

History as Textual Practice: Reading Contemporary Malayalam Fiction

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Two fictional works from the period after the end of modernism in Malayalam are chosen for critical analysis here: N. S. Madhavan's novel, *Lanthan Batheriyile Luthiniyakal* (Litanies of Dutch Battery, 2003) and a short story by Sara Joseph, "Prakasiniyude Makkal" (The Children of Prakasini, 1989). References are also made to O.V. Vijayan's *Madhuram Gayati* (Sweet Is the Music, 1990), a novel that seeks to raise issues that are somewhat unusual in the fictional terrain of Malayalam.¹ Between them these three works are expected to provide a context to discuss questions that are of central relevance to the fictional situation in present day Malayalam.

N.S. Madhavan is known to Malayali readers as a writer who has given a new twist to the tradition of fiction writing by blending a deep sense of the craft of fiction with an awareness of the complexities of life and history. Right from his earliest short story "Shishu" that was widely acclaimed after its initial publication in the *Mathrubhumi* weekly in 1970, his claim to recognition has been as an artist for whom art has meant, simultaneously, life, language and history. *Choolaimedile Shavangal* (The Corpses of Choolaimedu, 1981) that contained some of his stories written in the early seventies provided indications of a writer who in the modernist days was not willing to buy the usual arguments proffered by modernism on the nature of the relation between art and ideology. Is art an expression of ideology or is it an expulsion of ideology? Caught apparently on the horns of this dilemma, the artist in Madhavan must have been seeking a solution to this problem, as was indicated by the creative silence that he adopted for the most part of the eighties. His subsequent writings, including the stories collected in *Higwitta* (1993), *Thiruthu* (1996), *Paryayakathakal* (2000) and *Arthanareekandam* (2003) throw light on the new ways that Madhavan devised in this period to invest modernism with a sense of the social

that was perceived to be conspicuously absent in the "official" specimens of the trend. *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, the first novel to emerge from the genius of this accomplished storyteller, is another pointer to this.

Litanies of Dutch Battery indeed shows that Madhavan's competence as a storyteller is not limited to short narratives alone, but embraces longer forms of writing as well. One might wonder for a moment whether the formal distinction between the short story and the novel is all that vital for a writer like Madhavan whose shorter fiction embodies themes that are of larger significance. It is not as though this writer prefers the broader canvas of the novel to tell stories that extend across historical times. Many of his short stories too cover a relatively longer time span. In this he seems to take a route different from what a predecessor like O.V. Vijayan—who seems apparently to have exerted tremendous influence on Madhavan in his early stories—took. Vijayan's short stories are classic examples in Malayalam of fiction that follows the conventional norms of the short story genre. A short story like Vijayan's "Kadaltheerathu" (translated as "After the Hanging" by the author) is a typical example of fiction that recounts a significant experience in the life of an individual in the space of a few pages. It narrates the plight of an aged father living in a village who makes a long journey to the prison in the city to see his son who has been sentenced to death. The helpless Vellayi-appan in this story meets his son Kundunni in the jail and talks to him in monosyllables, and waits to receive the dead body of his son the following day. The narration here is compressed, and the writer's conscious effort is to make the story visually appealing, so to say, by providing graphic images of the events depicted. Madhavan is aware of the absurdity of the critical practice of placing a premium on such compressed narrations. Can one compress significant human experience into a narrative

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of ten thousand words, he wonders aloud in the preface to the second edition of *Choolaimedile Shavangal*.² Vijayan's stories emerge from the modernist problematic, while what would suit the post-modern scenario as unfolded in Madhavan is a story that fits the time frame of a television episode. Madhavan of course does not mention Vijayan, but his characterization of the short story form as literature's revenge on the visual media could be read as an implicit comment on the practice of looking at literary genres – and literary experiences as well – non-historically.

History in a sense is the matrix that shapes the formal practice of *Litanies of Dutch Battery*. It is also the most important theme of the novel. The events recounted in the novel span a period of about fifteen years in the life of the adolescent narrator, Edwina Theresa Irene Maria Anne Margarita Jessica, born in Lanthan Bathery (Dutch Battery), one of the many islands off the coast of the Ernakulam mainland, the deltas dotting the waters of Kochi. Jessica is heir not only to the family name, "Kanakkukattathil" (meaning "pilferers of calculations"), suggesting her lineage from forefathers who stole the calculus of ship building from their Dutch masters, but to the myths, legends and histories encircling the lives of fellow islanders. The legend concerning her great grandfather's pilferage, as far as Jessica is concerned, is the story of the genesis of her family, leading up to her own story that starts from her birth on 24 April 1951. At one level *Litanies of Dutch Battery* narrates the story of Jessica's growing up as the member of a small community with its own social and cultural ethos in the small water-logged island of Lanthan Bathery. The inhabitants of Lanthan Bathery and the neighbouring delta of Ponjikkara are mostly fisher folk whose ancestors – converts to Christianity from depressed classes – had run away from the mainland a few centuries earlier in order to protect their faith from Dutch Protestants who had taken control of the land of Kochi in the seventeenth century. *Litanies of Dutch Battery* narrates the tale of fiction-loving Jessica's real and imagined life in the island environs of Lanthan Bathery where it merges with the history of Kerala and of India in the turbulent period following the country's independence.

One would certainly be inclined to appreciate *Litanies of Dutch Battery* as a well-crafted artifact that invents a fictional space where a number of interesting events, situations and characters coalesce. The narrator, Jessica with her string of names that she got from her over-enthusiastic relatives and friends during baptism, her father Mathevoos the carpenter, her youthful mother Metilda who is conscious of the age difference between herself and her husband, her Aunt Victoria, her Uncle

Edwin, the master cook and specialist in biriyani-making, who had once been in the service of Colonel Bristow, her cousin Johnson, her grandfather Markose, long believed to be dead in a shipwreck, but who makes a miraculous return to Lanthan Bathery midway through the story, her friends, Rosy, Daisy and Natasha and their father Gomez Chettan who becomes a communist in his later years, the group of youngsters in the island, Santiago, Francis, Michael and others obsessed with the *chavittunatakam* theatre and perpetually discussing the possibility of reenacting the Charlemagne play that they had seen enacted as children, the parish priest who is called Pilathosachan (Father Pilate) by the local people because of his habit of washing his hands every now and then, Comrades Raghavan and Ramachandra Shenoy working hard to create a foothold for the communist party among the members of a community perceived in general to be hostile to it and the mathematics teacher at the local school, Pushpangadan, perennially glued to his desk working out a solution to the last theorem of Fermat pertaining to prime numbers which he hopes to disprove – these characters and their antics, somewhat Marquezian in their structuring, form the hub of the fictional activities in the novel. Madhavan's inventive faculty, an extension of his fictional imagination, shows itself to be in full play in the parts of the novel where the plot follows the fictional thread tangled around these characters.

What makes *Litanies of Dutch Battery* artistically more relevant however is the fact that it also narrates a social experience and initiates a textual practice involving questions of subject, history and gender identity. This obviously is a matter that concerns some of the textual relations implied by the narrative. An interesting aspect of the text is its narrative transvestism whereby the male author promotes a female surrogate to act as the narrator. Not that this device is unprecedented in the tradition of novel writing. But here in this novel one might come across a conscious attempt at the creation of a fluid realm of subjective experience where the received notions of gender identity are severely questioned. The male reader is in for a mild shock, a sort of "gender trouble," to borrow Judith Butler's expression,³ at a point in the novel where he discovers that the narrator he has been following through is indeed a female. Though it is Jessica's growing up in the first fifteen years of her life that forms the pivot of action in the novel, we see that this is intertwined with the narration of major political and social events in the constitution of India – and indeed of Kerala – as a modern nation in the period following Independence. In fact at the very opening of the novel is an event that in many ways can be construed to symbolize the nation's entry into the world of modernity – Jessica's birth happens on

the day on which eighteen health workers are deputed to carry out inoculation on new born infants at Lanthan Bathery and other islands. The message transmitted is quite clear: Jessica is born into a modern state where the administration considers it its duty to take care of the physical and mental well being of its citizens.

The textual practice that *Litanies of Dutch Battery* initiates is based on the constant interplay that the text maintains between the fictional and the historical. There are several places where this interplay is explicitly stated in the novel. Two crucial passages in the novel, each inserted at separate locations in the text, can be cited for illustration. One of them, about the centrality of history for the fictional narrative, occurs early in the novel where the narrator talks about her unceasing urge for "made-up stories." As a child Jessica would pester her mother for fabricated stories. Where does her mother get all her stories from? The land of Lanthan Bathery is a virtual goldmine of stories. One need only dig a little into the loose upper soil to unearth seashells. Dig a little deeper and one would get at satin boxes from Venice that were once guarded by Negro slaves from Africa, faded pieces of muslin that came from China and the remains of steeples that once belonged to the churches of local Catholics destroyed by Dutch invaders. The narrator cannot say for certain whether these are elements of fiction or of history. This much she knows: "History was the most important commodity our delta imported. History grew dense on Lanthan Bathery since it could not break free of the island's confinement by water. Stories had to be invented to temper its pent-up intensity."⁴

What fiction does however is not merely to temper the intensity of history. Fiction indeed is history, and the narrator is aware of this. History appears in the form of a grave ethical question before her. There is a point in the novel where Jessica adamantly refuses to share the imaginary piece of bread that she holds out with the crow in the nursery rhyme. The class teacher who is used to the usual response of children to the mischievous act of the crow that flies away with the piece of bread at the end of the song is amazed by the unusual response of Jessica, for whom fiction is no laughing matter. She bursts out weeping at the end of the song. She weeps not because she has lost the bread, nor because she feels cheated. On the other hand, it is out of an anticipated fear of being thrown out of history that she weeps. Narrating this event that happened on her first day in school, she says: "Stories are my home. I can suddenly walk into a story and shut the door on the outside world. It was my amphibious life in and out of stories that made me cry on the day I joined school" (108).

The interface between the fictional and the historical then is at the centre of the textual practice of *Litanies of Dutch Battery*. That is why the episodes in the story of Jessica's growing up lie interspersed in the novel with events from the history of the nation. Some of the historical events that took place in the fifties and early sixties like the communist party going underground after it was banned in the years around Independence, the lifting of the party's ban a few years later, Tensing and Hillary climbing Mount Everest, Soviet Russia's launching of the space satellite Sputnik, the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the assassination of Imre Nagy, the communist party coming to power in Kerala, the "liberation" struggle launched by non-communists against the communist government, the dismissal of the government as a result of the anti-communist agitation, the split in the communist movement, unrest on the Indo-China and Indo-Pak borders and the death of Jawaharlal Nehru find a place in the novel's narrative structure. These are actual historical events that gain a new meaning in the context of the novel. Alternatively, these events are totally integrated into the body of the novel, so that one might also speak of them as embedded fictional events that structure the basic experience recounted in *Litanies of Dutch Battery*.

An interesting aspect of this embedded history is the large presence of non-dominant versions of history in Madhavan's novel. The workers of the Tata factory, the members of the *chavittunatakam* repertoire and the artists at the Kundan Music Club are all participants in this history. In fact parallel histories of the nation can be seen to evolve through developments narrated around these and other similar institutions. There is an attempt at reconstructing subjective histories of the people through representations of experience that appear in popular cinema and music. History is not merely the record of glorious experiences associated with elite cultures. One can reconstruct history through experiences that occur on the margins, the likes of which are represented in films such as "Jeevita Nauka," "Chemmeen" and "Bharya" and the popular hits of P. Bhaskaran and the film songs of K. L. Sahgal, all of which allowed people to define their experiences – and in the process redefine themselves – in radically new ways. The charismatic personality of the communist leader A. K. Gopalan (AKG for Keralites) who is represented as making communists of people through his sharp gaze, the theatrical interventions of the pro-communist Kerala Peoples Arts Club whose popular play *Ningalenne Communistakki* transformed the political scenario in Kerala in the fifties in favour of the communists, the rabid anti-communist rhetoric of Father Vadakkan and the *kathaprasangam* performances of Rajan

during the days of the “liberation” struggle, all get their due in this history. The novel that closes on a note of uncertainty about the possibility of communication itself—symbolically represented by the narrator feigning insanity – almost turns into a sort of post-modern narrative extravaganza at certain points where the banal and the serious rub shoulders with each other.

The events fictionalized in *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, large and objectively historical in their reach and magnitude, might prompt one to place the novel in a horizon of narrative possibilities where Sara Joseph’s “Prakasini’s Children” with its focus on the subjective concerns of individuals would appear somewhat remote. True, one might look upon “Prakasini’s Children” as a literary artifact, as a finished product that meets the formal requirements of a well-crafted story. A reading of the story undertaken along this line will of necessity have as its focus its neat beginning, its controlled middle and its disciplined end. The story’s beginning with the discovery of unwed Prakasini’s pregnancy, its middle that describes futile attempts by her parents to get the pregnancy aborted and its ending on the fantasy of Prakasini giving birth to her children on the lap of Mother Earth will all find their rightful places in such a reading. Some might be inclined to consider the story, on the basis of this reading, to be a perfect specimen of eco-feminist creativity that does not compromise on the formal virtues of the short story genre. One might even recall the description given early in the story, of Prakasini standing naked in the pond “like a statue sculpted out of black granite,”⁵ and invoke it as a metonymic reference to the technical perfection realized in the work.

Much as one would like to laud the formal perfection of this fictional artifact, one would also like to treat “Prakasini’s Children,” as one did in the case of *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, as iconic of the desire to narrate a social experience and initiate in the process a textual practice involving questions of subject, history and gender identity. Sara Joseph’s standing as a major feminist writer with such important contributions as the novels *Alahayude Penmakal* (1999), *Othappu* (2005) and *Oorukaaval* (2008) has been duly recognized by the critical establishment in Malayalam. She is the first woman writer to develop a fictional style that merits recognition as a specimen of self-consciously feminist writing in the language. She belongs to the tradition of fiction writers starting from K. Saraswati Amma, Lalitambika Antarnjanam, Rajalakshmi and Madhavikkutty whose short stories represent an interrogation of the patriarchal culture with which they all had uneasy relationships. But unlike some of her predecessors, she is also a writer who is deeply concerned about the ideology of literary form and its

inter-connectedness with history and culture. This, needless to say, makes her concern for literature simultaneously aesthetic and non-aesthetic.

While an aesthetic concern for literature would be geared centrally to the specific character of the story as an artifact, a writer concerned with questions of history and culture would also take care to pay attention to this somewhat “non-aesthetic” event called story telling, a process which to be sure unfolds itself in an ideologically dense environment. Telling a story in this context is comparable to a folk ritual that in effect would unleash a pedagogy involving the reconstruction of the collective memory of a people. Walter Benjamin had formulated this idea several decades ago by suggesting, famously, that story telling, an activity close to the cultural practice of oral narration, leads also to the transmission of a moral message. “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to it.”⁶ This obviously is a communal exercise. In contrast to this is the generally individual-oriented tradition of novelistic narration – and this would include the tradition of short story writing as well – that endeavors to communicate isolated personal experiences. The textual practice mentioned earlier corresponds to Benjamin’s story telling in that it brings into being a community of readers who would respond to the story not as one would to an inert literary text, but who would actively body forth a collective subject and a collective history in the process of reading the story.

There are plenty of instances in “Prakasini’s Children” where the textual practice propels the evolution of such a subject and history. Look at the way Prakasini is discovered at the beginning of the story, her swollen belly inviting the shocked attention of her parents, as she moves to take a dip in the pond:

Amma saw the full figure of the girl, her body smeared with sunlight and turmeric. She shuddered to see the bulging buttocks that refused to be covered by the heavy flowing tresses. Muthassi gaped at the full rounded breasts, the widening dark blue circles around the nipples. The servants and domestic animals put fingers on their noses. Look at the belly rounded like a folk musician’s drum pot, their eyes mocked. (105)

What is striking about this description of the female body is that, in spite of the presence of male onlookers in the passage, it is not the product of the usual erotic, male gaze. This is because there is no hideousness or monstrosity about this description of the girl, who comes through in the end as one at peace with herself and her surroundings. Conventional narratives often present women, even those placed in non-erotic situations,

through bodily metaphors suggestive of the grotesque and the uncanny. The *yakshis* and the *rakshasis*, the mermaids and the harpies of past narratives persist as invisible, yet palpable, presences in several specimens of modern fiction. An important fallout of such representations is a deepening of the gender-divide in society, the proliferation of monstrous female bodies leading to a consolidation of the gender hierarchies that are already in place in the social psyche.

What the description of the female body in "Prakasini's Children" promotes in other words is a new subjectivity that does not replicate the historically constructed gender associations active in contemporary culture. Even the well-worn divide between nature and culture seems to dissolve and melt away in this narration. That is why the text presents Prakasini as one whose identity merges with the natural environment with perfect ease. Prakasini, the text reveals, opens her eyes like "a flower unfolding its petals" (105). She is "a nipped water lily" (106) as she comes away from the pond. Her eyes "shine like stars" (111) when she speaks to Muthassi. There is an air of placid naturalness even in the way she steps into the pond: "— knee-deep, waist-deep, breast-deep, neck-deep in water – her hands raised above her head, her face beaming" (105). Prakasini indeed is nature, but not, one might say, a non-historical nature that defines itself as the other of human history.

One might say that it is by constructing through her fiction a historically definable subjective identity for her reader that Sara Joseph discharges her onus as a socially committed writer. In an age and in a context where a woman's identity is often defined in private discourses and fantasies in terms of the body, this writer, in a distinctly creative move, liberates identity from the confines of the body and lets it merge with the vastness of nature. Identity cannot be reduced to any single aspect of the human experience; it is indeed unethical to conceive of a unified identity in the first place. The concept of a unified identity has always worked against the female, as several feminist scholars, especially those interested in integrating feminism with psychoanalysis, have pointed out.⁷ 'Traditional' psychoanalysis itself has in a certain sense promoted the idea of the unified identity in relation to women by suggesting that it is the failure of identity that is revealed through the fissures in the unconscious. Prakasini in Sara Joseph's story does not reveal any fissure in her unconscious, nor does she represent any failure of identity. What she reveals on the other hand is the history of her subjective identity by integrating it with the identity of a historically defined nature.

A comparison with a story written by a canonized

Malayalam male writer will throw light on what I mean by non-historical nature manifesting as the other of the human subjective will. The story in question is O.V. Vijayan's *Madhuram Gayati* (Sweet Is the Music), a short novel published at the same time as "Prakasini's Children."⁸ Vijayan's lyrical novel stands apart from the rest of his fictional oeuvre because of its unique theme, which is comparable in certain respects with the theme of "Prakasini's Children." *Madhuram Gayati*, sometimes described as Vijayan's bold foray into eco-fiction, is an allegory of the natural and human spirits fighting for survival in today's machine world. The novel asserts that man can survive the holocaust of the machine culture only if he agrees to live as part of his natural environment, paying due regard to the grace of the elders, what Vijayan elsewhere designates "the guru spirit" within him. Vijayan has already prepared the ground for such an assertion in his earlier novels, starting from *Dharmapuram* (The Saga of Dharmapuri, 1985), where nature's grace combines with the grace of the elders to give rise to the cleansing force of the guru. Siddhartha in that novel acts as a guru to the people, even as he adopts the trees, the leaves, the river waters and the wind as his own guru. *Madhuram Gayati* extends this principle to human life in a more focused way and attempts to glimpse the cosmic unity that exists not only between the non-human world and the human world, but between the human world and the machine world as well. It was unwise of the organic community to have extricated itself from this unity and divided into the separate worlds of birds, bees, beasts, flowers and the humans. It was this division that finally led to the separation and consolidation of a crude and unethical "machinality."

O. V. Vijayan of course is one of the architects of the modernist sensibility in Malayalam. It was his *Khasakkinte Itihasam* (Legends of Khasak, 1969) that consolidated the spirit of fictional modernism in the language. Vijayan's work in general can certainly be invoked in analyzing the way in which fictional imagination triggers a sharing of historical experience through processes of textual practice.⁹ However, *Madhuram Gayati* is unique in being constructed in the closed environment of a historical vacuum. It is not merely its closed formal structure that distances the novel from the dynamics of history. The novel steers clear of the dynamics also of story-telling and focuses instead on developing an allegory that can only recall a system of given values. Unlike in "Prakasini's Children" and *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, there is no room here for the creation of new values emerging from the textual practice. In narrating the story of the love relationship between an unnamed banyan tree and the forest maiden Sukanya, Vijayan's novel announces loudly

that what validates the story is the philosophical system working behind the allegory. There is much conflict and action in the novel as Sukanya learns a lot from her guru lover about the past, the present and the future of the universe. Sukanya's parents and the banyan tree are born at this end of a period succeeding a prolonged spell of antediluvian nuclear winter. The earth itself is split into two with one half full of machines and the other half witnessing the disintegration of the organic world into a diversity of animal and plant species. Even machines are at war with each other and with the human world. Man foolishly pretends to be in control of the machines he has devised, but it is actually the machines that control man. The novel concludes on a positive note, when, at the end of all conflicts, things come together and the sweet harmonious music of the cosmos is heard once again.

Though both "Prakasini's Children" and *Madhuram Gayati* seem to be arguing for a harmonious co-existence of the natural and human worlds, there is a great deal of difference in the way in which the texts conceive of the relation between the two worlds. The natural in *Madhuram Gayati* is non-human and non-historical, the result of a split that occurred in the universe after the antediluvian days of cosmic innocence. Man's alienation from this innocence leads to his estrangement from the cosmic life force that lies dormant in the earth during the prolonged period of internecine wars between the diverse species constituting the organic community. This, to be sure, is no history. It is more of a denial of history. That is perhaps why Vijayan takes care to provide those details in the form of a *purana* prefixed to the novel. Sara Joseph, by contrast, is a perfect historian of her time and place. The capitalist mode of production and the functional requirements of patriarchy are no *purana* to her; they are part and parcel of a lived reality and history. That is why in the story in response to the lover's suggestion that Prakasini give birth to *his* son – heir to his endless wealth, his "rice fields, laboratories, ammunition stores and soldiers" – in his air-conditioned room, Prakasini asks quizzically, "How did you come by these air-conditioned rooms?" (110) Her lover had once been poor and that was probably when she fell in love with him. But now her love for him freezes when she hears him say, "Prakasini, we now have air-conditioned rooms. Why do we need hillsides, fields of grass, jungles?" (110)

Apart from the specific sense in which this statement relates itself to the context of "Prakasini's Children," the question why one needs hillsides, fields of grass and jungles indeed is one that global capitalism has of late been asking the subjects of third-world societies. In fact this is a question raised by *Litanies of Dutch Battery* too, if not directly, at least by implication. Malayalee readers

might find this particularly significant, exposed as they are to regular debates on questions concerning capitalism's increasing invasion of Kerala's natural resources since the days at least of the controversial Silent Valley project. There is no overt reference in the texts of *Litanies of Dutch Battery* and "Prakasini's Children" to the environmentalist issue, or consumerism or patriarchy, even in the disguised form of a minor, subsidiary plot. Such concealed sub-plots, as the text of another of Sara Joseph's story puts it, "may not be to the liking of [most] readers" or, for that matter, of critics, who, especially, "may not take kindly to any relaxation in the prescribed norms relating to unity and tension appropriate to a good story."¹⁰ In point of fact however, whether one likes it or not, such inter-textual intrusions do occur in the reading of any really effective novel or short story, turning the experience of reading literature into an ideological practice rather than a passive encounter with a given artifact. A whole inter-text of dreams, myths, culture and beliefs are invoked in infusing the text with life. The structures in the text merely act as pre-texts for such infusions. This is an instance of the way in which textual practice processes historical material to produce texts, histories and identities.

In turning the text into such an inter-text of culture and history, Sara Joseph and N. S. Madhavan are proclaiming not only their unconscious identification with collective experience and collective memory implied by the art of story telling, but a more conscious allegiance to the tradition of writing in the language. The act of writing here becomes a way of sustaining and conserving oneself as a social being. This represents a major leap in sensibility that the literary mind in Malayalam has taken over the past few decades. The leap is noticeable in all branches of Malayalam letters, but it has been more particularly visible in the evolution of fictional genres. Unlike several other fictionists of their generation, Madhavan and Sara Joseph do not consider theory to be a bane that is to be expelled from their system. Both seem to be greatly sensitive to and mindful of the debates on the fictional medium taking place in their language, and this sensitivity allows them some rare insights into the reality around them, which in turn prompt them to re-order their world anew each time they confront the world. This is a continual process, a process that is replicated in the textual practice that fiction inspires. Though the textual practice of fiction need not follow the logic of theory, a theoretical knowledge of literature's logic might allow for an easy passage from the world to the text. N. S. Madhavan and Sara Joseph know that this passage also involves a mad interchange of ideas mediated through the practice of a community's linguistic and discursive

ingenuities. That there is indeed a method in this madness is what the analysis of *Litanies of Dutch Battery* and "Prakasini's Children" has indicated.

Notes

1. For English translations of the first two of these, see N.S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, trans. Rajesh Rajamohan (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010); Sara Joseph, "Prakasini's Children," trans. Ayyappa Paniker, *Katha Prize Stories 1*, ed. R. Bhattacharya and G. Dharmarajan (New Delhi: Katha, 1991), 104-111; O.V. Vijayan's novel *Madhuram Gayati* (Kottayam: Current Books, 1990) has not been translated into English.
2. N.S. Madhavan, *Choolaimedile Shavangal*, 2nd ed. (Kottayam: DC Books, 1994), p. 8.
3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990). Butler's argument, incidentally, is that gender identities are more a matter of performance and cultural practice rather than an expression of prior reality.
4. N.S. Madhavan, *Litanies of Dutch Battery*, trans. Rajesh Rajamohan, 3. (Cited in footnote 1 above; subsequent references will be made in the text.)
5. Sara Joseph, "Prakasini's Children," trans. Ayyappa Paniker, *Katha Prize Stories 1*, 105. (Cited in footnote 1 above; further references will be made in the text.)
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana/Collins, 1973) 87.
7. Feminist scholars, especially such representatives of French feminism as Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray as well as English feminists like Jacqueline Rose, have drawn pointed attention to this aspect of the constitution of the female subject. For an interesting discussion of the problem in relation to fiction, see Lidia Curti, *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation* (London: Macmillan, 1998).
8. The Malayalam original of "Prakasini's Children" was published in 1989 in the *Mathrubhumi* weekly. *Madhuram Gayati* was serialized in *Kalakaumudi Weekly* during the same year, though it was published as a book a year later.
9. This has been discussed in detail in P.P. Raveendran, *O.V. Vijayan (Makers of Indian Literature)* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2009), chapter 3. I have liberally drawn on this monograph in my analysis of *Madhuram Gayati* undertaken here.
10. Sara Joseph, "The Masculine Gender of Maiden," trans. P.P. Raveendran, *Haritham* 6 (1995): 45.