

## THATHRI: EVENT, GENDER AND EVOLUTION

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**Abstract:** This article conceptualizes the well-documented trial of Thathri in 1905 not as an objective historical incident, but as an event the contours and lineaments of which are constantly changing due to continuous processes of repetition and imagination.

During the spectrum of Kerala Renaissance, one of the cardinal projects and concerns was the woman. The conceptual reimagination and spatial reconfiguration of the female body that occurred during the long structuring process of the aforesaid social transformation is an area to be seriously and concertedly considered. One principal dimension of the social exchanges relating to the human body is linked to sexuality too all over the world. The present paper attempts to foreground the signs, the impact and the gender-based transactions that the *Smarthavicharam* (trial of an accused Brahmin woman of adultery by a designated Brahmin priest) of Kuriyedathu Thathri entailed. Perhaps this particular chastity trial has greater depth and dimensions than we think. The reverse is equally plausible: popular and spectacular events may prove shallow upon a close critical examination. If a system of knowledge production and epistemological preferences predicated on patriarchal values and sensibility grow prominent in Kerala, the institution of chastity trial may remain buried in the past or forgotten.

What is an event and how do we identify, conceptualize and explain it? How does the chastity trial of Thathri in 1905 become a persistent relevant in the social histories and memories of Kerala, especially as a milestone event in re/formation of the female agency? How do we locate and quantify those events which deserve to be history within quotidian experiences? As we know an event qualifies as material for the production history when it is widely acknowledged and proves capable of producing larger social impact. This article is an attempt to answer such questions. Why and how do the actions of an individual become an event with seismic social repercussions? Why did the Thathri episode evolve

into a great cultural text and template of Kerala? This paper attempts to pursue and engage with such questions. In this context an event is treated as a conceptual imagining useful for social understanding and gender analysis. An explanation as to how her trial and its concomitant issues have developed into an event is also attempted here.

## Imaginings of Event

Sreekanteshwaram G. Padmanabha Pilla in his *Shabdatharavali* (a dictionary which resembles a lexicon) variously defines event as birth, origin, sprouting, reason, and combining<sup>1</sup>. By blending these semantic shades, the word ‘event’ is used in this article to signify something that is happening seamlessly together. The theoretical postulates/concepts put forth by Kim Jaegwon, Alfred North Whitehead, Giles Deleuze, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek are used here for a more perceptive and accurate understanding of the various ways in which an event has been theorized and presented. Kim Jaegwon describes an event as a combination of temporary intervals and attributes that can be defined through two structures of rules. One is the state of existence and the other is the individuation of a state. He outlines four traits as prerequisite to individuate an event:

1. Unchanged and unrepeatable peculiarities.
2. Semi-temporal location.
3. Constructed characteristics which create distinct events.
4. Distinctiveness in the events to retain its characteristics and mark its distinctiveness<sup>2</sup>.

Jaegwon’s analysis of space and time are also used by Badiou and Deleuze. The latter suggests that time can be understood as a passage between occasions<sup>3</sup>. There are two hints that Deleuze drops about events and their unique nature. One focuses on space and time: if two events take place with the same spatio-temporal coordinates, they may be similar. The second is that for two events to be similar their causes and effects must be similar too. Both arguments establish the uniqueness of events. Thathi’s trial in 1905 is not a discrete event but is more like an extensive collection of events in the domain of gender-based terminology. It is not a centralized deed; rather it is a connected series that precedes

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<sup>1</sup>Sreekanteswaram G. Padmanabha Pillai. *Sabthatharavali*. Kottayam: SPCS, 2015. P. 169.

<sup>2</sup>Kim Jaegwon. *Supervenience and Mind*. Cambridge: CUP, 1993. P. 37.

<sup>3</sup>Steven Shaviro. *Deleuzes’s Encounter with Whitehead*. New York: Free Press, 2009. P. 7

and succeeds another set of events. One needs to enquire into the several dimensions that enable a given event to be treated as the principal/prominent event. In order to understand the gender relationships that have permeated into the roots of chastity trials, one must first attempt to define the existing transactional space of Kerala.

Badiou discards the argument that history is an omnipresence of singularity with the intention of establishing the primacy of plurality<sup>4</sup>. As an event the chastity trial cannot be conceived of as something that happened in 1905—an event began and ended in the past. It is ‘multiple’ in that it gets constantly reconstructed through new approaches, imaginations, representations and practices. Stylistically an event is a hypothesis that is yet to be understood as part of a series in a decentralized multiplicity. As a practice an event focuses on the decentralization of stylistics.

### **Dimensions of Gender and Caste**

The space that is called Kerala is created by several large and small historical events (large and small, of course, are relative and based on historical events). Henri Lefebvre’s observation that social practices produce social space<sup>5</sup> is remarkable and illuminating in this context. Anthony Giddens in the *Constitution of Society* argues that a social space is created by the mobility of the people in a given society and their communication<sup>6</sup>. Giddens adds that the ability to move about and communicate is a trait of the human body and opines that the lifecycle of a human being has a peculiar geographical project.

Two principal or overlapping events (separate yet connected) that have created the social space of Kerala are caste and gender. The reason why they are foregrounded is clear and simple: even in contemporary Kerala the hierarchy of caste and gender is strictly and sternly adhered to. When we attempt to delineate the components and characteristics of Kerala society, gender and caste emerge as two concrete realities. In this article, however, the focus is not caste but gender relationships.

Many analysts of the caste system in Kerala argue that caste and gender status in Kerala are inseparable. P.K. Balakrishnan in *Jaathivyavasthayum Kerala Charithravum* writes:

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<sup>4</sup>Alan Badiou. *Being and Event*. Tr. Oliver Feltham. New York: Continuum, 2005. P. 175.

<sup>5</sup>Henri Lefebvre. *Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991. P. 45.

<sup>6</sup>Anthony Giddens. *The Construction of Society*. Polity, 2001. P. 111-115.

The Indian caste system has no parallel in world history. . . . The social ideology and social structure that came into being after the establishment of the caste system has not undergone any change. It has not faced any noteworthy internal<sup>7</sup>.

Stagnation of the caste structure during the evolution of a society indicates its entrenched and intransigent nature. It is through a collection of events that a system evolves, gets established and is sustained. Deleuze commenting on the 1947 partition of India writes “space and time are not free from events. Events decide their time- space<sup>8</sup>”. That is to say many events including the chastity trials have gone into the composition of the cultural practices and structures of Kerala. E.M.S. Namboothirippadu wrote that due to the influence of an overarching Brahmin culture Kerala has virtually attained the status of a separate country and its denizens a distinct people<sup>9</sup>. His take can be seen as an attempt to make sense of the unique ethnic history and present sensibility of Kerala from a distinctive theoretical and historiographical perspective.

Ambedkar’s inquiry into the caste system is also crucial at this juncture. Ambedkar, even as retaining the multiple arguments regarding the evolution of the caste system, points to a fundamental fact regarding the continuance of this ascriptive institution. In India the concept and mechanics of caste signal a network of taboos and interdictions which necessitate and sanctify endogamous marriage, preclude people from intermingling, and eventually ossify them into watertight and apparently permanent units<sup>10</sup>. The social practices that sanction the conjugal sexual act are a densely connected grid of occasions, rites and rituals. The rituals that lead to specific rights of inheritance and peculiar series of events in different castes are quite complex. The series of events after nuptial consummation transfigures a sexual act into a marriage proper, a pious social institution.

The foundation of the continuance of the caste system was the panoptic regulation of heterosexual relationships which predictably prevented miscegenation of all sorts. To rephrase, caste system was sustained and expanded by meticulously monitoring sexuality

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<sup>7</sup>P.K. Balakrishnan. *Jathivayavasthayum Kerala Charithravum*. Kottayam: DC, 2008. P. 207.

<sup>8</sup>Alan Badiou. ‘The Event in Deluze.’ *Parrhesia*, No 2, 2007. P. 35.

<sup>9</sup>E.M.S. Namboothirippadu. *Keralam Malayalikalude Mathrubhumi*. Trivandrum: Chintha, 2016. P. 83.

<sup>10</sup>B.R. Ambedkar. *Complete Works Vol I*. Trivandrum: Language Institute, 1996. P. 9.

by painstakingly focusing on the female body. This does not mean that the woman was or is, the active participant in sex so that a measure of regulation was warranted for the smooth function of family and society. Institutions and conventions such as family, religion and morality are based on sexuality at the most fundamental level. Marriage and inheritance, like many other practices, depend on the larger economic structures of a society. The structure of the value system that Namboothiris partook of is reflected in their system of marriage and inheritance. They followed patrilineal transfer of property and practiced primogeniture so as to conserve the wealth of the family intact<sup>11</sup>. The impact of Thathri's chastity trial is reflected not only in private sexual relationships but is produced in the minute, visible domains of caste, gender status and related economic platforms which are dynamic structures and fluid processes. When Simon de Beauvoir<sup>12</sup> says that "one is not born a woman rather one becomes a woman" she is commenting on the social processes (operations and interventions) that construct the idea/condition of being feminine. A process in this context needs to be understood as the continuation of events and the value systems that are forged out of this series of events. Deleuze writes that life is a series of varied events so as to explain the enquiry into the essence of the biological as well as sociological characteristics of constructing an event<sup>13</sup>. Events start from birth and continue after death through a series that essentialises identities.

Different characteristics are formed in a society through the configuration of events. As a community the Namboothiris are distinct due to their daily routine and elaborate customs. Their day-to-day life is specifically marked as qualitatively different from that of other communities. As William Logan opined "among the Malayalees the most conservative, exclusive" and from the European perspective "the caste that is least enlightened are the Malayalee Brahmins known as the Nambuthiris"<sup>14</sup>. The difference in perspective is important. When we compare the gender status of women in other communities with that of women in Namboothiri households one can easily spot the glaring differences.

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<sup>11</sup>K.N. Panicker. *Desiyathayum Samskaravum*. Tr. P.S. Manojkumar and P.N.

Gopikrishnan. Trichur: Current, 2004. P. 172

<sup>12</sup>Simon de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex*. New York: Bantam, 1952. P. 249.

<sup>13</sup>Alan Badiou. *The Event in Deluze*. P. 35.

<sup>14</sup>William Logan. *Malabar Manual*. Calicut: Mathrubhumi, 2007. P. 101.

The increase in number of componential processes in an event and the time span of their collective actions create a difference in the impact quotient of an event. *Smarthavicharam* is a *sastric* trial conducted on a woman suspected/accused of being adulterous by a Brahmin who is educated in the *Sankarasmrithi* <sup>15</sup>. Kanipayyoor Sankaran Namboothirippaddi divides the steps of a *Smarthavicharam* into five:

1. Trial of the maid servant
2. Putting the accused woman in a separate building
3. The trial proper
4. Ostracism
5. Consumption of purified food<sup>16</sup> signifying the readmission of her kith and kin into their formal social order

In order to get the trial of 1905 and its wider ramifications in perspective, we should grasp the social environment where Thathri's sexual relationships assume importance as events. The primary concept to be considered is the nature of economic structures and relationships in the nineteenth century. Till the eighteenth century the Namboothiris had monopoly over the land ownership and agrarian products of Kerala. P.K. Balakrishnan writes:

The Namboothiris who constituted less than 0.5% of the entire populace had almost sole control over the entire land. It remains a fact that though the story of the evolution of Kerala and her illustrious history are tales fabricated by the Namboothiris out of their selfishness, they had a birthright over the entire land<sup>17</sup>.

Though it is a matter of conjecture as to when they gained this kind of ascendancy, K.N. Panicker argues that it occurred from the twelfth century onwards<sup>18</sup>. If we agree with the opinions of P.K. Balakrishnan and E.M.S. Namboothirippadu regarding the land ownership of Kerala till the eighteenth century, we will have to concentrate on the relationship between caste and the products of the land. The retentiveness of inheritance practices and ownership over products implied the preservation of caste purity. As Ambedkar suggested, in order to sustain inheritance practices the purity of the

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<sup>15</sup>Sreekanteswaram. Op cited 101

<sup>16</sup>Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboothirippad. *Ente Smaranakal Part III*. Kunnankulam: Panchangam, 1966. P 130

<sup>17</sup>P.K. Balakrishnan. Op cited 239; . E.M.S op cited 81-83

<sup>18</sup>K.N. Panicker. Op cited 172.

caste one is born into has to be maintained too. The trial of Thathri becomes a reverberating event within and outside the Namboothiri community precisely because it transgressed—at least tried to do so—the retention of authority over land and its products. Secondly the trial sought to subvert the caste system that had been in existence over centuries, a system created by ideologies and language to control the products and the society. Thathri was able to transcend, and practically break, the culturally and theologically stipulated boundaries of sexual practices that were designed to retain caste purity. In short the trial elevates itself to the stature of an event because it transgresses the rituals, renegotiates practices, and crashes onto the allied series of events that are structured to control and regiment sexuality.

In Kerala, caste and the economic structure are important factors in deciding the gender status of women. This article designates the word ‘factor’ as a series of interconnected events in specific social circumstances. Caste, economics and gender have intertwined and overlapping rules; each practice is controlled by these rules. It is through consistent repetition that an action consolidates into a practice. Nizar Ahmed writes about the manner in which a practice is naturalized:

A practice is normalized when the relationship between people who live in a society becomes an established process. The institutions and usages are connected and put into a specific order. A practice is the interconnectedness of varied events.<sup>19</sup>

A system is a symbiotic matrix of multiple events. Deleuze calls an event a coming together of intensities<sup>20</sup>. Social, economic, gender and caste status that are the practices of patriarchy gave rise to the event of *Smarthavicharam*. What is being examined here are the social, economic and cultural relations of the ideologies that created tradition.

### **Sexuality as the Arena**

If one examines the history of sexuality in Kerala, it transpires that until the eighteenth century sexual relations were loose, amorphous and open. From Duarte Barbosa in 1503 to C. Kesavan in 1950, social observers and historians have pointed out that the majority of

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<sup>19</sup>Nisar Ahmed, ‘Vyavasthayilninnu Mochanam’ . Ed Biju Koonathan and P.S. Maya.

Trichur: Keraleeyam, 2016. P 12

<sup>20</sup>Giles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. Tr. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. P 191.

the population followed this system of sexual practice<sup>21</sup>. Both polygamy and sexual liaisons for one's own pleasure were rampant even in the nineteenth century and this shows the remnants of a tribal culture that had not yet accepted the patriarchal system of family and sexual puritanism; the people were still immersed in polygyny and polyandry that were pervasive in tribes and clans<sup>22</sup>. Only the Namboothiris and the hill tribes were different<sup>23</sup>. William Logan notes that a Nair woman could accept twelve husbands at the same time and they lived in harmonious cohabitation by taking turns; the days on which they could stay together were decided based on a system of hierarchy<sup>24</sup>.

This social situation, to be fair, was not endemically unique to Kerala. Michel Foucault comments that sexual practices prevalent up to the seventeenth century were not kept away from the public sphere: it was a Victorian bourgeoisie ideal to confine sexuality within the four walls of a house<sup>25</sup>. During the latter period sexuality began to be considered more and more as a means of reproduction only. In the case of Kerala, the Semitic habit of disparaging sexuality as sin took root only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and along with the new perception were born cultural practices that would reinforce this concept. Railways, roads and estates sprung up in Kerala and recreated the cultural taste of the people and this led to the confining of sexuality within specific territorial limits. More importantly the land ownership system in Kerala functioned as a barrier to the free mingling of castes and genders. Within the caste hierarchy, the core social group did not have a direct and intimate connection with land, though land and education were decisive factors in Kerala. The trial of Thathri in 1905 becomes an important event against the backdrop of colonial modernity because it caused a decisive rupture from the accepted cultural, religious and sexual conventions of Kerala. It becomes an event by precipitating and signifying this paradigm shift. Slowly but unmistakably, Kerala was moving into the new spaces of nuclear family, employment, caste and social morality and sexual paradigms and Thathri was both a subject—an active agent—and signifier of the transition. It is only in the first half of the twentieth century that Kerala even started to reflect upon marital

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<sup>21</sup>P.K. Balakrishnan. Op cited 314

<sup>22</sup>Ibid 319

<sup>23</sup>Ibid 319

<sup>24</sup>William Logan 111

<sup>25</sup>Michel Foucault. *History of Sexuality, Vol I*. Tr. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1978. P 39.



laws<sup>26</sup>. N.M. Namboothiri writes that only fifty one cases of ostracism were recorded from 1851 to 1930. It should be noted that practices like the *Smarthavicharam* spread over Kerala only by the 1850s<sup>27</sup>. So sexuality was discursively constituted and subsequently discussed in Kerala in the nineteenth century<sup>28</sup>. Alexander Jean-Baptiste (1790 – 1836), an early scholar of sexuality, theorized sexuality within the confines of Victorianism in 1835. This paved the path for later treatises on sexuality establishing it as a pivot of cultural studies.

Let it be worded that this study does not approve of confining *Smarthavicharam* to the sexual exploits of a woman, her personal choices, to the condition of Namboothiri woman, the history of sexuality or the economic relations practiced in Kerala. It is more an enquiry into whether the imagings of an event can be structured theoretically. According to Deleuze multiplicity is, in the most fundamental sense, a complex structure that does not refer to a prior unity. Everything for Deleuze is a multiplicity<sup>29</sup>. Such a position destabilizes not only the analysis of repetitions that view events as unique but also the arguments that foreground essentialism. It is a deconstructionist perspective of essentialism. Badiou in *Being and Event* clarifies that multiplicity occurs due to space and circumstances<sup>30</sup>. As to the question of what an event is Alfred North Whitehead suggests that whatever happens is an event: it is not a subject but experience, not names but actions, not objects but processes<sup>31</sup>.

Thathri is born out of the socio-economic mindsets and sexual practices of the twentieth century. If one takes Judith Butler's perspective<sup>32</sup>, then it can be seen that the

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<sup>26</sup>Robin Jeffrey. *Nair Medhavithwathinte Pathanam*. Tr. Puthupally Raghavan & M.S. Chandrasekhara Varrier. Kottayam: DC, 2016. P 235 – 236.

<sup>27</sup>N.M.Namboothiri. *Kerala Samskaram Akavum Puravum*. Calicut: Uty Co-op Store. Year not given. P xiviii – iv.

<sup>28</sup>Views of Vatsyayan and Egyptian, Greek and Chinese traditions are discussed in this context.

<sup>29</sup>Giles Deleuze. Op cited 182

<sup>30</sup>Alan Badiou. *Being and Event*. 176

<sup>31</sup>R.C. Collingwood. *The Idea of Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1945. P 165.

<sup>32</sup>Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge, 1990. P 1

manifestation of Thathri's body crosses the threshold of existing patriarchal taboos and rattles traditional structures. After 1900, marriage between a single man and woman became the norm and it began to be perceived as the central pillar of society. One reason for this is the re-imagining of man-woman relationship concomitant with colonization. As already mentioned the human body, desires and sexuality were sinful for the Semitic ideology which the proselytizing Protestant denominations had inherited. In other words the figure of Thathri could and would not have occurred in pre-colonial Kerala since sexual relations and acts before 1800 had a different impact and image in the society.

For one thing the trial of 1905 sheds light on the economic structure of the region in the forms of inheritance practices and caste purity that defined and endowed woman's status within patriarchal normative regimes. Secondly it signifies a move towards industrialization under colonialism, and the emergence of the nuclear family and monogamous marriages. Thirdly the colonial religious morality, more pointedly Victorian prudery, were imbibed by the people in Kerala and monogamous marriages were valorized and glorified due to the influence of politico- religious power structures. Fourthly, the advent of Eurocentric knowledge systems like medicine, anatomy, psychology and history produced a new perspective of the world and its controlling mechanisms. It is against this struggle between multiple paradigms of various events that a chastity trial becomes an impacting event and needs to be considered accordingly.

### **Uniqueness of the 1905 Trial**

Thathri's chastity trial in 1905 became the foundation of and trigger for several events connected to the socio-cultural spaces, caste hierarchy and the status of women in Kerala. The next section of this article explicates how one event is distinguished from others on the basis of its peculiarities. The article introduces certain observations and analyses with the help of examples how the chastity trial is transformed into an event under circumstances explained so far. Collingwood in the *Idea of Nature* says that one event has the potential to create several others<sup>33</sup>. I wish to point to certain continuing events (without analyzing them) in Kerala's socio-cultural spheres created by the trial in 1905. Generally speaking the main justification for punishing a person is that it acts as a deterrent. The optimistic belief that others will refrain from committing the same mistake is taken up for scrutiny here. Certain examples that are events (or clusters of events) that

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<sup>33</sup>Alan Badiou. *Being and Event*. P 175

spawn this belief/justification are discussed. Firstly the series of events that took place in Thathri's life after her trial and banishment must be examined. P. Bhaskaranunni in his book *Smarthavicharam* has included a letter written by the Sarvaadhikari Gopaladeshikacharyar on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1905:

The person accused [object] of misconduct was put in a room in KuriyedathIllam on the 31<sup>st</sup> of this month. The *Swaroopam* was declaimed and it is the practice to rehabilitate the object in an isolated spot near a river after the ritual of the *Swaroopam*. After taking the object to Chalakkudy it has to be ensured that she has no contact with anyone till the end of end of her life.<sup>34</sup>

After excommunication the gender status given to a woman by the society is taken away from her. The privileges and insignia of a Namboothiri woman are stripped away. That this break may lead to freedom is true as far as parasitic communities are concerned (any group that survives on the labor of others; within the Namboothiri community one must realize that women were the ones working). And this is true as far as women are concerned.

There are several events that separate the accused from the society and her own family. Each of these events exerts emotional pressure and anxiety on the accused to refrain from committing the same mistakes that have led to the punishment meted out to her. That is why Badiou remarks that events structure life<sup>35</sup>. The background of ostracism and isolation might have sown seeds of fear within the minds of the Namboothiri women. They may be scared of future events also. One has to only follow the related and resultant events of the 1905 trial to understand how female sexuality is structured or controlled by society. There are conflicting and contradictory narratives about what happened to Thathri after the eventful trial. Some say that she spent the rest of her days a small hut on the banks of Chalakkudy river cursing herself; others claim that a Nair from Karimangalam married her; there are people who believe that Thathri escaped from Chalakkudy with the help of a Christian priest and made her way to Pothannur<sup>36</sup>. There are many other events which are related in connection with the trial. It is *after* the trial proper that events powerful enough to rattle the society and transmute public imagination started to take place.

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<sup>34</sup>P. Bhaskaranunni. *Smarthavicharam*. Kottayam: SPCS, 2009. P 197.

<sup>35</sup>Alan Badiou. *Being and Event*. P 175

<sup>36</sup>Baiju Kaippapalakkan. *Kuriyedathu Thathrivichrathinte Kanappurangal*. Calicut: Mathrubhumi, 2015. P 74-75.

## Evolution of Copulation

In the aftermath of the aforesaid trial the Brahmin hegemonic practices that structured Kerala in the medieval period came to a grinding halt. The sexual intercourse between Thathri and her partners was a scandalous and subversive event that led to the collapse of consanguineous bonds, teacher–student relationship, priesthood, caste hierarchy and traditions as well as the ideological moorings that had buttressed them. These relations and restrictions were a wall erected through consistent repetition within the caste system to maintain caste purity. It was head on attacked by modern notions of the individual body and ideas of freedom.

Repetition formed the foundation of patriarchy and caste purity. One can remember Deleuze's postulate that the notions of nature and natural are constructed through repetition<sup>37</sup>. The idea of caste purity was conceived of and presented as a natural state. It is through repetition that values and traditions are established. These repetitions were marred by the event of Thathri's catastrophic trial. The changes that came over in 1800s like covering of breasts, the *achipudava* agitation for the right to wear a particular kind of cloth by the Ezhavas, *mukkuthisamaram* by marginalized women demanding the right to wear the nose-ring and the agitations for getting admission to schools can be read along with the evolution of sexual polarization/radicalization in Kerala.

The splintering within caste and tribal relationships, priesthood and caste hegemony led to the disruption of many repetitions and their restrictive practices. The structure of the family was challenged against the backdrop of illicit sexual relationships. Thathri's damaging and controversial testimony ripped open the façade of purity that had covered the bond between the teacher and student for long. The ideologies that supported caste hegemony and patriarchy were not strong enough to withstand the event of the ostracism, and such systems were also challenged.

More than half of the sixty-four men who were ostracized along with Thathri belonged to the lower (relative to Brahmins) castes that were customarily forbidden to have sexual relationships with Namboothiri women. Six Sudras, two Marars, a Varier, a Poduval and a Pisharody (all but first are intermediate castes) were among them. A most fundamental and consequential coming together of bodies had occurred. This mixing changed the existing

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<sup>37</sup>Giles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. P 6

structure and gave rise to new traditions. It goes without saying that the impact that Thathri's copulation with Poduval, Pisharody, Sudra and Mararmen produced on the society was far greater than the impact of her sexual partnership with Namboothiris and Tamil Brahmins.

The Nairs accepted the supremacy of the Namboothiris due to their ideological hegemony and their control over land. As the sexual, moral mores of the Nairs were constructed and codified by the Namboothiris, they did not consider chastity as a virtue. The one sided Namboothiri man-Nair woman liaisons could not be reversed as Nair man - Namboothiri woman relationship was treated as a serious sin. There are several dimensions to the sexual relationships Thathri had with servants like Madathilveetil Cheriyeikkan Nair, Akazhipurath Kunhiripu Nair, Katalath Narayanan Nair, Narikatte Veetil Raman Nair and Cheerambathur Raman Nair. Each copulation is a distinct rippling, if not fissile, event with its own depth and range. When each event becomes an unrepeated new action, then the event becomes autonomous. Each and every copulation Thathri entered into were such autonomous events. It is a strange text that shows how a sexual event ceases to be a physical act and percolates into social and political realms, undermining the hitherto holy beliefs and privileges. The relationships Thathri had with her own father, uncle, husband's brother and her elder sisters' husbands were downright incestuous and subversive. In other words, each of these events displays an uncanny ability to trigger a variety of other events much like ripples in water. It is by remembering that the foundations of the family are built on the prohibition of specific sexual relationships that the full extent of Thathri's demeanour becomes appreciable.

One cannot ignore the fact that the impact of Thathri's ostracism in 1905 was strengthened by the fast changing tastes and institutions of the society. A.M.N. Chakyar in his work *Avasanathe Smarthavicharam* talks about the Thathri episode in the light of an evolving society<sup>38</sup>. She was bold and bright enough to specifically name her paramours despite the

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<sup>38</sup>A.M.N. Chakyar. *Avasanathe Smarthavicharam*. Trivandrum: Cultural Publications, 2001.

fact that many of them were elite Namboothiris and her revelations could create a huge furor even outside the princely state of Cochin. Traditionally a chastity trial is conducted secretly and the judgment is unanimous.

Therefore it draws little public attention. But as the fate of many important people were at stake, Thathri's trial became the cynosure of an age. Changing historical circumstances caused Thathri's trial to lead to other events. It is clear that the turbulence and turmoil caused by shifting gender status reached the Namboothiri community belatedly. It was a century after the struggle to cover breasts that happened in Travancore in the 1800s that Thathri's ostracism occurred leading to an internal reconfiguration and revamping of the Namboothiri community (unlike most other castes and religions). New institutions, modern codes of morality, restructuring of physical imagining and structural changes in caste caused by colonialism had a strong impact on the desire of individuals. Yet I feel that the terminology of the medieval period can be used to speak about ideas regarding sexuality even at the beginning of the twentieth century. In different domains like religion, caste, sexuality, environment and spirituality Kerala has followed certain undesirable practices. But it is a fact that in the case of sexuality it was beneficial in that it was seen liberally and tolerantly.

Thathri's personal (even while admitting that the notion of the individual is problematic) likes and desires should be analyzed within the framework of historical evolution too. Feminist studies on gender status outline the re-visioning of the definition of individuality and social reconstruction as based on the changing nature of sexuality. There is evidence showing that changing sexual desires propelled Thathri's actions too. A person becomes an individual when s/he acts according to one's own rules. So we can say that Thathri's choices of sexual partners establishes her identity. Thathri's copulation with Kavungal Sankara Panicker, the Kathakali maestro, illustrates how her subject position assumes powerful agency and thereby dismantling the traditional modalities of sexuality. During a time when a girl who attained puberty was forbidden from mingling with her own brothers and a married woman from seeing a man other than her husband, Thathri arranged some of her meetings that would lead to copulation underscores her agency.

Thathri's trial in 1905 is a combination of the evolution of gender binaries, caste structure, family system, and moral/sexual interdictions which had evolved over centuries. All the later reformations that took place within the Namboothiri community to a great extent can

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be attributed to Thathri's trial and ouster. The ceaseless flow of literary and historical responses to her life show that the chastity trial of 1905 was not a buried event, but a lingering presence, a store for ever new narratives and theories.

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