

A reading on Kappapattu: The Mystic Melodies of Kunhayin Musaliyar

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Abstract: Kappappattu/ship song is a classical didactic poem by Kunhayin Musliyar in eighteenth century. The poem sings about the necessity of a spiritual way of life. The poet symbolizes the man in the earth as a dhow, the sea as life and harbours are the beginning and end of life. The poem ultimately sheds light on the spiritual essence of Mappila culture in Kerala.

Kunhayin Musaliyar is a literary genius who contributed immensely to the Arabi-Malayalam literature. He trod into the path of glorious Mappila literature following the footsteps of Qazi Muhammed (1579-1615 A.D) and wove a universe of gnosis by his praise-worthy literary compositions. Musaliyar prove his literary mettle as a poet, mystic, religious scholar and a lampooner. He left behind three major literary works, namely, *Nool Madeh* (1151 A.H/1737 A.D), *Nool Mala* (1200 A.H/1785 A.D) and *Kappapattu* as the relics of his great literary career. The first two works are *Malapattus* or eulogies. These are the poetic expositions of the great lives of Prophet Muhammad and Shaikh Abdul Khadir jilani of Bagdad (1078-1166 A.D) respectively. But the third work, *Kappapattu*, is a philosophical and symbolic poem conceptualizing ship as a metaphor of human entity. Here it is intended to share a few literary musings on this note-worthy literary work.¹

A comprehensive life-sketch of Kunhayin Musaliyar still remains elusive. As such the precise historical span in which he lived is unknown. However, by scanning his own poetry and folklore, we can approximately locate his life span in history. In 15th *Ishal* (couplet) of *Nool Madh*, which is considered to be his first poetic composition, Kunhayin Musaliyar offers prayers for his preceptors, Shaikh Noorudin Makhdum (death in 1141 A.H/ 1740 A.D.) and Shaikh Abdul Salam Makhdum. Moreover, in the prosaic prelude to *Nool Madh* and *Nool Mala*, the years of the composition are mentioned (1151 A.H/ 1737 and 1200 A.H/ 1785 respectively). Taking clue from

these references, we can safely conclude that Kunhayin Musaliyar lived between 1700 A.D. and 1790 A.D. As such the poet lived in 18th century. Native place of Kunhayin Musaliyar, as per popular parlance and traditions, was famed Thalasseri. The details furnished by the scholars in this regard runs like this – he was born in a family known as Makkara near Zaidar Palli at Thalasseri in Northern Malabar. He attended religious instructions at Ponnani. He won his reputation as a religious scholar, poet and a humourist. He had profound scholarship in Malayalam, Arabic and Tamil languages. He remains buried in the graveyard of the grand old Mosque of Thalasseri. Kunjan Nambiar (1705-1770) who is known for witty *Thullal* poetry, Ramapurath Variar (1703-1763) who composed *Kuchelavaritham Vanchipattu*, Unayi Variar (1675-1775) who penned the celebrated *Nalacharitham Attakatha* and Arnos Padre (1681-1732) were the literary luminaries who lived in the same epoch. Musaliyar traversed through his own peculiar literary path unlike his luminous contemporaries. Kunhayin Musaliyar was a unique prodigy who had distinct themes and unusual exposition in his poetic style. Like any salient personality, Kunhayin Musaliyar kept his distinct style and turned as a trailblazer in his field of action. As such he moulded a poetic diction of his own by taking a high-extended liberty in selection of vocabulary and boldness in themes. He brought about words, imagery and reflections in his poetry from all the languages he tamed. While siding with Qazi Muhammed in creed and deed, Kunhayin Musaliyar stood apart from him in imagery and exposition. He employed uncommon Tamil vocabulary and profound Sufi techniques in his poetry. Thus, he embarked himself into a hitherto untrodden path of cosmic love and poetry. Complex linguistic hybridity and mystic Sufi imagery that Kunhayin Musaliyar unfolded, were further explored into by his talented successors like Moinkutty Vaidyar (1852-1892) and Shujayi Moidu Musliyar (1869-1919).²

The Theme of Poem

The *Kappapattu* was composed without a patent reference to the year of its composition. The theme of this work is highly symbolic. The human soul is symbolised as a ship navigating through the stormy sea of life. This work is composed in a single metre throughout, like *Muhaudin Mala*. Later, the metre of *Kappapattu* was transformed into a popular poetical metre in the Mappila literature. This miraculous phenomenon that the rhythm of a literary work turned into the rhythm of life of a people, demonstrates the profound influence of that poem over the Mappila psyche. *Kappapattu* is a historical experience that was born out of a unique poetical imagination. The poet identifies the human self with a ship or dhow. Each member of human body is portrayed as a part of the ship or dhow. Head of man is symbolised as the hull of dhow. Stomach is compared to its keel. The nine openings of the

body are symbolised as nine doors of ship. The under-raft of the ship is compared to vertebra of human body and ribs of ship is compared to the nerves. The five masts of dhow are symbolised with the five cardinal principles of Islamic faith. The departing and arriving ports of ship are, to the poetic imagination, nothing but this mundane world and the other eternal world. The light house in the coast is the symbol of death. The sea-rout is portrayed as the *tareeqath* designed according the Islamic Law (*Sharia*). The purpose of this voyage is to glean the pearls (*Haqiqa*) from the shelves of sea, defeating the ruthless pirates roaming around. The destination of voyage is to perceive the Divine Light (*Likhah*). The ultimate message that the poet conveys through 583 couplets may be summed up thus: ‘‘God has created a beautiful world for human being to live in and endowed a short life to enjoy it. The life is like a ship that travels between two ports of life and death. The wise men should enrich their life with virtuous deeds.’’

The Backdrop of the Poem

The background that inspired Kunhayin Musaliyar to compose this poetic work using the simile of ship, deserves some reflection. The socio-historic setting of the composition was the turbulent Malabar with galloping Colonial invasion and its devastating effects on Mappila life. Never a worthwhile literature evolves out of vacuum. But it unfolds as a creative response to the contemporary social, political and cultural changes in the society. As such the theme, philosophy, style and structure of this literary work should be made subject to a comparative study with similar and contemporary compositions. Through such investigations and studies, the literary works of Kunhayin Musaliyar including *Kappapattu*, may be taken far ahead to new realms.

There are two distinct folk stories about the composition of *Kappapattu*. Among the two, this one has gained much currency: while Musaliyar was a disciple of Shaikh Noorudin Makhdum at Ponnani, he used to dine at his master’s house. Once Makhdum’s wife sought an advice from Kunhayin over the prayer (*diqr*) to be offered at bedtime. Witty Kunhayin advised her to chant *elle malle* (chants of the sea-folk while sailing in the sea). Makhdum was amused to see his consort chanting this bizarre prayer at bedtime and understood the trick played by his witty disciple. Makhdum asked Kunhayin: ‘‘are you making ship of men?’’. This question eventually inspired Kunhayin to compose a poetry symbolising ship as a metaphor of delicate human life. But this funny story does not hold much water. Some questions that arise from common-sense and general historical awareness challenge the veracity of this story. Ponnani was fabled as the ‘Mecca of Malabar’ due to its immense contributions to Islamic studies ever since 16th century. In such background, it is quite improbable to assume that

the consort of Makhdum, the Grand Master of contemporary academia at Ponnani, was innocent enough to fall prey to Kunhayin's trick. Brushing aside this story, there four more probabilities that should be considered in this regard:

The poet was born in a harbour town, namely Thalasseri and educated in another one, Ponnani. As such he was familiar with the life of sea-folk and sea, ships and dhows were a part of his soul. So, it is quite natural that he adapted the metaphor of the sea and ship to express his poetry and philosophy. Kunhayin Musaliyar was deeply religious and had profound knowledge in Quranic epistemology. There are around 31 references to ship in the Holy Quran as a symbol of human accomplishment. This Quranic aesthetics might have had inspired Kunhayin Musaliyar to write a poem employing the ship as a metaphor of human life.

In the glorious Makhdum gnostic tradition to which Kunhayin Musaliyar rightly belonged, the ship was a familiar poetic symbol. Shaikh Zainudin Makhdum I (1468-1583) was a luminous Master of this scholastic lineage. He introduces three paths of spiritual advancement in his celebrated Sufi work *Hidayatul Adqiya ila Tareeqatul Awlia*.³ In that work, he portrays *shariat* as the ship, *tariqat* as the ocean and *haqiqat* as the pearls hidden in the sea bed. Shaikh Zainudin Makhdum observes: "verily *shariat* as like a ship, *tariqat* is like an ocean and *haqiqat* like the pearls hidden in the ocean bed. So, let those who seek pearls, sail in the ship, explore in the ocean and find out the pearls." (*Adqiya*, stanza 5-7). Shaikh Zainudin Makhdum visualised the *Shariat*, the basis of Islamic Law, as the ship. But Kunhayin Musaliyar visualised the faithful who imbibed the essence of *Shariat* as ship instead. In this view point, it may be presumed that *Kappappattu* was a liberal Arabic – Malayalam paraphrasing of *Adhqiya* in poetry.

If we trace out the naval routes of Kunhayin Musaliyar's poetical dhow, he can reach the coasts of Sufi gnostic and aesthetical senses. According Annemarie Schimmel (1922- 2003), the talented German Sufi scholar, Sufism which is the philosophy of pristine innocence, always tended to express its world view and vision through symbolic messages.⁴ Asim Roy, the author of *The Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal* (1983), has also made some observations on the Sufi methodology of expressing theosophical visions through very popular symbols and metaphors. Asim Roys observes: "The Sufi concepts of the four stages (*manazil*) and the four corresponding stations (*maqama*) follow directly from the notion of the mystic journey (*safar*) or path (*tariqa*) to the Beloved God, in which the mystic is a traveller(*salik*). The Bengali writers discussed in largely classical Sufi terms. The four stages of Sharia, Tariqa, Haqiqa and Ma'rifa as well their corresponding stations of Nasut, Malakut, Jabarut

and Lahut. Sharia to one of the writers, is a "boat" of which tariqa is the "sail" haqiqa the "anchor" and marifa the "rudder."⁵ To another, Sharia is Lamp, tariqa is Wick, haqiqa is fuel and marifa is Ignition. The three together without the other cannot function."⁶ Form the above discussion, it is crystal clear that the imagery of ship as a symbol of spiritual voyage was deeply imbibed in the Sufi gnostic and aesthetic sensibility from the time immemorial. Accordingly, Kunhayin Musaliyar was unfolding new Makhdumian dimensions and tunes to this Sufi imagery through his famed *Kappappattu*.

The Poetic Vision in *Kappappattu*

Let us conclude this deliberation with some specific points that we can discern from a close analysis of the contents of *Kappappattu*.

A Spiritual Philosophy

Kappattu performs a preaching-mission by enlightening the faithful on Islamic gnosis and providing them an orientation for its realisation rather indulging in aesthetic vanity. As a religious scholar, it his natural and fundamental role. Every great poet could have such an original and pristine philosophy to put forward. They are evolving such a philosophy out of the knowledge and spiritual experience that they receive from their scholastic lineage. Ultimately Kunhayin Musaliyar is expressing his insatiable thirst for spiritual advancement through *Kappappattu*. He exhorts the faithful to uproot the spiritual decadence that will mar the arena of their life. See how the poet portray the alertness that one should keep towards the temporal mundane life:⁷

“ *Pade oodadi nee ottalla potta / Payum kulirakkodi parum vittal*
Arezhu nalulla ottam kalichal /Ayyo uruv karayrum nalil
Barayum kitta vazhibillam kitta/ Malanki kambayum kallanji kitta ”

The poet states, in the above lines, that if one indulges unthoughtfully in the frolics of sea of life he will lose the control of the ship, that is, his destiny and will nose dive into irreparable and irrecoverable havoc. These advises communicate with human life and its potential weaknesses prevailing in all time. The contemporary relevance of *Kappappattu* lies in the facts that it prescribes some remedies for human greed in today's commercialised and competitive world. Note the following lines:⁸

Koottame vanavar vachalam chaith / Koottam vittalum nizhal mattonnina

Kottu kothichalo njan uruveri / Koolikku nalla khalasiyum alla

Chuttum kadal odi kanuvan alla / Cherna charakkeri neduvan alla

Muttum thurappukkirippanalla / Mukarnnulla malika keruvannalla.

The poet emphasises that the purpose of the voyage of life is not to amass great worldly fortunes, nor to have leisurely trip over the sea and nor to merchandise the big stocks and to build big mansions out of the great profits.

A Popular Poem:

The commonality in the theme, lucid advices evolving out of divine sensibility and popular metaphors richly embellish *Kappappattu*. Ship, the sea, tides oars, lighthouse, port, mast, shark, sail, bridge, milk and honey are the common poetical images used in *Kappappattu*. These are very familiar to the common folk. It unfolds the popular aesthetic vision of the gifted poet, Kunhayin Musaliyar. It reminds us the famous comment of William Wordsworth on the poets – “he is a man speaking to men”. *Kappappattu* is a not-over-sophisticated poem of a not-over- sophisticated poet who lived among the common folk cracking jocks with them.

Folkloric Value

The advices anchored in theosophical thinking is yet another characteristic of this poetic work. The poet lampoons the moral fallibilities of hedonistic life style. For this purpose, he employs the experiences from common life, folklore and commonly proverbs. Proverbs are precise statements, often humorous in nature, that convey a useful message or a worthy advice. The proverbs critically examine the society and social dynamics, find out some truths or facts and applies such wisdom in current life.⁹ These pearls of wisdom, transmitted through generations and traditions, are judiciously embedded in *Kappappattu*. Note the following lines:¹⁰

Kandittarivano kannile potta/ Karunor chonne chol kettile potta

Pandullor chollil pathirundo potta/ Pai thanna palil kayppundo potta

Thenil mathirtho karabhasha potta / Pattam polinjal parakkumo potta

Palam murinjal kadakkumo potta / Kettalum kettalum kettila potta!

The Counter Discourse:

The literary works of Kunhayin Musaliyar, including the *Kappappattu*, are the literary voyages of the discourse of encounter. This hypothesis may be further substantiated by an analytical study of these works on the

background political, social and cultural scenario of 18th century. It was an epoch of Sanskrit-centric epistemological hegemony and Colonial political dominance in Malabar and Kerala. Literature was highly elitist in nature and approach. The literary activism of Kunhayin Musaliyar was a blitzkrieg on this elite literature which was the vogue of the day. The much Sanskritised Malayalam poetry of that era was, more or less, pornographic. The diktat of the elitist reigning class prevented the proletariat even from uttering chaste language. It was in this dark era, Kunhayin Musaliyar defied the elite epistemological hegemony and composed poetry in Commoner's language and warned the hedonistic society. He prioritized the piety (*bhakti*) over linguistic niceties (*vibhakti*) and imparted lucid good spiritual advices to the common folk. It was actually a poetical resistance or a literary guerrilla war against the transgressions of all sorts. In that sense, this literary work is a fine example of the micro-cultural vigilance that the Mappila literati have been performing hitherto.

The influence of poem in Mappila Literature:

Examine the influence of *Kappappattu*, a poem with remarkable originality, on Mappila literature. The Study of Influence is a critical area of the discipline of Comparative Literature today. The literary scholars observe there are historical, social and cultural factors behind the influence that a literary work wield over a society. A fresh literary work may come as an imitation, or a modification and sometimes, as a total abrogation of the bygone literary works. Originality of a work lies in the novelty of the contents and presentation that turn away from the works hitherto.¹¹ The theme, philosophy, style, craft and metre of such original work may influence the later-day works. In the light of above grounds, the influence that *Kappappattu* wielded over the thematic and poetical style of later-day Mappila literati should be subjected to profound literary research and investigation. Let us sum up this discussion with the influence that *Kappappattu* wielded over the literary style of 19th century writers like Moyinkutty Vaidyar and Shujayi Moithu Musaliyar. In Vaidyar's works, the symbolism of *Kappappattu* is conspicuously absent. However, he has employed the *Kappappattu* design in the arrangement of *Ishal* in his compositions. The 29th *ishal* in *Badrul Munir*, the 26th *ishal* in *Salaeqat Padappattu*, the 10th *ishal* in *Malappuram Qissa Pattu*, the 23rd and the 114th *ishal* of *Uhd Padappattu*, and the 16th *ishal* of *Salaseen Qissapattu* are the examples of this literary influence. So also, the 57 and 58th *ishal* of the *Safala Mala* of Shujayi Moithu Musaliyar are composed in the *Kappappattu* metre. In the 83rd *ishal* of *Safala Mala*, the *Kalima* stanza is composed using the metaphor of ship:¹²

La ilaha illahu / La ilaha illahu / Muhammed rasoolullah/ Ahad Alfil needa kappal/ Nida kappal illalahu/ Ahmedayi vantha kappal / Adam muradadi kappal

Aadi kappal illahau/ Aalam ur koodi kappal – koodi kappal / Aalam jamhoothil adankidatte kappal/ Bahuth hahuthum koodidatte kappal / Aalam lahuth veli konda kappal / Kolam misalil iragidatte kappal / Aalam jabaroothil udatta kappal/ Kolam malakooth aranagetta kappal/ Alam adangal amarthitta kappal/ Insanil vantha nilainthitta kappal / Kappal raja dharma kappal..../ Dharma kappal illah/ Koledhikarkathodi kappal / Odi kappal illah/ Thadidamal thornde kappal/ Thorde kappal illah/ Kappa charakkukalake ethirthu / Kochada laphangal nashtathil parthe/ Kappathinai kaiku kanakum muthirth / Guna dosham kondu vidhiyum koduth.

“In the beginning, God created the self of Muhammed the Messenger. It was the first ship in the Cosmos. From that self, God created Adam, the second ship. From that self, He created umpteen number of human-ships. The rhythm of the human-ship is the glorious Qalima – La ilaha illallahu Muhammedun Rasoolullah! Those ships deviate from this channel of navigation will lose their direction. Those ships anchored in the hedonistic instincts will be in doldrums in the world of Angels and the Other-world. They have no salvation and no rescue.”- thus the rhythm of *Kappappattu* resurfaces in the *Safala Mala* after the passage of one and half centuries. The researchers of Mappila literature should trace out how much this ship has travelled from *Safala Mala* and how many coasts it has reached at. So also, one can pinpoint some more lines in *Safala Mala* having affinity with *Kappappattu*. The frailty of mundane human life, the meaninglessness of materialist pomposity, the futility of human greed are the frequent themes of both Kunhayin Musaliyar and Shujayi Moithu Musaliyar. In this way, Shujayi Moithu Musaliyar often reminds us his predecessor-in-letters, Kunhayin Musaliyar. In other words, Shujayi Moithu Musaliyar elaborated the ideas and themes of Kunhayin Musaliyar after the lapse of one and half centuries. See the similar poetic imageries of Kunhayin Musaliyar and Shujayi Moithu Musaliyar in following lines:¹³

Karunor chennechol kettila potta / Pandullor chollil pathirundo potta

Pai thanna palinu kaippindo potta/ Thondam ninakkendathum thonnila potta

Thenil maddirtho karabhasha potta /Kondath thirubhasham kettile potta

Kettalum kettalum kettile potta /Undo nee ethanum orthittu potta

Unmizhi ketta kurudayo potta /Pattam ploinjil parakkumo potta

Palam murinjal kadakkumo potta /Pottanu annthanum padamundo potta

(Kunhayin Musaliyar)

Koodunnu kollangal masangalazhcha /Ghedikal kanakkil nin ayusin theercha

The dunnu avar ninne manveettilekku /Thanjam nee nokkunnu pon veettilekku

Akakkan thurannake nokkennu mooda/ Ulsaram orthal urnagumo keda

Mukhakann adukkal thurakkatte mada/ Mooditte poncheppil muthund kada

Jikam pettor khafila pottipoy potta/ Chethakkar ank ananjittu potta

Pakal kann adachal irulumo potta/ Patham pudichal fajiramo potta

Thatta tharangal urappenth potta/ Thinna pazhathinnu ruchiyenthu potta

Potta nin munthulli pin chorakatta/ Pinninu kattam chumannoru kotta

(Shujayi Moithu Musaliyar)

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