Fashioning Gender and Consumption

It was Onam, an important harvest festival in Kerala. The hostel where I lived, which housed female students of nearby colleges and female employees of various banks, post offices, schools, stores, and government offices in town, was celebrating the occasion. First, we “inmates,” as we were called by the hostel staff, sat in rows on the floor of the common room and entrance to the hostel, while the “warden,” or head of the hostel, bent down to ladle the rice and curries that make up a traditional Onam meal (sadhya) onto the banana leaves in front of us. My hostelmates met the temporary reversal of hierarchy that this entailed with giggles, a mixture of discomfort and amusement. After the meal, several students presented ritual gifts of saris and cloth (onnakodi) to those who worked in the hostel—assistant warden, cook, sweeper, gardener, watchman. What we were all really waiting for, however, was the mock fashion show that the students had been preparing all week. Within the safe, semiprivatized space of the hostel, it was possible to be playful.

Ajitha sashayed out onto the makeshift stage in a “Garden Vareli” sari as a cassette player belted out the latest hits from Malayalam, Tamil, and Hindi films. This sari was a play on an expensive brand of chiffon saris in floral patterns, often worn by middle-class working women. Ajitha strutted about to much laughter in a red sari blouse that clashed with the pink synthetic sari, from which various actual leaves, stems, flowers, and branches were dangling. Aside from the “garden” on her sari, the sari itself was a source of amusement. This type of sari is often called, in a derogatory manner, “pandi style”—referring to the fashion of workers from the adjacent state of Tamil Nadu, who now make up a significant portion of the manual and laboring poor in Kerala. Drawing on the connotations of cheapness that the shiny synthetic sari evoked and deploying the literalness of the word garden, Ajitha was able to playfully subvert the status of the Garden Vareli sari as a sign of mature, middle-class female respectability. Next came Meena, who strutted across the stage in a tight yellow top and high heels, wearing “hot pants”—a pair of white trousers with dried red chilies hanging from them. Barely able to stand in the heels, she sashayed about, imitating the stereotype of a hyperwesternized upper-class woman. Following Meena, Lekha skipped across the stage in an “umbrella skirt,” holding a huge open umbrella, wearing a very long and wide skirt, a fashion at the time. Tripping numerous times as she skipped, Lekha showed us the impracticality and frivolity of the skirt’s design, to great comic effect. Next came Sheena, who demurely walked across the stage in a “half sari.” Now out of fashion, this South Indian style used to be popular with young women who would wear it before marriage or paid employment, when they might begin to wear regular saris. The half sari consisted of a long skirt (pavada) and a full blouse, with cloth wrapped around the outfit (kavunti) to resemble a sari. Sheena’s version consisted of a full sari that came down only to her knees instead of her ankles. Walking demurely as she coyly showed off her bare calves and ankles, Sheena played with the persona of the good young traditional girl. Finally, there was Anjali, hair up and under a hat, a fake moustache on her upper lip, in a man’s shirt. She wore “baggy pants” with four or five purses draped all over her. Prancing about with long, extended steps, chest out, sidling up lecherously to various audience members, Anjali mocked the macho persona of the fashion-conscious hip young man of the street. The show was a huge
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hit, amusing and to the point. Even the usually dour warden could not help herself, laughing along with us, congratulating the young students on their performances.

These young women are consumers of fashion who are able to mock the commodification and objectification of fashions and the bodily demeanors that go along with them; they are both potential consumers and commodities, subjects and objects of consumption. The oscillation between playful subversions of adult feminine personas, such as the respectable working woman in her “Garden sari” and the hypersexualized, upper-class westernized woman in “hot pants,” and younger personas, such as the girl in an “umbrella skirt” or the postpubescent girl in her “half sari,” carves out a middle-class space, in between girlhood and full maturity, of young feminine adulthood at the intersection of region and nation, a space intimately tied to the pleasures and dangers of fashion. The contrast between these various feminine personas and that of the strutting young man about town in his “baggy pants” point to both masculinity and femininity as a terrain of class-inflected gendered embodiments that are central to the ways in which young people navigate the public spaces of modernity and globalization. The movement between “Indian” fashions such as the sari and half sari and “western” ones such as the pants or skirt point to the importance of spatial and temporal oscillations between tradition and modernity, the West and notions of “India” and “Kerala” in the production of this gendered terrain.

However, what is being mocked here are not just specific styles and gendered personas. These young women are also playing with the very idea of youth, and young women in particular, as “fashion conscious.” What is so humorously scrutinized is not only the content of the fashion show but also its very form—the idea of young people as emblematically consumerist and fashionable. Some of this scrutiny stems from many of the hostel residents’ marginalization from cosmopolitan and metropolitan constructions of “modern girls” who engage in such increasingly popular things as beauty pageants and fashion shows. Largely from lower-caste, lower-class Kerala backgrounds, they are marginalized from both local and national articulations of middle-class globalized Indian femininity. In order to so humorously scrutinize the very idea of youth as fashionable and the specific personas that occupy this terrain, they move beyond consumption as a set of practices to focus on consumption itself as fetishized object; something that is created through highly objectified constructions of consumer agency. These personas become condensed and concealed signifiers of consumption itself (see Appadurai 1996, 42).

Although Ajitha, Lekha, Meena, Anjali, and Sheena could turn a critical and mischievous eye toward the dominant understanding of fashion-crazy young people, their performative playfulness is circumscribed. The contrast between the relative safety of the semiapart hostel and the dangers of the public street, the college, or a public stage compels young women and men to behave differently in the public spaces of consumption and education—spaces that leave room for such assertive mockery. Further, while they may be able to critique the nexus of youth and fashion in this instance, their navigations of public life require a much more careful and calibrated negotiation of the gendered styles and personas they so amusingly rendered. The gendered terrain I discuss in this chapter helps us understand the enabling and constraining conditions of possibility for women who wish to enter not only public consumer spaces but the spaces of education as well, demonstrating how globally infected consumption becomes an axis of cultural belonging with implications for how women participate as citizens within the spaces of public life.

India’s Beauty Machine

Nowhere is the gendered production of the new globalized youth more evident than the burgeoning beauty industry in India. Key moments in the celebration of India’s ascendance to a new role in the global economy include the figures of Sushmita Sen, winner of the Miss Universe pageant in 1994, and Aiswarya Rai, winner of the Miss World contest in 1995, their bodies embodying India’s worth on the global stage, their tiaras crowning India’s attractiveness in the global market. In fact, with the crowning of Lara Dutta as Miss Universe in 2000 and Yukta Mookhey and Priyanka Chopra as Miss World in 1999 and 2000, India has become, like Venezuela and the United States, a major “beauty machine.”

The Miss World pageant of 1996, held in the city of Bangalore, was particularly noteworthy. The mobilization over a two-month period of
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12,500 police and paramilitary personnel from city, state, and central security forces was the largest use of state power to help what was essentially a multinational private commercial venture fend off widespread protests from a diverse array of political organizations. The protests came essentially from two sides. Women's groups on the Hindu right opposed the pageant on the grounds that it would import a decadent western culture that undermines "Indian culture." In the words of Premila Nesargi, a lawyer and member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):

There is only one common culture of Indians, irrespective of caste, creed, and sex. Our culture cannot be taken away by others, invaded. . . . In India women are not meant to be sold. Women are not treated as a commodity available for sale in the bazaar. If she sells herself, either her flesh, or body or beauty, she is offending every law in India. Commodifying a woman is wrong. You cannot reduce her to the status of a chattel. Beauty cannot be sold.*

The left-affiliated and independent women's groups distinguished themselves from the more conservative critics who they felt focused on a unitary and conservative notion of "Indian tradition," "a euphemism for the subordination of women." Rather they focused on the liberalization of the economy and the growing influence of multinational corporations, which they argued had created a climate in which events like beauty contests thrived, demeaning and commodifying women. Brinda Karat, general secretary of the left-affiliated All India Democratic Women's Association, brings a class and gender perspective to bear on the pageant:

Copycat contests are being organized in neighborhoods across the country. The growing obsession with "looking good" is not a reflection of the growing confidence of the independent-minded "modern miss" . . . nor is it a reflection of "free choice." . . . This constitutes oppressive pressure on young middle class women and distorts their self-worth. The processes of a new type of socialization driven by the market mantra impose stereotypes that are as oppressive and degrading for women as the earlier stereotype of the patniratna. . . . With the advent of policies of globalization and liberalization there has been an unprecedented increase in the efforts of the beauty industry to

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. . . create a market for its products. . . . There are clear links between globalization and the accelerated commodification of women. . . . The contest was an insult to the vast masses of India's women, who struggle to make both ends meet and are deprived of the right to a decent human life. If there is beauty it is in their courage.5

The pageant and such commentary on it demonstrated that consumption is not only one half of a capitalist system but also a discursive site for contesting and imagining the Indian nation in the era of liberalization. This discursive site, which markets to and constitutes a consumer-driven middle class oriented toward the global economy, is centrally imagined through the bodies of young middle-class females. While the beauty contestants themselves illustrate this, the Canadian-bred host of the pageant, Ruby Bhatia Bali, brings together the "global teen" and the nonresident Indian (NRI)—two sites for fetishized images of consumer agency—to represent globalizing India.6 In fact, Bali was a "veeJay" on Channel V, India's counterpart to MTV, which also featured Sophiya, a British Indian, and Kamla, a U.S. Indian.7 Marked by fashionable clothes and an aggressive public persona, speaking their respectively accented English, with occasional forays into exaggeratedly accented Indian English and broken Hindi for comic effect, they personify and market the NRI lifestyle for the new consumer in India. The crucial point to note is this: these veeJays are not white Canadians, Americans, or Britons.8 On the other hand, neither are they children of less affluent migrants to places like the Persian Gulf. The selective appropriation of the diasporic experience of migrants to industrialized, "first-world" destinations not only marks an important aspect of the class character of that particular diaspora itself but points to the class-specific, highly gendered stakes of producing a new consumer subject within India. This production hinges on an equation between youth and fashion that is crucially tied to the female form.

Protests of the beauty pageant contested the construction of this figure through a demonization of consumption, linked to the commodification of women's bodies. The Hindu right and left-feminist perspectives are obviously different in important respects. The conservative position rests on a deployment of tradition that masks gender oppression and patriarchy within as well as outside India. Like cultural nationalists of the
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The late nineteenth century that Partha Chatterjee has discussed, these nationalists of the Hindu right place women under the sign of a privatized tradition that must be defended against the corruption of western materialism. The left-feminist perspective rejects Indian culture as patriarchal. Yet it also rejects simplistic identifications of modernity with the space of women’s freedom. This modernity, rooted in the structures of patriarchy and capitalism, collaborates with the patriarchy of continuously reinvented tradition to produce new forms of gender oppression. Both positions, however, are operating in tandem in their rejections of the commodification of women. For the Hindu right, this commodification is associated with an invasive, alien, foreign culture. For the feminists, it is associated with an imperialist form of capitalist oppression. This is an oppression that differentially affects the “modern miss” and those who cannot afford beauty products.

The messy alignments between the Hindu right and leftist feminists around the protests to this pageant reveal the complicated terrain upon which Indian feminism is confronting globalization. Critics of the feminist position have focused on two aspects of the protests against the beauty pageant. First, the feminist position renders transparent the process of commodification, leaving the feminist critique of the pageant outside the circuits of global capitalism. Simply blaming commodification on the West assumes that there is a noncommodified, primordial space, something easily naturalized as the space of tradition within the Hindu nationalist position (John 1998). A more critically engaged interrogation of the actual process of commodification might reveal a more complicated analysis of the dynamics of the beauty industry, something that might enable the beginning of a more nuanced and differentiated political vocabulary. Second, Menon (2004) criticizes the dependence of the protests on nationalism, either culturally or economically understood. The Hindu right’s collapsing of anti-imperialism with cultural nationalism was couched in an emotive language that was difficult to address and hard to resist, and cultural nationalism in turn became conflated with the economic nationalism that many on the left relied on to protest the pageant. Further, Niranjana urges us to pay attention to the question of why women’s bodies became such a rallying cry for antiglobalization politics (1999). Not only do these processes target women and girls but they also put on public display the “normed upper-class female body,” central to the historical consolidation of Indian nationalism. This element of nationalism was not scrutinized by feminists. Recognizing the ways in which women bear the burden of authenticity and the centrality of this role in the operations of nationalism becomes imperative for understanding the dynamics of globalization in India.

What these criticisms do point to is that a rejection of commodification as “western,” something that both the Hindu right and the leftist feminists relied on in their critiques of global capitalism, depends on spatiotemporal grids distinguishing India from the West, and tradition from modernity, that are often worked through the figure of the ideal Indian woman. Rather than examine and critique these grids as part of the process of commodification itself, feminists fell in with the Hindu right in relying on such distinctions for the articulation of their position on beauty pageants, thereby relying on an uncritical nationalist platform. Further, the pageant itself relied upon globalized standards of beauty and femininity that simultaneously index locality, as can be seen, for example, in the celebration of these pageant contestants as national heroines. A straightforward dismissal of the pageant as “western” fails to address the ways in which these beauty regimes rely on their own nationalist constructions.

Protests against the pageant took the form of mock “queens” crowned “Miss Disease” and “Miss Starvation” in order to point to basic priorities, such as alleviating poverty and providing health care, from which the state had been retreating while lending tremendous support to this consumer-oriented private venture. The privatization of the state and its withdrawal from social welfare provision under new regimes of economic liberalization are certainly important rallying points for a politics of globalization. However, this form of protest skirts the critical task of examining beauty as a structure of gender, class- and caste-based aspirations, and anxieties; and it also fails to address a feminist politics to young middle-class women, the “modern miss” (John 1998). An insistence on considering the vast majority of women who cannot afford beauty products and who struggle to make both ends meet is an inadequate response to the realities of the ideological and political terrain, marked by an expanding consumer culture across caste and class distinctions, that Indian feminism must now confront.
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The recent proliferation of fashion shows and beauty pageants—often sponsored by colleges, youth organizations, stores, and other commercial ventures—and the attempts by the state, educational institutions, and political organizations of the Hindu right and the feminist left to ban or curb their presence inside and outside college spaces have made youth fashion an emblematic and highly objectified instance of gendered consumer culture tied to globalization.

In fact, a shorthand way to mark the advent and impact of globalization more widely is to point to the evidence of “global” youth consuming practices and symbols in often remote corners of the world: the popularity of the basketball star Michael Jordan and his team the Chicago Bulls during the 1990s in the slums of Brazil and in rural villages in Africa, the spread of hip-hop music around the world, and the popularity of McDonald’s among young people in China. These examples have a theory of globalization and youth embedded within them: youth is a consuming social group, the first to bend to what is understood to be the homogenizing pressures of globalization, a globalization fundamentally tied to Americanization.10 Youth consumption practices index the presence and reach of globalization. That fashion shows are available for mockery by my hostelmates and that the state government has attempted to ban them from college events reveals fashion as a highly objectified and potent terrain of cultural distinction for young people, one tied to a moral panic about the onslaught of a global consumer culture, and especially about what women wear.

However, these ways of indexing the salience of contemporary forms of globalization obscure the ways in which new global cultural forms are inserted into struggles over the meaning of modernity in many postcolonial locations.11 In the context of India, an understanding of the dynamic relationship between youth, consumption, and globalization requires an interrogation of the conditions under which young people engage new spaces of consumption. These conditions are profoundly shaped by long-standing colonialist and nationalist preoccupations with westernization, tradition, and modernity. Globalization works through strategic images of consumer agency that rely on notions of “India” to fashion a young, globally oriented middle-class Indian femininity. If a feminist critique of consumerism and globalization is to distinguish itself from nationalist anticapitalist critiques, of either the cultural or economic variety, it must produce a critical account of the production and circulation of these spatiotemporal grids, so as to reveal and interrogate what I call the “burden of locality” placed on femininity in processes of commodification. Rather than oscillate between the fact of the commodification of young women's bodies by global consumer culture on the one hand, or too simple an argument about the agency of young women within this culture on the other, I draw attention to how globalizing consumer culture is manifest within Kerala through highly selective discourses and constructions of consumer agency that mediate the boundaries between tradition and modernity, the West and the non-West, the public and the private for young women and men in ways that are both enabling and constraining.

Locating Fashion

It seems commonsensical now to say that clothing styles and the bodily demeanors that go along with them become an entry into a world of fashioning gender for young people that is central to the ways in which they navigate new spaces of consumption.12 This navigation is both fluid and structured, revealing genders and the spaces they operate in to be both enabling and constraining. But this understanding, and these embodied practices, have both a politics and a history: part of the rise of consumer culture, they are the current products of long debates over the role of clothing and the idea of the individual.

Studies of consumption within Europe point to many factors that define the nature of what is called “the consumer revolution” (Miller 1994; Bourdieu 1984; De Grazia 2005). Without getting into the competing explanations for what conditions led to the expansion of consumption within Europe or what the full contours of such a history might look like within India, one large-scale shift is important for the analysis here: a shift from a society organized according to sumptuary laws to a society organized around fashion (Appadurai 1996). This shift entails the gradual replacement of overt regulations on dress, based on ascriptive categories such as age, gender, community, and class, with ideas of choice and change, marked by a more generalized desire to consume.13 The emphasis on choice and change as a key feature of fashion, which ties it intimately to theorizations about modernism and modernity within the
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West, needs to be situated within the larger contours of debates about westernization, tradition, and modernity that characterize the history of clothing styles within India (Tarlo 1996). While differences in fabric, design, and cost can create a whole world of distinction, individuation, and choice within a particular style of dress—for example, the respectable chiffon “Garden sari” as opposed to the cheap “pandi style” synthetic sari—decisions about different clothing styles are structured by a politics of culture tied to debates about westernization and cultural authenticity that is highly gendered.

In an insightful article that traces the emergence of new discourses of the body and interiority in Malayalam literature, Udaya Kumar discusses the transformations of the late nineteenth century in Kerala with regard to clothing (1997). As has been discussed, caste was a primary source of differentiation. Clothing, along with jewelry, hairstyle, naming, food, and bodily gestures, constituted a sign system that regulated bodies in public. As Kumar notes, “The spectacle of the body in public spaces was replete with caste markers” (1997, 248). Within this context, what became known as the “breast cloth controversy” reveals how clothing gets transformed in the context of colonial modernity in Kerala. One caste regulation involved a prohibition on lower-caste women wearing an upper cloth (mel mundu), the preserve of upper-caste women on special occasions, to cover their breasts. European missionaries who were converting lower-caste members to Christianity encouraged their converts, in the name of Victorian notions of modesty, to wear a “jacket blouse,” similar to what Syrian Christian women wore. In the 1850s, Christian converts began to wear the upper cloth in addition to blouses, a direct challenge to upper-caste norms. This led to tensions between upper-caste and lower-caste communities as they struggled over the changing nature of caste relations. Kumar notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, the blouse ceases to be a simple caste marker and emerges as an object of fashion, something to be personally and aesthetically enjoyed as part of a fashion sensibility (249–50).

This dismantling of the sumptuary and the emergence of a fashion sensibility during the colonial period is an important moment in the genealogy of fashion. However, debates about fashion and style during the colonial period also reveal the insertion of questions of fashion and clothing styles into a new set of contentious debates about tradition and modernity, community and nation; the rise of a fashion sensibility is not simply about choice, change, and variability, though those are entangled within the elaboration of clothing styles. The example of the “breast cloth controversy” is a case in point. The blouse as an object of aesthetic pleasure emerges in a contested reworking of caste relations in the context of colonial modernity that is written onto the female body.

Within a larger context, histories of cloth and clothing in colonial India have demonstrated that dress underwent an important set of transformations for both men and women (Tarlo 1996). At the height of the nationalist period, the most spectacular example of the politization of clothing is khadi (homespun cloth), the production and wearing of which Gandhi made central to Indian nationalism. Within the realm of the everyday, the contours of these transformations involve changing attempts to define what is Indian and what is western through dress: how to sartorially mark the boundaries of work and education within the modern colonial spaces of office and school, while reformulating what home and the family meant. For men, the adoption of European-style dress in public was easier than it was for women. The debate about what constitutes proper dress for women became a key site for working out new definitions of community and nation. Within Bengal, the dress of the bhadramahila (respectable lady) of the middle classes was extensively debated before the brahmika sari (a form of wearing the sari in combination with blouse, petticoat, and shoes) became accepted as a standard for middle-class women. As Himani Banerjee notes, the sartorial recasting of women within the Bengali middle class involved much more than the introduction of a fashion sensibility (1991). The debate about women’s fashion involved a cultural-ideological reworking of the role of women within the community, one that tied the question of women’s dress to the dynamics of antic colonial Indian nationalism.

Fashion, style, and consumption have become important sites and metaphors through which we understand the processes of identity formation. They form a terrain of youth fashion, at the intersection of region, nation, and world, tied to embodiments of masculinity and femininity—an intersection that mediates young men and women’s differential navigations of consumer and educational spaces.
Masculine Anxieties

An important concept for understanding the association between youth, masculinity, and new forms of consumption in the Malayalam language is derived from a slang word, chethu.\[^{15}\] While it can refer to the stylish nature of many commodities and in some sense can refer to the notion of "being fashionable" in general, it refers most significantly to a kind of commodified masculinity.\[^{16}\] If a male is dressed in a new pair of jeans and fancy sneakers, he is usually called chethu, which literally refers to the activities of slicing, cutting, and slashing and also the traditional low-caste occupation of toddy tapping and the tapper's knife; figuratively it means "sharp," "cool," "hip," or "shiny," something like "cutting-edge."\[^{17}\] A fancy car, a stylish house, or a new motorbike are all chethu. A store dedicated to selling fashionable clothes in town was named Chethu. A fashionable young man is chethu, but women rarely are. If a woman dresses in a particularly fashionable way (especially if she is wearing a western-style skirt), she is said to have "gema," a term that connotes arrogance—something between being a "showoff" and being "stuck up." A young man is rarely described as having "gema."

One of the more fashion-conscious young men in the college interpreted his sense of chethu for me during a long, rambling interview. I never saw Devan in anything but jeans or baggy pants, an oversized shirt that went down to his knees, sneakers, and often a baseball cap with Boss emblazoned on it. Somewhat the class clown, he was a curious mixture of anxieties. He came from a lower-middle-class Ezhava family in town. As he tells it, he had been a good student in his well-disciplined Christian school. College was a different story. He did not want to study engineering or medicine, as his parents wanted, saying he found the subjects boring. He had an interest in the civil service. According to Devan, that meant studying something like history, English, or political science; subjects he surmised would give him the writing skills and knowledge necessary to pass the civil service exams. As history was "just the study of dates," he dismissed it. He stated that if one were to study English for the exams, he would need a very high quality of English education from extremely elite schools such as the Doons School or Delhi Public School.\[^{18}\] English seemed risky given where he was coming from: a marginal college, in a backwater town, in southern Kerala.

So, from his perspective, that left political science, which was what he was studying.

However, he was not very serious about college. He blamed a bad crowd he fell in with when he first got to college, going to three or four movies a week, hanging out at the beach, and spending time at the public library reading Mills and Boons romance novels for titillation. He was affectionately known by his friends as "Mr. Quote" because, as I found out, he punctuated much of his speech with quotes in English, from sources as divergent as Dale Carnegie’s How to Win Friends and Influence People and Gandhi. Explaining the effect of falling in with the wrong crowd, Devan said, "You are the company you keep." On the importance of friendship, he quoted Gandhi: "True friendship is a rare one. It is the identity of two souls." Caught between his bourgeois aspirations and his desire to have fun, Devan presented a humorous, anxious set of observations on his life and the meaning of being young.

Devan told me that you needed to be chethu in order to matter in his college: "It’s the chethu style: jeans, a Yamaha bike [he had only a bicycle]. You need to have six or seven jeans, Killer jeans [a brand name]. You need four or five cotton shirts, three to four T-shirts, a well-groomed, chethu, smart look. A bike. You must have a bike." Having delineated the minimum material requirements for a chethu style, Devan went on to describe the masculine persona that signifies and is signified by this style of commodified masculinity by describing some fine nuances. A less common term often used interchangeably with chethu is ash-push—a term that many said came from English, or the sound of English as it was heard by Malayalam speakers.

It’s just a matter of intensity. Ash-push is much more intense than chethu. Ash-push... a life that is in the chethu way, you enjoy life. You go to a beer parlor and have beer, that is ash-push. A Yamaha bike, money in the hand, a line [slang for a relationship with a girl], that’s it, in between you go to a beer parlor and you sip two beers, you have plenty of friends, you enjoy life. You enjoy the life. You don’t care about what has happened yesterday. You don’t care what will happen tomorrow. You are always happy. That is chethu.

This notion of chethu encompasses within it several aspects of a youthful, commodified masculinity that brings together clothing styles, sta-
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only element of the chethu style. Devan’s reflections on what it takes to achieve a chethu style focus significantly on key commodities and their number, such as six to seven pairs of Killer jeans, four to five cotton shirts, three to four T-shirts, the crucial and expensive motorbike, along with a line—a romance with a girl. Further, this style is about having friends and drinking beer in a beer parlor, which points to assertion and public forms of sociality. The lower-caste male body is commodified through fashion but is also a consuming subject marked by an aspiration for the good life.

An important component of the chethu style is the consumption of public space itself. Other than the requisite jeans, shirts, sneakers, and the all-important bike, Devan insisted that you needed to have money in your hand. When I asked him why, he said it was to kanagan. Karanguda can be glossed as “to wander about,” “to gallivant.” One needs money in order to consume in public. But it implies more than the material ability to participate in spaces of public consumption. Key to this notion is the aimless quality of this mobility—aimless in terms of not having a specific place to go to and also not having a specific goal to accomplish. It implies an ephemerality with respect to both space and time. As he stated, part of having a certain kind of chethu style was an attitude oriented toward the present, not the past or future. When folded into the idea of “wandering about,” it implies a kind of aimlessness with regard to not only the past and future but space as well. Therefore, whether the space was the actual college campus, or a beer parlor, movie theater, park, beach, restaurant, ice cream parlor, or bus stand, it was fodder for wandering about. And what was the reason for going to any of those places? The answer would invariably be chumma—for “no reason.”

Often, this past and future that one is trying to hold at bay are related to obligations and aspirations—to study, work hard, succeed. Here is Devan describing his desired future:

My idea of the good life is that you must have a lot of money. Per month, you must get ten to fifteen thousand rupees per month. You must have that. You will see. Living is not just eating. I do like traveling. Prices are skyrocketing: For example, all want to have one car. On average, you can spend two thousand rupees on maintenance of a car. Then there is food, housing, social gatherings, like that. If you want to live and have some savings, at least ten

tus, and an attitude about the world based on ephemerality and some notion of fun.

Devan’s narrative reveals the aspiration and anxiety that underlie his desire for Yamaha motorbikes, Killer jeans, T-shirts, and beer parlors. One way of contextualizing Devan’s reflections and his persona is to link them with the analysis of a film, Kaadalan (Loverboy), that was enormously popular with Devan, his friends, and college students in general. In an article about this important Tamil film, Dhareshwara and Niranjana point to new forms of youthful, commodified masculinity produced within this new moment of liberalization (1996). Kaadalan helped create a new youth style and aesthetics characterized by ragga-inspired clothing (baggy pants, oversized shirts, sneakers, pony tails), rap music, and Michael Jackson dance moves that have come to be the referents for a fashion-conscious sensibility among low-caste young men. Devan’s style directly borrowed from this film and other Malayalee variants such as Sreet (see Osella and Osella 2000b). The video and music cassettes of these movies, and those of the ragga musician Apache Indian, a UK-born Indian musician popular in the UK, the Caribbean, and India, were the hottest-selling items at many music stores in and around the college. Hit songs from the movie were standard fare at college and youth festivals. Perhaps the hit of the 1990s, this film marked the beginning of a new aesthetic in film, combining MTV-style shots, dance sequences, and rap.

Set in a college-student milieu, as Dhareshwara and Niranjana argue, the film reconfigures the young lower-caste male body, in the figure of its star Prabhu Deva, to mediate globalization, the violence of the state, and the demands of tradition. Under the sign of “fashion” indicated by his desire for blue jeans and sneakers, the body is refashioned as urban and consumerist. This kind of fashioning had previously usually been reserved for the upper-caste male body, as seen in the important and popular films Reji (1992) and Bombay (1995) directed by Mani Ratnam, in which the space of liberalization is produced through the bodies of upper-class, upper-caste Hindu forms of masculinity and femininity.” Previously, it was under the rubric of the “folk” and the “rural” that the lower-caste body had been configured. This film marks an important moment in which globalisation and its signifiers attach themselves to the body of the lower-caste, lower-class male.

However, the commodification of the lower-caste male body is not the
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thousand per month. You see, lots of modern things are coming into our life, like pages. Life is too short. You must have ten thousand per month. Then, a
good woman. If you have money, naturally, all other things will come. Cer-
tainly, it will certainly come. If you have a good job and you are drawing this
much salary, like that, you can marry from a well-to-do family, I don’t mean
top-class, but middle-class, like that. You will naturally get a good woman
like that. And you can enjoy life.

This movement from the present to the future, in which one is trying
to transform the ephemeral enjoyment of consuming in a chethu way
in the present into an upwardly mobile and secure form of middle-
class consumption in the future, is a precarious journey, something that
makes this chethu style problematic. Devan goes on to describe what he
calls the “positive and negative aspects” of being chethu, expressing his
worries about making such a transformation:

You have to speak in a chethu style (chethu nithigal samaram) and you have to
have chethu relations. You are good company for everyone. Then, you study
well. If you have all this, then you can say that you have a positive chethu style.
But there is also a negative side. You don’t care about what has happened
yesterday. You don’t care what will happen tomorrow. You don’t have aim, but
you are always happy. That is chethu. There is a negative side. You throw away
work and you become chethu. What I mean is that you will walk in a chethu
style. But you degrade yourself sometimes. The positive side of chethu is that
you should know about what you should do—work. But then you use life as if
it’s sand. You don’t care how much sand came here or how much is there. You
don’t care what will come in the future and what has come in the past. You
will just think about how the sands are flowing now. You only care about the
present thing.

All of this reveals many of Devan’s own anxieties about having had a little
too much fun in college. Approaching the end of his college days, unsure
about what to do next, remembering when he did work hard in school,
wondering how he was going to make his ambitions of the good life
materialize, he wondered about the limitations of aspiring to be chethu as
the past, present, and future weighed heavily on his mind.

Devan’s aspirations for and anxieties about achieving the good life
mediate the many forces that structure his life—his social origins, his
education, the space of youth as pleasure and consumption, and the
horizon of getting a job, setting up a household, and being a bread-
winner. He most immediately aspires to the pleasures of consumption,
marked by ephemerality and fun. This present is marked by the pleasures
of self-fashioning and the consumption and traversal of public space.
While trying to hold past and future at bay, he is plagued by the enorm-
ous task of having to turn his educated and aspiring self into a model
of middle-class stability, respectability, and consumption in the future
that is his imagined adulthood.

The three to four movies he sees every week are invariably the youth-
oriented “comedy films” that came to prominence in the late 1980s and
1990s in Malayalam cinema. Drawing on the work of Rowena (2002), in
the previous chapter, I discussed how these films mark the emergence of
a competitive and differentiated terrain of masculinities in the 1990s
across the caste/class spectrum which she links to the influence of Gulf
migration, the rise of consumerism, and the crisis of employment. Here,
it is important to note that the masculinity of chethu is an assertive and
aspiring lower-caste, lower-class masculinity that lays claim to the public
through consumption. It is marked by precariousness and vulnerability,
both in terms of its lower caste and class social location and the wider
world of acute unemployment in Kerala. In the broader consumer cul-
ture of Kerala during the 1990s, this masculinity sits at the intersec-
tion between the developmental state that educates students like Devan
and globalization that structures his consumer-oriented visions of the
good life.

Feminine Resolutions?

What is the relationship between femininity and these globally inflected
spaces of consumption within Kerala? Again, we can begin to grasp the
structures of representation that mark feminine engagements with these
new spaces through an analysis of films. While it was rare for the hostel
residents to go to films multiple times in a week because of evening
curfews, we did manage to occasionally see a film at a theater. We also
occasionally watched films within the hostel if we could convince the
warden. While some of the films we saw were the youth-oriented comedy
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films I have been discussing, others were of the more standard type, focusing on family melodrama. The figuration of the young adolescent girl in two such films illuminates the structures of youthful femininity through which consumption and globalization are mediated.

One film we saw within the hostel focuses on a diasporic family of Christian origin; the other, which we saw in a theater, features a Hindu family in a Kerala village. Spanning communities and locales both within Kerala and its diaspora, the resolutions to the crises facing both families converge on the young female form. The key figure for the mediations of globalization is not the lower-caste, lower-class male, as in the film Kudanala, but the upper-caste, upper-class female. These movies take us back to the construction of the "modern miss" struggled over in the politics of the beauty pageant. However, while that representation of a globalized middle-class Indian femininity was a highly contested celebration of an aggressive, sexualized young woman in public, these films reveal the specifically Kerala mediation of that nationally inflicted construction, one that is much more ambivalent and regulated. I highlight the productions and burdens of locality at the intersection of region, nation, and globe. The highly articulate and contested politics, on the part of the Hindu right and the feminist left, that marked the staging of the Miss Universe pageant reveals one form of antiglobalization politics. Here, a more diffuse and persistent cultural politics of globalization draws on masculine anxieties about modernity in order to raise the specter of a young woman run amuck in public, one who is eventually brought back into the fold.

In the Malayalam feature film Dollar (dir. Joseph, 1993), notable for having been filmed in both Kerala and New York, a Syrian Christian family from the central district of Kottayam struggles with the displacements of migration. The story focuses on a grandmother who goes to New York to visit her son and his family. Amid wide-eyed encounters with escalators, dazzling shopping malls, and the New York subway system, the grandmother bears witness to the disintegration of "family life" (kudumba jivam) in America. This disintegration turns decisively on the behavior of the women of the family. The daughter-in-law is a greedy, well-paid nurse who controls the purse strings of the family. Besides making more money than her husband and controlling him, her ultimate act of transgression involves hitting the grandmother in a fit of rage. The couple has a teenage son, a teenage daughter, and a ten-year-old daughter.

The rebellious, miniskirt-clad teenage daughter has an African American boyfriend with whom she is seen cavorting in bars and nightclubs, a narrative trope that relies on a racialized imagination of America as a space of criminality and vice. Unable to engage her own son, who is wrestling with his wife for control of the family helm, and unable to talk to the rebellious and incomprehensible teenage daughter (who speaks no Malayalam), the only one the grandmother can talk to is the teenage son (for some reason he does speak Malayalam)—who, while tempted by gangs and drugs, nevertheless listens to his grandmother's lectures. In the end, the African American boyfriend takes the eldest daughter hostage and the good son dies trying to save his sister. In the final scene, the father, unable to bear what his family has come to, entrusts his youngest daughter, clad in the paduva (full-length skirt) and blouse characteristic of South Indian dress for young girls, to his mother, telling her to take the girl back to Kerala, where she will be raised in the "traditional (nadan) way."

In the Malayalam feature Pavithram (Purity) (dir. Kumar, 1994) Kerala—as a space of the traditional—is in trouble. This is the story of the disruption of a traditional Nair (taravadu) household. The first half of the film takes place in a taravadu-style house in a village. A baby girl has just been born to a middle-aged couple with two grown sons. The good son, played by the foremost male star of Malayalam cinema, Mohan Lal, remains in the village, while the elder son, a college-educated doctor, lives in town. Tragically, the mother dies in childbirth. Unable to cope with the loss of her beloved wife, the father hands over control of the raising of his baby daughter to the good son. The daughter, Cochu ("little one"), grows up living a simple, idyllic village life with her deverahan, a term she herself has coined, which combines dever (meaning "elder brother") and ahan (meaning "father"). The first half of the movie shows Cochu growing up in this space of tradition. Toward the end of the first half, the space is marked by a scene in which a puberty ritual to mark the onset of Cochu's menstruation (tiruntukulil) is celebrated by the women of the village. The second half of the movie shifts to the city, where Cochu has been sent to be with her childless sister-in-law and other older brother (after much debate) and where she is to attend college. The sister-in-law, who functions like an aunt, immediately goes.
to work on Cochu, buying her skirts, jeans, and cosmetics. She instructs Cochu to stop wearing the full-length paúda skirt and blouse that mark a traditional regional style for young women and encourages her to go have fun. The rest of the movie follows Cochu’s decline as she wins a college beauty contest and comes under the influence of a hard-drinking, rowdy bunch of male students. Eventually, she returns in disgrace to her beloved chetanam in the village where, immediately upon arrival, she switches from her skirt to the paúda as an act of contrition.

These films provide some sense of how contemporary Malayalam cinema represents the “traditional” and the “modern.” Much can be said about the cultural politics of this cinema. For example, film criticism has pointed to the emergence of a potent mix of patriarchy and Nair nostalgia, which is repeatedly deployed to create notions of Keralayātha, or a collective cultural memory defined in upper-caste Najr terms—one linked to Hindu revivalism in the state (Ramachandran 1995). Therefore, while movies of the late 1960s and 1970s might have stereotyped the collective past of Kerala in terms of a generic peasantry rooted in “village” Kerala, now that “village” is understood as the space of Nair-ness and is thereby upper-caste and Hindu. Further, anthropological celebrations of matrilineal notwithstanding, that Nair past is rendered in decidedly patriarchal terms. As G. Arunima argues, “As the cultural nostalgia is cast in distinctly masculine terms, so is the anxiety related to it. Memory here is often an act of gendered erasure, with Nayar women slowly and silently fading away in a world of masculine desire and intrigue” (1995, 165).

Nowhere is this more stark than in Paúthram, which literally erases the mother, through her death, thus making Cochu the object of her brother-father’s prerogatives. The only remaining Nair woman of significance is the city-bred sister-in-law/aunt who leads Cochu down a path of corruption. This kind of cultural memory is also evident in the film Dollar. Not straightforwardly nostalgic for a Nair past, within the spatial imaginary of Kerala’s diaspora, the crisis of family and culture links the paúda-clad body of the young girl to the idea of Kerala as the space of tradition. In both these films, the production of locality onto the female form becomes key to narrative resolution.

The films Dollar and Paúthram both make the paúda and the skirt central, marking two poles in the inscription of the “traditional” and the “modern” onto the female body. The overall trajectories and the specific twists of the movies’ plots move between the two extremes that constitute this binary. In the case of Dollar, the ravages wrought by the miniskirt-clad, sexualized, westernized, “modern” elder daughter are trumped by the paúda-clad; “traditional” (nadam) younger daughter. In Paúthram, a village girl becomes dangerously modern but comes back again to her traditional ways—a transformation marked by an oscillation in fashion from paúda to skirt and then to paúda again. The representational absence of the churidar-clad female body in these movies marks the ideological absence of any possibility for a viable compromise. Moving between the two extremes of the nadam and the “modern,” instantiated in the paúda and the skirt, respectively, these movies fail to represent what might be designated as “the demure modern,” the churidar-clad female body that is otherwise pervasive in schools, streets, shops, and offices. The masculinity-obsessed anxieties about modernity that drive such cinematic representations either produce an utterly privatized traditional girl or a dangerously transgressive girl running amok in the publicity of modernity.

Dominant representations drape women’s bodies with the tropes of the traditional and the modes of the modern, as this brief consideration of recent Malayalam popular cinema demonstrates. But, increasingly, in the public spaces of contemporary Kerala—streets, shops, schools, and offices—young women, whether students, professionals, clerical workers, or shopgirls, neither wear the paúda-blouse combination nor commonly wear skirts or jeans. The dress of choice is the churidar (what might otherwise be called the salwar kameez), comprising trousers worn with a long top that usually goes to the knees. The wearing of the churidar among young unmarried women, and now increasingly younger girls as well as recently married women, has increased dramatically in the last fifteen years. Associated with North India, the churidar has been understood as a prominent example of an increasing North Indian hegemony and the displacement of a regional identity, and one that interrupts the more simple binarism of the “traditional” and “modern” in women’s fashions in Kerala.

The churidar came to Kerala in much the same way the one-piece sari did in the 1930s and after: first the dress of “fashionable” middle-class women, it became increasingly popular among women of other classes.
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intent on claiming a place for themselves in a specifically “Indian” modern public. For upper-caste, upper-class women, the one-piece sari, draped over the right shoulder in the nizin style, which has become the dominant national style, displaced caste-marked and community-marked clothing. For young women today, wearing the churidar, as opposed to the pavadai, is a matter of adorning themselves in the clothing of an “Indian” public—one that takes them out of a pavadai-clad nadu and yet protects them from the rampant sexualization of a “western”-identified, skirt-clad modernity. As I discussed in the previous chapter, despite the construction of the private/public dichotomy, women increasingly began to move in the public spaces of modernity, especially starting in the 1920s. The construction of separate spheres did not, of course, mean that women did not traverse these boundaries. Several scholars have drawn attention to notions of “respectability” and “modesty” through which this traversal was made possible. The contemporary wearing of the churidar is an embodiment of such notions of modesty in the fashioning of a modern femininity—one that enables and yet circumscribes women’s participation in the public. However, the modern public at stake here is a specific, nationally inflected one, an often bemoaned fact within popular discourses about the increasing popularity of the churidar. In discussions of the perceived threat to Kerala’s regional identity, the displacement of the pavadai by the churidar is a key indicator that North Indian hegemony is spreading through Hindi movies and Hindi-language satellite television.

Students at the college revealed to me the demure modernity of the churidar during the early days of my stay in the hostel. With respect to clothing styles, I had to contend with the stereotype of the foreign-returned, hyperwesternized, nonresident Indian woman. Early on, male students who came to know of my presence in the college as someone who had come from the United States would shoot comments my way mimicking my American accent or asking why I was not wearing a mini-skirt. Slightly older than many of the students with whom I worked, I sought to sidestep the stereotype by taking on the status of thekkuy, or elder sister. This made possible my role as a kind of confidante to many young women, initially a somewhat curious and exotic outsider who had few ties to the social networks around them, which made me relatively easy to talk to. Being a thekku also made possible a safe, generally in- nocuous, sometimes joking relationship with young men that helped me to navigate the terrain of male-female interaction. Sartorially, what this meant was that I rarely wore saris, because that identified me too closely with female teachers. Dressed in simple cotton churidars that were not too fancy, and never in western-style skirts or jeans, I sought to inhabit the relatively respectable role of the modern and demure young woman. My dress was a subject of some discussion, especially among young women. Some approvingly commented on the fact that I did not “show off” and walk around with gems like others who had come back from abroad. Others would sometimes get annoyed with my overcompensation. Why could I not wear something that was nice for once? When was I going to dress like the person I was? Surely, being foreign-returned, I could afford to buy something other than khadi cotton? What was wrong with wearing a pair of jeans?

Dressed in a churidar, I would walk with my fellow hostelmates to college. After several days, one of my friends came up and informed me that I had to learn how to walk correctly. When I told her I did not understand what she meant, she went on to explain that I walked in an “open” (thuranna) way: I would look around and peer at people walking by and at things on the road. Sternly, she told me that this might be acceptable in Chicago, but not in that town. She told me that it would invite comment all—the pervasive practice of men “hitting” women with sexual comments as they walk or ride by on roads, at bus stops and train stations, on buses and in trains. She said I should walk straight, I should not look around so much, I should look ahead of me and slightly down, and I should carry my bag and books close to my body. In short, I should walk in an oudhukam way. The Malayalam term oudhukam can mean “contained” or “closed.” I gloss the term here as “demure.” I had to learn to properly traverse the public in a demure manner. In public spaces, I would have to be responsible for my own containment.

There is no simple correspondence between the wearing of the churidar and being demure, as I found out. However, the force of the “demure modern” is that it is both demure and modern. A young woman wearing a pavadai could certainly walk in an oudhukam manner but could not claim modernity in the same way. Likewise, a woman in a skirt could walk as demurely as she wanted, but she would still be “modern” in a way that would leave her inescapably vulnerable to aggressive male behavior. The
churidar provides no simple safeguard, but it qualifies its own modernity with the kind of demure self-containment that enables young women to move through public spaces with some measure of circumscribed confinement. Here, however, let me insist on the instability of the category of a “demure modern,” one that mirrors the ever-present instability and vulnerability of a woman in public.

So far, this discussion has focused on the nadu, the oudhukam, and the “modern” as they are embodied through women’s clothing and as they respectively index spatialized notions of a traditional memory specific to Kerala, a specifically Indian national modern, or a dangerously sexualized “West.” Until now, the distinctly spatiotemporal character of each of these categories has remained largely implicit. But any discussion of these terms (nudu, oudhukam, modern) must also reveal the space-time dynamics that instructively demonstrate the stark inscription of the contestations of modernity on the female body.

Nadu—the pervasive term for “traditional”—comes from the word nūdu, which in Malayalam usually refers to “native place” or “home.” A profoundly locational concept, it can be applied only to someone who is understood to be where he or she does not belong. To ask somebody where their nadu is (an ubiquitous question when one is first introduced to someone) implies that they are understood to be from somewhere else. In the spatial configurations of Kerala’s geography, it can also refer to the “interior” or the “countryside” (nadu puru). It is in this way that nadu as “native place” comes to be taken as “village” more generically. Insofar as the term refers both to place of origin and the traditional (nudu— the traditional way), the adjective nudu therefore can only make sense along a space-time grid that maps “native places” onto “traditional” time. And in the logic of nostalgic memory, nudu points to another place and another time. The term modern is a similar term. Conventionally understood as the marker of a temporal break, the mutual imbrication of the projects of modernity and colonialism has produced a space-time dynamic where the relations between the non-West and the West are mapped onto a distinction between the past and a present-future. So, modern simultaneously refers to that present-future and the “West.” Thus, for example, an anxiously modern male subject in the film Puththram expels a paavad-clad female body from a place in the present to which it cannot with certainty belong, into a “traditional” past constituted by and also constitutive of its location in Kerala’s nādu/village; simultaneously, a female body that is marked as incorrigibly “modern” is propelled into a dangerous “West” out there in the city.

The term oudhukam does not have the same space-time dimensions. It refers most directly to a different space-time grid—that of bodily habitus and comportment. It refers to the “closed,” “contained” body of one that walks with her head down, arms in, eyes averted. It refers to no place “out there” but rather contains the female subject within the body itself. In some sense, the resolution of the tension between an indigenous tradition and a predatory modernity is literally the demure comportment of the female body. The production of locality, in this instance, hinges on the female body.

This point might be better made if we compare the terrain of femininity to the terrain of masculinity. Without entering into a full discussion of masculinity here, it is instructive to examine the sartorial representations of masculinities in Puththram. In the film, one sees a “traditional”-coded, mundu- or sarong-clad brother who resides in the village and a trouser-wearing brother who is a doctor in the city. This contrast points to a certain kind of emblematic opposition between traditional and modern masculinities; it also points to class differences. However, in Malayalam, one would rarely refer to a young man as either nādu or “modern.” And one would never refer to a respectably clad bourgeois-type male as oudhukam. The absence of a readily available concept for marking a respectably “modern” male thus points to the specifically gendered nature of the term oudhukam and its constitutive construction of the female body.

Similarly, if we compare the orientation toward the present of the dēthu style to the presentist orientation of the demure, the body politics of the production of locality begins to reveal itself. The demure modern repudiates the privatized past of tradition and the sexualized transgressive future of modernity by producing a present that is located within the confines of the female form—the space-time configurations of the body. The past and future of femininities are highly spatialized temporalities, whereas the dēthu style repudiates a different kind of past and future and produces a different kind of present. This form of masculinity is not one necessarily rooted in a spatiotemporal notion of “tradition” and “modernity.”

While the present tense of dēthu is rooted in an aimless kind of wandering—a restless mobility in search of fun that might or might not lead
to a secure future of middle-class respectability and consumption—the present tense of the demure modern is rooted in the body and its containment as it traverses public space. This becomes clear as Devan discusses his idea of the perfect girl by describing a kind of girl that he could hardly imagine: “Imagine a girl going about in a chethu style... She moves towards people in a big way... towards everybody... a big style... I mean just try and imagine it... she speaks to everybody... she makes a lot of noise.” His idea of a demure girl is “one who won’t go around for no reason. For no reason, just wandering about. She won’t wander about for no reason.”

The demure female body enables a young woman to enter the public, but in ways that circumscribe her movements. She must be goal-oriented and contained as she traverses a public that is also occupied by young men, whose movements and trajectories are different—aimless and wandering. In a sense, this idea of the demure entails carrying the private, “essential” self into the public. Masculinity “shines” (chethu) in public, whereas the demure is contained. A demure femininity in public retains its interiority, which is what allows it to enter the public in the first place. The interiority of masculinity is not rooted within masculinity itself, but in the home, family, and a relationship with a woman. The opposition between public and private that young women must negotiate creates a discontinuous social space that leaves little room for a harmonious, essentialized gender identity that can be easily applied across social fields. This “demure modern” style is both inscribed and performed, one that can be identified, talked about, and contested.

Fun, Embarrassment, and Regulation in Public

The masculinity of the chethu style involves a congealing of certain fashions; an attitude about past, present, and future; and a mode of traversing public space in which one is very self-consciously on display. However, chethu is a precarious achievement, one that can fail in any number of ways. I have discussed some of this precariousness in terms of a lower-caste/class masculine struggle to turn a presentist enjoyment of consumption into a secure form of the good life in the future. Moving through public spaces, whether the street, a bus stop, the actual space of the college, or the stage of a local beauty pageant, involves for both young men and women a complicated mode of self-presentation and traversal. It is here that we begin to see the ways in which the gendering of the youth/fashion nexus structures the participation of young men and women within the public spaces of consumption and education.

In the town where the college is located, nonfamilial, heterosocial spaces for young people to congregate and socialize were increasing but not plentiful. Often, spaces of sociability were fashioned in and around the spaces of the college along with the trains, train stations, bus stands, and buses that many students used to get to and from college. More adventurous types might congregate at restaurants, ice cream parlors, or the cinema hall; the most adventurous, at a nearby park or the beach. Of course, the sense of these spaces as relatively safe or transgressive is tied to their relative sexualization. These spaces also enable homosocial and heterosocial forms of sociability, full of pleasure and risk. These practices of sociability constitute these spaces as youthful, spaces for friendship and romance. It is instructive here to explore humorous stories about the embarrassment (chammal) of navigating sociability and public life, stories that reveal something of its enjoyments and dangers.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, comedy films emerged from and reconfigured comedic repertoires and performative traditions within Kerala. For example, Rowena (2002) discusses the ways that a form of stand-up comedy called mimicry, in which pairs or groups of young men perform comedic routines about verbal mishaps and everyday blunders and confusions, began in the 1970s to replace kathaprasangham, an oral genre that features a single performer who recites song, poetry, and dramatic narration. Like the fashion show, mimicry routines have become a central element of youth festivals and college events, now intimately tied to cinema. Early stars of comedy films were mimicry artists, an early and important comedy film being Mimitry Parade (dir. Thulasidas, 1991). Now, performances of mimicry almost exclusively by young men involve enacting comedic scenes—often depicting everyday blunders and confusions in schools, hospitals, police stations, bus stops, and the family home—from popular films and television programs.

A complex everyday mediation of this genre emerges in which what is highlighted are moments of public embarrassment—indicated by the word chammal. For example, on the television show Chammal in Demand on the Kairali satellite television channel, viewers are able to request their
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favorite scenes of embarrassment from comedy films (see Rowena 2002, 161). Sometimes, the term can refer to comedy in general. For example, describing a film or a role as chammal refers to its comedic elements. (Rowena also links chammal to practices of male rivalry called para, in which one is trying to cut one's rival down to size.)

Often, during the evenings in the hostel, our conversation revolved around stories of various kinds of chammal that happened that day at work or college. These would include examples of physical embarrassment—dropping a folder full of paper in front of one's co-workers and being made fun of. Other examples involved verbal mishaps—being nervous and giving the wrong answer when a teacher asked a question. I experienced a lot of chammal mispronouncing various Malayalam words, to the endless amusement of my hostmates. Still others involved seeing something that was so outrageous that it caused the viewer embarrassment.

One day my roommate Seema came back from the post office where she was a clerk. She walked in the door, wagged her finger at me, and told me that "my people" had caused her too much chammal that day. Seema was full of stories about the sahibs and madamas, as white men and women are referred to, who came through the post office. Those stories often involved language confusion; their hair, eyes, and color of their skin; and most important, the way they dressed. That day, she said that a woman had walked into the post office dressed in a pair of shorts and a bra. At my and my other roommates' protests, she insisted that she was not confusing a bra with a sari blouse. The woman had walked up to her counter with a long series of tasks that she needed to get accomplished. The shock at the way the woman was dressed was followed by such intense embarrassment on Seema's part that she started to "feel chummy" and could not look at the woman while she tried to serve her. This caused further confusion, which led to further chummy feelings, because then her co-workers started making fun of her and her situation. Chammal happens in public—where one is on display, where the performance of one's public self can unpredictably fail; it is a kind of slapstick comedy of everyday life in public. And it's an amusing kind of failure to which both men and women are subject.

However, chammal takes on a particular salience when tied to a chethu masculine style, one in which wandering about looking for some fun can often involve embarrassing oneself in a clownish sort of way, laughing at other people's embarrassment, or embarrassing others, becoming an aspect of male rivalry and competition. I discussed various forms of chammal with Bajju, a student friend of mine, after he came up to me laughing heartily about something he had just seen. He first described what he called "bad chammal," a kind of chammal in which one is not relating to one's peers but to authority, and the ways in which authority can embarrass you, administering a dressing down that leaves you looking bad in front of your peers, especially girls:

You're talking in class. The teacher will tell you to stand up. Then he will start a dialogue: "Boy [de], what is this? Who do you think you are? You have no sense [bohum]." He'll go on for a while. After a little while, you will feel chummy.

He then went on to describe a more light-hearted situation, like the one he had just seen:

Rajiv was going on a cycle. A bus went by with a girl in it whom he knew. Just so he would hear, she said out the window, "Hey boy [de] move out of the way!" He looked up to see who said that. He hit the curb and fell over . . . [laughs] . . . At least he didn't hurt himself.

Then he described other chammals he had recently experienced:

A chammal that happened to me. I'm waiting for the bus at the junction. I put out my hand. It drove past me and stopped. I ran to catch it thinking it had stopped for me. It stopped because of a gutter in the road. Then just as I was reaching it, it sped off. Everybody in the back and at the bus stand laughed. That was a chammal. I had to walk all the way to the next junction. How could I go back and stand there with everyone else?

Finally, he described a chammal that he thought was a really big one, involving a friend of his who had just gotten a brand new motorbike:

You know the road that runs alongside the college? There is that road. Sunish had gotten a Kinetic Honda, the kind that you don't need to change the gears for. There is that curve in the road. Me and my friends were there. They saw
him coming and he saw them too. He wanted to shine [sree] in front of them. He took both hands off the handlebars and said, “Hey!” The Honda turned and skidded. That’s a big chammal.

These examples reveal the unpredictability of attempting to present a certain kind of public persona. All of them involve one’s management of various kinds of public situations—sitting in a classroom, riding a cycle or a motorbike, running to catch a bus. The stories are funny because they reveal a certain incompetence to manage oneself in public, physically or verbally, in a failure of sree. Sometimes it is your transgression or desire to “shine” that gets you in trouble. Other times, it is the fault of a situation beyond your control. And still other times, someone else does something to embarrass you, like a girl calling out to a boy.

What happens when a man tries to produce chammal in a woman? It is here that we begin to see the ways in which women’s traversal and occupation of public space becomes problematic. The situation shifts from small incidents of unpredictability in public to a more rigorous policing in which women’s sexuality and their containment is at stake. The most pervasive form in which men address women in public is comment adi, “hitting” women with sexualized comments on the street, in a bus, or in various other situations. Part of a set of practices labeled “Eve-teasing” in popular discourse, comment adi emerges out of masculine practices of fun in public. As indicated earlier, women deploy a demure demeanor to navigate this precarious terrain.

In an interview, Shijo, somewhat notorious for his playboy image, produced his own rationalizations for this practice. He began by saying that he was not as bad as most other guys because he did comment adi only as he was walking along the road. He did not stand at the college junction and continuously make comments to all the women who came by. He then went on to say:

In nature there is this notion, that the opposites always attract. That cannot be realized. Right? To have a conversation about that is why people comment adi. Then, you say it to boost up confidence. For example, when I was walking along, I saw a girl. She was a friend. Not very attractive [roam illo]. Somebody said something in a way that hurt her. I don’t do things like that. You should do it to boost someone’s confidence: I will give you another small example.

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When I was walking along this morning, I saw a girl. Very attractive. She was good to look at. I am walking this way and so is she. So I go up to her and say, without saying anything dirty, I just want to say that you are good to look at. I like you. Do you think you might like me? Then she will laugh. I know I will not see her tomorrow. I know that. It’s just a joke, tamasha. It works both ways. I get satisfaction, then her confidence is boosted. I tell her she’s good-looking. Her confidence is boosted. There is nothing negative here. That’s the way I think about it.

However, other than doing a girl a favor by “boosting up her confidence,” he also goes on to blame the manner in which girls behave:

When you walk in an unmindful way, you will get comments. Nobody will like it if a girl walks around feeling a little superior [garna]. They will try and degrade her. They will say something in order to lower her, bring her back down.

This idea of “walking in an unmindful way” points to the ways in which young women’s traversals of public space are regulated. Further, when a man tries to embarrass a woman in public, the specific regulation of women’s sexuality begins to reveal itself. This regulation requires both the production of women as sexualized and the policing of that sexualization. The spatialized terrain of femininities mapped out earlier through an analysis of clothing styles structures the ways young women are enabled and constrained in their negotiation of the public spaces of the college and consumer spaces. A young woman’s participation in the public spaces of modernity requires her to mediate her sexuality. The mediation happens through embodiments and negotiations of femininities that enact a cultural politics of globalization within Kerala as women participate in globally inflected consumer culture and spaces of education.

In the earlier discussion of the Miss World pageant, I highlighted the figure of Ruby, a veejay and the host of the pageant. Ruby’s traversal of the public (on television she comfortably and aggressively moves through the public streets and beaches of Mumbai) is a completely “modern” one. Standing in the heart of the modern, nationally inflected public, the anxieties that provoke the need for another, more demure “modern” are not represented. Such anxieties are represented in Dollar and other such movies of the contemporary Malayalam cinema. The
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The "modern" girl who has too much gama by recounting a story of when she was the target of sexual comments. He locates this story in a more elite college in the capital city, where all the girls are supposedly "modern":

In Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram), I had to go to [that] college for some reason, you know? Yes . . . I had to go see some friend. You have to walk a lot from the main road. I was alone. I had my two hands in my pockets, like that I was walking, kind of smartly. As I was walking along, there were two or three of them, laughing and going. One said to another, "It seems like he's about to break up and fall. He must need his two hands to be in his pockets in order to help him stand up. What does he think, that it's chethu? Oh, it's not chethu. He's just got on a pair of stupid jeans." I was shocked. I turned around, angry and hot. I pretended not to hear and I just went on. "Can you see how he struts?" [the girls said]. I just turned and said, "Daughter [mole], I have a lot of people to see. Can you just let me go?" I'm telling you. These girls say a lot.

Here, Shijo is constructing a narrative in which his marginalized class status, as someone from a nonelite, small-town college dressed up to go to the city, is mediated through gender, a confrontation with the aggressive "modern" girls of the more elite classes. The narrative plays on tropes of conflict and desire between an aspirational lower-class, lowercaste boy and a newly aggressive upper-class, upper-caste girl that have come to dominate youth-oriented films (Rowena 2002).

When I asked why and how girls in other colleges sometimes wore skirts (in Kerala's capital city of Thiruvananthapuram, for example), I was often told it was because those were rich, Gulf-return girls. But in fact the great majority of these girls would never have been to the Gulf. Under the highly restrictive labor laws of many Gulf countries, rarely does a work permit include a family visa. Furthermore, noncitizens are not allowed into the Gulf countries' university systems, so children are commonly left behind for school. Young women who wore skirts were not recently returned from the Gulf, and their families may or may not have had connections to the Gulf, but their bodies bore the burden of "foreignness." Further, the relationship between the Gulf and the "West" is a complex mediation that is elided in such markings, where the libertine sexuality associated with the "West" is foisted on a woman associated with the Gulf (even though most women who have been there...
complain of having had to wear a burqa for the first time and point to having been highly restricted in their mobility. Such situations reveal the ways in which class and urban-rural resentments come to be focused on the female body.

While this example reveals the negotiation between the “modern” and the “demure,” the other end of the boundary that marks the “demure modern”—namely, that between the “demure” and the “nadn traditional”—is also policed. Beena and Lena were two close friends from a village two and half hours away by bus. They were students on a scholarship for the children of the lowest-caste communities, their fathers being fishermen. Within the college, the state, and everyday talk, they were “sc/st” students, referring to the bureaucratic categories of “scheduled caste” and “scheduled tribe,” the lowest categories of communities in the state-derived classification of caste hierarchy, linked to programs for redressing caste inequality in jobs and education. Acutely sensitive to their marginalization, they had a strong sense of the difference between nadn purruh—their village, the interior from which they came every day—and the city. They understood themselves to be nadn and dressed in a paunda and not an expensive churidar. They were particularly appreciative of teachers who were welcoming and kind, and angry about teachers who seemed distant. College was a difficult and threatening place for them, but they managed to have their fun—stickying with their friends from their village, occasionally and illicitly spending their stipend money on an ice cream instead of a notebook. And they were more assertive than most about the ways in which they were targeted. Beena was especially angry about being threatened by a group she and others called “the bad boys,” a group of six male students that had formed the previous year, going around “chethu-fying” as Beena scornfully put it.28 They were of the city, four had motorbikes, and they were known for targeting girls inside and outside the college. Many in this group were from middle-class Ezhava families in town, and one could see in their personas the workings of a more general “osc” (other backward classes) caste- and class-assertive and commodified masculinity. Beena contrasted them to the nice, respectful boys of her nādu, boys she called pawum, possessing a simple and humble kind of masculinity.29

I ran into Beena and Lena one afternoon as they were leaving at two o’clock to catch a bus. I started to tease them about skipping class, wondering what their parents would say when they came home so early. Beena immediately got defensive. She declared that she was fed up and tired and wanted to go home. She complained about the long commute, which usually meant getting home after dark. She said her parents did not know what she went through every day. Then she recounted an incident that had happened that morning in their classroom. While the teacher was out of the class, the president of the student union had come by to announce the start of a book fair. Beena and Lena were sitting on the windowsill. After the student president left, a member of this “bad boy” gang started berating them for not sitting properly at their desks while the announcement was made. He yelled at them and asked if the classroom was their family home (kudumbu sramam), where they could sit any way they wanted. Beena said that they paid no attention to him and continued to sit on the sill. When the lecture started, she moved to sit at her desk. “Why should I have to respect him?” she asked angrily. She vowed she was going to file a complaint with the principal, bitterly noting that it would do no good. For today, she had had enough and was going home.29

The male classmate had deployed a contrast with the privacy of the family home to try to make Beena, already marked under the sign of a privatized tradition, behave in a properly demure manner in public. This particular move from the traditional to the demure modern is one that she resisted. But sometimes a young woman wants to make that shift and is prevented from doing so.

Shoba was one of a group of students who came from the surrounding villages to attend college. Like many of them, she came from a relatively poor, peasant Ezhava background. She stood out among this group of students for several reasons. She was the “dancer” of her class; for every college function, it was Shoba who performed the obligatory bharatnatyam dance number. She wore cosmetics and jewelry. She also wore churidars while the other girls of her background would usually come to college in paudas. Although Shoba sought to embody the demure, she was also the special and persistent target of male sexual harassment. A year prior to my arrival at the college, it had gotten so bad that a boy on a bus had actually tried to rip off some of her clothing. It was then that she filed a complaint with the school. This sort of behavior occurs in many forms every day, and most young women do not complain. When pressed to answer why she was so singled out, she would simply say
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"Boys are like that." When boys were pressed to explain, or teachers, or other female students, it always came around to her uncle in the Gulf. Shoba lived with her widowed mother and sister in a village outside the town. In conversation after conversation, her style, clothes, and body were directly and explicitly linked to the money her uncle sent back for the family. She was often said to have too much gema, or arrogance. No matter how hard she tried to enter the space of the "demure modern"—wearing churidars, studying bharatnatyam (that emblem of the cultured, demure middle-class young woman)—she had transgressed. Needless to say, she had never left Kerala, but her body bore the burden and the traces of that journey abroad, a journey that engendered transgressions of class and caste hierarchy for which she pays the price.

This example demonstrates the ways in which the space of the demure modern is exclusionary and points to the production of locality on the unstable boundary between "tradition" and "modernity." I end by exploring how girls understood to be "modern" negotiate ideas about tradition/nadu in the context of a "Miss Kerala" beauty pageant. Notions of fashion and fun and their negotiations reveal tensions between the idea of the "modern" and notions of tradition/nadu.

As in the rest of India, the beauty industry in Kerala is thriving. From the proliferation of beauty parlors to the presence of fashion shows at almost any youth or college festival, the practices of fashion and beauty have come to redefine what constitutes femininity for middle-class young women. It is within this context that the Miss Kerala pageant was staged in December 1994 in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of the state.

The contest was but one of several Miss Kerala pageants held in various parts of the world. Held under the aegis of the World Malayalee Federation, along with Miss Keralas from such far-flung places as Abu Dhabi, London, Chicago, and Houston, the Thiruvananthapuram Miss Kerala would travel to New York for the final level of competition, thereby mapping Kerala's own diaspora. The contest was held in a large auditorium in a palace of the former maharajah of Travancore, a Nair royal family. Consistent with its location, the beauty contest went on to define a hegemonic Kerala femininity in line with its upper-caste Nair trappings. The contest had some very precise specifications. There were to be three rounds, each with a different style of dress. In the first round, the contestants wore the paúda-blouse combination. In the second round, they wore the sari, most of them a Kerala sari, distinguished by white cotton cloth and gold-thread borders. For the third round, the young women wore the mundum-neryatham, a two-piece garment worn to resemble a sari. It is the traditional attire of mature, upper-caste Nair women.

In each round, a local television celebrity asked them several questions. The questions were quite specific, focusing on Kerala dance, drama, poetry, history, and literature. In round three, the round in which they wore the mundum-neryatham, they came out one by one, carrying a large villalu (lamp), in the Kerala style, which they carefully carried to the front of the stage and lit. (As one contestant put it, "It was really heavy.") This mirrors the lighting of the lamp by brides during Nair marriage ceremonies.

Gita, a young woman who was in the audience, stated:

OK so this is what they thought. She should look like a Kerala girl. The typical Nair. People consider that to be the middle, you know not the highest caste... And it's not the lowest where poverty comes. It's for the middle-class people. With the paúda and blouse, the long hair. You get the picture? That's the way it is, in the Nair class.

In describing to me what she thinks the organizers were looking for, Gita links Kerala with Nair, the "middle," long hair, and the paúda. This nostalgic production of a specifically Nair femininity is in line with a broader movement of cultural remembering defined in upper-caste, Nair terms. However, within the rubric of the global Miss Kerala competition, the Miss Kerala from Kerala is but one of many the world over. She has an equivalent position with respect to other Miss Keralas. Her Keralanness is not privileged with respect to the diaspora; in fact, her equivalence with them is required by a certain cultural politics of globalization. The structure of a globalized middle class makes it possible for there to be an equivalence between the likes of a Miss Kerala from Kerala and a Miss Kerala from New York. The contest reveals starkly the production of locality on a global stage. Miss Kerala must be a nāden penu in her dress, comportment, and knowledge. Written onto the female bodies of a proliferation of Miss Keralas, the nadu, locality itself, becomes transportable and transposable.

So far, I have presented an analysis that would trace the body of the
woman as object, tradition commodified: a body inscribed and consumed by a patriarchal middle-class masculine gaze. But in many ways, the Miss Kerala pageant was seen as a failure. In order to examine why, we must move from the structure of the event to its performative aspects. The beauty contest can be conceptualized as a literal and figurative stage for the enactment of gendered identities. Judith Butler points to the possibility of a breakdown of replicability—a “failure to repeat”—as a way of understanding gender identity as a real but tenuous construction (1990). It then becomes possible to view a woman’s body as not simply inscribed and commodified but also performed and enacted.

During the public performance of gender identity that took place during Thiruvananthapuram’s Miss Kerala contest, certain dissonances appeared. The main problem emerged during the questioning. In short, all ten contestants had trouble answering questions about Kerala history, poetry, literature, dance, and drama mainly because they simply did not know the answers, sometimes because they did not know the highly Sanskritized Malayalam necessary to answer. The problem became particularly acute during the third round. After walking slowly across the stage with the traditional lamp, laying it down, lighting it, and then walking over to the questioner, many of the women could only answer, when asked who had won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for poetry two years prior, “Sorry, I don’t know,” at which point the audience, laughing and heckling, would shout back, “Then why did you come?” or “Go home, girl!” It became comically clear that there was a mismatch between contestants and contest standards.

I asked Gita her assessment of the problem. She said,

They felt this is what Kerala is about. And we need a girl who is about Kerala. But they forgot that there is no one like that. Do you understand that? There is no one like that who is going to get up and go onstage. . . . Most of them had done these things before, I mean other modeling things. I’m sure they thought this was going to be one of those things. Like other contests. They have easy questions. You know, like “What do you think women should do?” Most of them had some title, Miss Coimbatore, Miss Ernakulam. One girl was in the movies. So, they walked like they were in a fashion show, except they were wearing a paada.

For Gita, the source of the mismatch was a contradiction between form and content. The form of the pageant was part of a whole repertoire of practices—acting, modeling, fashion shows—which constitute a “modern” and globalized feminine consumer space; a form of publicity that only “certain girls” engage in, the “modern middle-class miss” as characterized by Brinda Karat of the All India Democratic Women’s Association. The content required a performance of the “traditional” comportment and habitus in a public space that collided with other (“modern”) bodily demeanors—walking as in a fashion show, but somehow doing so while wearing a paada. From Gita’s perspective, the failure of the pageant stemmed from the contradiction between a “traditional” Kerala girl and the modern, globalized form of a beauty pageant. She found the expectations of producing “tradition” unreasonable, highlighting the fact that a truly naden girl would never participate in a pageant. Gita went on to say,

I was laughing, they [people in the audience] were laughing. It was so bad. But I don’t blame them. They didn’t know the answers. And the Malayalam. See, they make fun of it because the kids just don’t know. Do you blame them? Some Malayalam words are really difficult. Because it is like when you ask a kid to talk in really high-tech English; it’s hard too.

She is in many ways articulating an imbrication between two structures of patriarchy. One is rooted in the patriarchal family formed through India’s colonial and then postcolonial, nationalist modernity into a binarism between tradition and modernity. This intersects with the patriarchal structures of emergent spaces of public consumption that commodify women at the same time that they target them as consumers. Gita struggles to articulate a sense of agency, albeit a consumerist sense of agency within this mutual imbrication.

They say fashion is bad. So they have the girls wear the paada, the sari, and all that. But what’s wrong with fashion? I’m not saying fashion is a big deal. I don’t say like other girls, you know. In the magazines the girls say, “Fashion is a really important part of my life.” I don’t say that. It’s just a little fun. That’s all it is, just fun.
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It is difficult to formulate precisely how one can rescue the “fun” of fashion from its simultaneous demonization by the protectors of “tradition” and by critics of capitalism who locate “fun” as a mere diversion, a market-driven, middle-class consumer subterfuge. Throughout this analysis, I have highlighted the production of locality as a key feature of the process of the commodification of women’s bodies and their circulation. In this beauty pageant, the failure of the replicability of gender identities is founded on a collision between highly spatialized notions of tradition/modernity and India/West as young women’s bodies wrapped in clothing commodities move across the public stage of beauty.

The idea of “fun,” marking experiences of pleasure, desire, and leisure, then, becomes one lens through which to understand the differential relationship that young women and men have to new, globally inflected consumer spaces. If we go back to the idea of the “thethu”—understood as a masculine, fun-loving, consumer identity—and compare it to the ways in which Gita struggles to articulate her desire for “fun,” it becomes clear that the spatiotemporal grids that underlie those two notions are very different. The ephemerality of the “thethu,” located as it is in the here and now, marked by its explicit rejection of the future, unburdened by a sense of the past, shapes the roving, fun-loving persona of a young man in his jeans, riding his motorbike, drinking beer. This is a lower-class, lower-caste masculine consumer identity marked by desire and aspiration. The “modern miss,” interested in fashion shows, modeling, and beauty pageants, is a middle-class object of desire that must ultimately be tamed and disciplined. Burdened by tradition, preyed upon by modernity, she must learn to navigate these new spaces of consumption respectfully and modestly. Her notions of “fun” are situated in and through notions of tradition and modernity, public and private, that make her claim on these new consumer spaces tenous.

Further, it is important to note the social categories that appear under the sign of “fun” and those that do not. In this iteration, we have the classic and stereotypical contrast between the lower-class, lower-caste aspiring masculine subject and the upper-caste, upper-class feminine object of desire. Analyses of important films of the 1990s such as Reja and Bombay have demonstrated the ways in which an upper-caste, upper-class masculine subject is reworked through discourses and ideologies of liberalization. What is absent in this structure of representation that marks “fun” in the public spaces of modernity is the lower-class, lower-caste young woman. Here, if we go back to Beena and her friend Lena, we begin to see how their aspirations for “fun” in public struggles against their privatization under the sign of tradition. Within the structures of representation that I have elicited through analyses of ficine narratives—ones that reveal forms of consumer subjectivity that are gender, caste, and class specific—nowhere do we have a lower-caste, lower-class young woman marked by an orientation to and desire for consumption (see Rowena 2002). There is no need to represent her consumer agency and subjectivity, because she is so thoroughly privatized under the sign of tradition through the intersection of her gender and class and caste status that she can make little claim on a modern public, either as a threatening or entitled figure. While she emerges within feminist discourse as the heroic woman outside the fold of consumption—“struggling to make ends meet”—the lack of a consumer identity linked to her social location in liberalizing India marks the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion through which consumption has become a new axis of belonging and social membership.

Conclusion

Youth consumption practices have become an easy way to index the reach and extent of globalization. An analysis of how young people in Kerala apprehend and negotiate new globally inflected spaces of consumption, particularly the youth-fashion nexus, reveals these spaces to be structured by specifically postcolonial preoccupations about tradition and modernity, public and private that have differential consequences for young women and men. These spaces have created new consumer identities—for example the lower-caste male marked by consumerism and fashion—and reworked the respectable, middle-class woman as aggressively sexual, confident, and public. Young men and women in Kerala embody, negotiate, and contest a caste- and class-inflected gendered terrain of masculinities and femininies under both an enabling and a constraining set of conditions for participating within educational and other consumer spaces.