indian philosopher who consolidated Advaita Vedanta and travelled across the length and breadth of India (on

foot) to set up four monasteries (*mattha*) in his youth, belonged to the 8th century CE.
The writer brushed the argument aside, reasoning that "Shankaracharya, though he
belonged to the Namboothiri community, was excommunicated as his mother was
widowed even before he was born...so he was not really a Namboothiri brahmin. "...it is
called *Adukala dosham*, due to which Shankaracharya was made *bhrashtu* (exiled)."

MGS also denies the Parashurama legend (Kerala, it is believed is the reclaimed land
that the god Parashurama gave the Namboothiri brahmins), and also the Ramayana and
the Mahabharata, claiming that these are "conspiracies created by the Brahmins."
According to MGS, the theory that Nairs originated from the Naga tribe who had
migrated to Kerala was put forward by Chattambi Swamy in his book *Pracheena
Malayalam*. One of the ancient rituals of snake worship in Kerala gives credence to this
theory.... Within Nairs there were the Chakkala Nairs (oil makers), Maraar (drummer),
Padanair (warrior), Vadakathra (Barber), Kurup (guru/teacher), and other several
categories of Nairs in Kerala. Even Namboothiris had several divisions and sub
divisions...this makes Kerala unique in the development of the caste system.

I asked MGS some questions related to Haider Ali and Tipu and their rule in Kerala:
**Were there dancers in the 18th century Kerala and later? What was the dance form
called?**
Of course, there were. Unniachi was one of the renowned dancers in Kerala -
somewhere between the 14th to 16th centuries. You will find the *Achi Charitram*, love
letters written in the form of poems during the time. Devadasis were the cultivators of
dance and music, though they were not as prominent in Kerala as in Karnataka and

Tanjore.

I read your book on Calicut (*Calicut: The City of Truth Revisited*), where you have mentioned a conversation between Vella Namboothiri and Haider Ali. Would you know what language they spoke in among themselves – Tipu, Haider and their army...

"That would be Persian, and Kannada.

"Yes, Vella Namboothiri was a brahmin who came in close contact with Haider Ali as part of negotiations between the Zamorin and Haider Ali, and travelled with him for a while. He wrote his memoirs in a journal called *Velle-odey Charitram* (Vella's story) in which he has detailed Haider Ali's campaigns and army life. It is an interesting account...reveals the true shades of these rulers and their barbaric acts in Kerala and Mysore. Sadly, there is no English translation of the book yet...the Indian government is less willing to make changes to the books where Haider and Tipu are portrayed as heroes fighting the British...they don't want to touch a book that says that Tipu had in fact, invited the French to invade the country.

And how about the Namboothiris and the Nairs...what language did they mainly use?

Malayalam mainly, and some Sanskrit...

September 22, Keezhillam.

Agnisharman Namboothiry

The next morning, we visited Agnisharman Namboothiry again, for more information

regarding Haider and Tipu in Kerala and how it affected the social fabric during the

time. We also wanted to verify what we heard from M G S Narayanan the previous day.

Agnisharman Namboothiry, on the caste system: There were different categories of

castes within Kerala... eight categories of brahmins, 12 Ambalavasis (temple dwellers),

and two minorities. The Nair caste was divided into 18 divisions. In the old days the

women had a lot of freedom, which changed after Victorians had taken over and the

mindset of the people started changing. He quoted the 13th Century traveller Ibn Batuta

on Kerala... '"A lady can walk through the public roads even at midnight. This is a land

of God.' Even during the rule of the Cochin Raja in the early 20th century when the

British had made a lot of Namboothiri arrests, a letter written by the Veliya

Thampooratti (elder queen) had more value and authority than any request sent by a

male member of the family.

"After 1880, the property rights of the Namboothiris was diluted. This caused more

material damage to Namboothiris, thus changing their system. The system further

changed after independence where in 1956, the Hindu Succession Act was made where

the property went to the wife and children. In 1958, the Namboothiri Act and Marriage

Act was passed and subsequently in 1976, the joint family system was abolished. At

present there is no Namboothiri act in existence. Namboothiris make their own rules

now using the Yogakshemam Sabha (association)..."

"The *Sambandam* system had started somewhere around 216 CE...when a foreign or

Kshatriya prince was brought to Kerala...Kshatriyas come from the Vishwamitra gotra

(clan) and they are not permitted to marry in the same community. That's how the

Sambandam system started...Nair communities soon started the same practice."

On *Smartha Vicharam:*

"...if an *antarjanam* has an affair, the *smarthavicharam* (morality inquisition) was

conducted where the lady as well as the accused (who is/are proven guilty) stand to be

excommunicated from the Namboothiri caste." The only chance the accused had was

the Suchindram *Kaimukkal*: the Suchindram temple between Kanyakumari and

Trivandrum where one had to dip his/her hand in boiling oil or ghee...if the hand is

unscathed on the third day, he/she would be proven innocent. "Excommunication was

the worst punishment, and there have been cases where the innocent have also been

punished." He cited his own maternal uncle's example: the latter was one of the accused

in a *smarthavicharam* and offered to undergo the Suchindram *Kaimukkal*... but

unfortunately the practice was banned by then (the last hand-dipping ordeal was carried

out around the 1860s) and hence he was excommunicated...but he would not go away.

Eventually the family abandoned him in a train going to Kashi (near Benaras) in north

India.

"There have also been cases where prominent Namboothiris had affairs with women

believing them to be Nairs and therefore a legitimate *Sambandam* connection. However,

in such cases also the Namboothiri was excommunicated."

We brought up the subject of our meeting with MGS Narayanan the previous day, and

asked his opinion on MGS's views. Agnisharman Namboothiry said he had met MGS

during a conference. There had been a debate with some Namboothiris and MGS was

unwilling to accept their arguments (Namboothiris') even then... "It is not his fault...he

has some misunderstandings on the subject," the Namboothiri said, smiling.

Was Shankaracharya really an outcaste Namboothiri as MGS suggested?

"If Shankaracharya was indeed excommunicated in the 8th century ..the presence of

Namboothiri community and systems are already proved!" he laughed. He also said that

the son/daughter of a widow (widowed during pregnancy) was not made a *Bhrashtu* or

outcaste. He gave the instance of his own grandmother who was widowed when she was

carrying his father...

September 23, Trichy

G Balaguru, the director at the Thiruannekavu temple at Trichy was very helpful and

told us about the origin and history of the temple. He led us to a thousand-pillared hall

in the temple premises that was normally closed for visitors. The pillars were each

decorated with dance motifs and dancers in various poses. He explained that the hall

was once a dance durbar and is currently being used for feeding devotees once a day.

Balaguru also directed us to visit Srirangam and the Brihadeeshwara temple in Tanjore,

which was the centre of devadasi culture and dance, especially during the Chola period

in the 9th and 10th centuries. He spoke about the invasion of Malick Gafur from the

Delhi Sultanat (early 1300s), which brought Islam to south India.

We did visit Srirangam, another magnificent temple near Trichy, but we could not find

the relevant information. We also could not fit Tanjore into our schedule due to time

constraints.

17. The thousand-pillar dance hall, now used as a dining area for devotees

18. View of the now-dried up, square temple-pond and its surrounding corridors

September 25, Mahabalipuram, Chennai

We couldn't again find the relevant information at Mahabalipuram, but the huge

monolithic sculptures of elephants, various gods, dancers etc...gave the impression that

the place could have been a training ground for artisans.

19. Sculptures carved out of a single rock at Mahabalipuram, seemingly unfinished

20. Temples without a deity: another example of an incomplete temple structure at

Mahabalipuram

Prior to undertaking the research journey, much of the novel was written.

However, visiting the above places gave a real sense of the settings mentioned

in the fictional work, which was then honed accordingly. Some examples

include: the Kaveri ghats or the river bank where Paarvani first spies Rati

Kumari; the temple ruins where Thomas helps Paarvani hide for the night, and

most importantly, the Mandyam massacre at the Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy

temple that was previously unheard of. Interviews with the Namboothiri family

especially revealed some of the social customs of their community, and details

about the *Smarthavicharam* practice, which stopped in the early 1900s.   ❊