

CHANGING CONTEXTS OF MALAYALAM NOVEL IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: This study is an attempt to map the development of novel in Malayalam from the beginning to the Progressive era in 1930. Despite beginning in the 19th century, Novel in Malayalam did not flourish until the emergence of the nationwide progressive phase of literature writing of 1930s and 40s. This paper differentiates the contexts of novel in Malayalam language in relation to the differences between the early novels and the progressive writing situating Malayalam novel in the broader context of Indian literature. The socio cultural and political implications of Novel produced in the early beginning are discussed to differentiate them from the progressive sensibility came later revolutionizing novel. It is argued here that while the early novels in Malayalam participated in the making of a certain national consciousness based on the life of the socio cultural elites in India, the second major turn, the progressive phase, tries to reverse the process by taking up the rural poor for discussion and therefore opening up new horizon of possibilities.

Index Terms: Novel, Social, Political, Progressive, Nation.

Novel was an established literary genre in Europe much before it appeared in Indian languages. Nineteenth century is perhaps the most successful period in the history of novels written in languages like English, French, and Russian. In comparison to these languages Indian novel had a late beginning. The Novel in most Indian languages was established by the second half of nineteenth century. Marathi had its first novel *Yamuna Paryatan* in 1857. *Indira Bai* (1899) is considered the first novel in Kannada. Likewise *Pareeksha Guru* (1882) in Hindi, *Indulekha* (1889) in Malayalam is some of the major novels from nineteenth century India (Das 1991; Mukherjee 2002; George 1994).

Indulekha is considered to be the first significant Malayalam novel. It is written in 1889 by O. Chandumenon, a magistrate in a colonial court in Malabar region of the present day Kerala. It was followed by *Marthandavarma* by C.V Raman Pillai in 1892. Chandumenon wrote a second novel *Sarada* (1892) which was unfinished because of his early death. In the popular opinion these three works are celebrated as pioneers of Malayalam novels. But there are some novelistic works namely, *Kundalatha*, *Pullelikunju*, and *Ghatakavadham* written before *Indulekha* did not receive popular attention from scholars and literary historians. Most of them do not consider these novels 'literary' enough to be part of the mainstream Malayalam Literature. How and why these texts could not become 'proper novels' is the question addressed in the following discussion. It will also lead an inquiry into the history of Malayalam novel and the narratives of its origin. By interrogating the popular, well known history of Malayalam novel in the nineteenth century it may be made clear how the above said novels were marginalized and consequently *Indulekha* became the first ever novel in Malayalam.

By the end of 19th century thirteen novels were published in Malayalam. Out of these some are not considered mainstream 'novels'. Some are pushed into oblivion because of various possible reasons. My interest in re-reading the early history of Malayalam novel is limited to know how *Indulekha* becomes a key text in defining what is literary in the early Malayalam novels. The mainstream history is more or less affirmative to this novel's position as the first of its kinds in Malayalam literature. A skeptical stand on this

assumption provides a platform to re-visit the history of emergence of Malayalam novel. Chronologically *Indulekha* is not the first published novel in Malayalam. In 1887 a novel titled *Kundalatha*, written by Appu Nedungadi was published. *Pullelikunju*, another important work, was published in 1882 by Arch Dicken Koshi. *Ghataka Vadam* (Slayer's Slain) is written by Mrs. Collins in 1877. Dr. George Irumbayam in his detailed study of nineteenth century Malayalam novels points out certain key problems which prevented these novels from being acknowledged as novels. I would briefly review his findings here to understand what characteristics raise *Indulekha* to the level of a 'literary novel' and its consequent widespread acceptance.

The prominence of *Indulekha* over the above mentioned three earlier works can be best answered in an enquiry into why the other novels are/were denied the same status. Chronologically *Ghataka Vadham* (Slayer's slain) would be the first novel in Malayalam. The plot, set in the Syrian Christian community of Kerala, is essentially trying to persuade the reader to embrace Protestantism. The novel is critical of the discriminations within the Suriyani Christians and their approach towards Pulaya, a Hindu lower caste. This novel falls short of being called a novel in its artistic and aesthetic representation. It is considered to be a missionary novel written to spread Protestantism. Though the novel is set in Kerala society, it was written with the sole aim of converting the lower caste Hindu (Pulaya) and the Suriyani Christians to Protestantism.

Appu Nedungadi's *Kundalatha* is another work before *Indulekha*. George Irumbayam says "This novel has no contact with the real world in terms of its characters, incidents, social background and the language used" (54). The novel uses certain place names like 'Kalingam', 'Kundhalam' and names of people like 'Kundalatha' and 'Taranathan'. The setting of this novel is in a fictitious place named 'Kundalam'. Dr. Ravindran notes "if the writer had not clarified in his preface to the novel that the places and persons were fictitious, the readers would have mistaken them to be based on some fact of history." (156) Neither the places nor the people with these names were familiar for the readers. In the preface the author himself comments:

The purpose of using such unfamiliar names is to remind the reader that this story is told as happened in a distant land and the incidents are therefore set accordingly to the customs of that fictitious land, if the reader finds something in the story that do not fit to the conditions of Kerala life. (qtd in Irumbayam 54)

Pullelikunju, the third one in this discussion, was written in 1882 by Arch Dicken Koshi. Unlike *Kundhalatha*, this work has a setting that can be identified with the Kerala landscape. But the problem in calling it a novel is in its lack of unity. "A loosely connected plot would be taken as an evidence for its discontinuity. The first, second and third parts have no strong link among themselves" (Irumbayam 47). The events in the story are unlikely to attract the curiosity of the readers.

Thus the three works are rejected on three different counts. While the first one was a missionary novel aimed at spreading Christianity the second one falls short because of the strange place and time in which the story takes place. The third one is admittedly close to a novel since it has a familiar setting but its lack of unity of plot is exposed. Contrary to these works *Indulekha* claims certain originality as the story and characters are set spatially and temporally in the then Kerala society. It becomes the first novel in Malayalam on the grounds of its claim to the familiar setting and familiar people. These familiarities of place and people are certainly constitutive of imagining a nation. Studying the origin of Indian fiction K. Satchidanandan observes:

Fiction in India, born out of colonial encounter, had its root in our own narrative traditions and has been an attempt to narrate the nation in all its plural complexity. The novels, and to lesser extent short stories, written before and after independence reveal to us the various ways in which nation was imagined and re imagined from diverse locations in the society and from various positions in history. (57-78)

The existence of the nation is also imagined in terms of the binaries of majority and minority. As Gyanendra Pandey points out; "Nations are established by constructing a core or mainstream-the essential,

natural, soul of the nation, as it is claimed. The other is that minorities are constituted along with the nation.....” (608-29). Indian Nationalism encouraged its leaders to represent India as having an essential unity among themselves in terms of their national sentiments because they had to reclaim their land from the British administration. Representing the people of India as a unit was therefore necessary in opposing the colonial rulers. The multiple religions, languages and cultures of India were impediments to any such claims. Indian nationalism was strongly molded on the roots of Hindu mythologies and a ‘great Hindu past’. Thus the formation of several Hindu groups joining together to represent the nation needs to be understood as an elite response to colonialism. The group was selective because only the elite Hindus were included in the confluence which served a formula for the ‘organic body’. The internal structure of ‘chaturvarna’ in Hindu religion could have hardly allowed a union of all the Hindus possible. The deeply rooted caste system remained an unsolved issue and they were given little attention in forming the confluence. At this juncture, the unity becomes possible only when the differences within the country are either silenced or unrepresented.

Indulekha is to be read as a novel partaking in the national consciousness. The imagination of a nation it provides for the readers reveal its relationship with the politics of representation too. The novel is set in the background of an upper caste Hindu Nair family caught between the dilemma of tradition and modernity. Madhavan, the protagonist, is a Nair man around whom the novel revolves. He is in love with Indulekha who is also from the same caste. Moreover, Panchu Menon, Sankara Menon, Parvathi Amma, Govinda Menon and Kesava Nambudiri are some of the major characters in the novel. All are drawn from the Nair and Nambudiri families. Madhavan in his journey through various parts of India befriends elite Hindu men. Later in the novel we are told that while in Calcutta (Kolkata now) Madhavan meets some rich Bengali men and makes friendship with them. These rich friends of Madhavan are also of high castes. M.T Ansari in his analysis of *Indulekha* says; “Let me unpack the names of the rich and reliable merchant friends of Madhavan; Govinda Sen, Chitraprasad Sen, Kesavachandra Sen, Gopinatha Bannerjee are all marked by caste”. (*Malabar* 123).

All these names indicate their high caste (elite) identity. As a matter of fact there are no lower caste Hindu characters in the novel. By setting the story in Kerala and depicting the Nair community’s life, the novel first claims a region which becomes the land of the particular Nair community having deep roots in the pre-colonial past. This region would be identified later as a part of the nation state in the post-colonial future. So the claim will eventually lead into a greater claim of the nation itself where the Nair community becomes legitimate citizens of the state. The exclusion of lower castes from the novel is not a silly omission. Their silence in the novel could be an instance of discarding them from the mainstream. Presenting them would have opened up a doubt in the legitimacy of the Hindu confluence and its creation of national citizens. And therefore lower caste Hindus remain a ‘silenced other’ in *Indulekha*.

In his journey from Calcutta to Bombay, Madhavan meets Shiyar Ali Khan who introduces himself as a subordinate judge in Allahabad. Bearded and wearing a topi he was easy to be identified as a north Indian Mussalman (Muslim).¹ Shiyar Ali Khan and Madhavan become friends in a short time. When the train stops at a big station, Shiyar Ali Khan takes Madhavan out of the train to a refreshment stall asking his aide to take care of Madhavan’s belongings. Madhavan was carrying expensive gifts given by his Bengali business class friends. In a couple of moments Shiyar Ali Khan disappears and Madhavan realizes that he is being cheated. All his money and other valuables also disappeared as well. Now the question of Shiyar Ali Khan’s Muslim identity is exposed to a judgment of a generalized idea of the vicious Muslim. Later from Bengal, Gopinatha Bannerjee sends Madhavan a letter saying that the men who stole his assets in the train are now caught in another attempt of theft with murder. They have confessed several crimes they did including that of stealing from Madhavan. They also said that if anything went wrong that day, they would have killed Madhavan. They also said that if anything went wrong that day, they would have killed Madhavan. The completed circle of events now confirms the earlier presupposition. Gyan Prakash argues Indian nationalism represented Muslims as backward figures. The image of a Muslim as a potential danger is constructed in the discourse of Indian nationalism. “This image was confirmed by the stereotypical depiction of the Muslim male as bearded and wearing a Turkish Fez (and women clad in burqas)...” (Prakash 177-90). Beard, topi,

burqa etc. are identified as essentially used by Muslims. Shiyar Ali Khan also becomes a Muslim beyond doubts in the novel by wearing 'the Muslim attire'.

Marthandavarma is another important work after *Indulekha*. It was written by C.V Raman Pillai in 1891. It is a historical novel, a "term which refers to novels set in a period of time recognizably 'historical' in relation to the moment of writing" (Childs and Fowler 107). There are two more historical novels by him which together make a trilogy. The other two novels are titled *Dharmaraja* and *Ramaraja Bahadur* written in 1914 and 1918 respectively. All these three novels deal with the monarchs, princes, courts, ministers, struggle for power, war and conspiracies in erstwhile Travancore. These novels can be hardly called social novels because of the elements and techniques used in them. Unlike *Kundalatha*, this novel uses a 'known history'. In fact the history of king Marthandavarma and the rivalry of eight powerful Nair families are known in history. The other two novels by Raman Pillai, though independent in composition, keep this common link between them. Thus it is observed here that the novels lack a social approach which takes them away from the masses. Yet this is a conscious effort to reinvent the history of Travancore as ruled by the high caste Hindu families. Even the rivalry is between two upper caste communities within Hinduism. The eight Pillai families are powerful Nair families. Who is the ruler of the kingdom is internal to the elite families and doesn't make much difference to the subordinated castes and classes. Both Marthandavarma who belongs to the "prevalent matrilineal system" or the "ruling monarch's son Padmanabhan Thamby and his younger brother Raman Thamby" who are rebelling against the rulers are ultimately Nair men (Raveendran 162).

Reinventing such a past would mean recreating and legitimizing the dominance of the community throughout history. It gets transformed into a necessary myth of belonging to a place in the discourse of nationalism. This myth is decisive in claiming pertinent citizenship in a nation. Along with the erstwhile rulers, Nair family gets legitimacy as true citizens of Travancore with their support provided to the rebelling sons of the monarch against Marthandavarma ascending the throne. Practically both the communities are marked essentially belonging to Travancore and its pre-modern history. What is to be noted here is that neither the low caste Hindus nor other religions have a place in these narratives.

Twentieth century brought in some of the major ground-breaking deviations in Malayalam Literature. This new direction towards literature was inspired by the widespread social reform movements in Kerala. Social reform has taken the shape of a movement to transform the prevailing structure of Kerala society which was deeply based on a social relation defined by caste system. Reform movements started in Kerala as early as in the beginning decades of the twentieth century. Sree Narayana Guru was a pioneer who worked for the progress of Ezhava community in Kerala. In 1903 he established Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) to acquire educational and political rights for his community. Inspired by this new step other communities also formed their associations. Ayyankali, another important social reformer lead Pulayas to form their own organization following the movements lead by Guru. Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam was formed in 1907 under the eminent leadership of Ayyankali. Following these two leaders Yoga Kshema Sabha of Nambuthiris came in 1908. Pulaya Maha Sabha and Nayar Service Society (NSS) followed them in 1912 and 1914 respectively.

The Progressive Literary Movement

Indulekha was followed by considerably less number of novels in the nineteenth century, and novel form was largely dormant in the first decades of 20th century. It was in 1930s Novel found a resurrection but this time with a new face. It was distinguished as progressive literature which brought about an altogether new sensibility. The progressive writers argued that an artist has a social role to play and any artistic production should question the orthodoxies and the primitive social values of any society. This being a direct call to writers for becoming politically and socially committed, those who followed this path became at odd with the values of the writers who followed the catchphrase 'art is for art's sake'. Attacking the formalistic assumptions on art and literature, the progressivists emphasized on the content of literature which they believed should herald radical changes in the society.

The Malayalam novel seemed to have a slow development after the success of *Indulekha*. Only a few novels were written after it during the nineteenth century. The next major turn of events happened in the history of Malayalam novels during the 1940s. It was heavily influenced by the Progressive Writers Association (PWA). As a result of this influence in Kerala a group of writers, for the first time, started depicting the minority experiences in Malayalam literature. Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994), P.Kesavadev (1904-1998), Ponkunnam Varkey (1910-2004), Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912-199), Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987) are some of the major writers during this time. They produced literature, mainly fiction, as a reaction against the then prevalent conventions of literary writing. PWA emphasized in the depiction of characters such as coolies, scavengers, thieves, prostitutes, pimps, and people from underprivileged class got their life represented realistically in the mainstream literature. Raymond Williams observes; “What is knowable is not only a function of objects—or what is there to be known. It is also a function of subjects, observers—of what is desired and what needs to be known” (17).

At the larger Indian scenario PWA was dealing with the political and social transformations through which the country was living. The Progressive movement and the formation of All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) in India can be read as a response to the wider global movement that had its roots in the leftist movements in Europe.

Indeed, the formation of the PWA was itself inspired by the emergence of anti-fascist and left-wing cultural fronts in Europe and the USA. Enormous disquiet co-existed with a profoundly optimistic sense that something had to and could be done – and that writers had a role to play in it all. (Gopal 2)

As stated above, the coming of world’s first communist government in Soviet Union acted as a major influence on a large number of intellectuals. As a part of this, a group of left wing writers emerged in Europe who were highly critical of the Fascist and totalitarian powers. This group of writers with progressive and leftist ideas, organized under ‘Writers for the Defense of Culture’, from various countries, held a meeting in Paris in 1934, presided over by the famous French writer Andre Gide and attended by an international group of writers.

“Heinrich Mann, E.M. Foster, Aldous Huxley, Stephen Spender, Waldo Frank, Isaac Babel, Virginia Woolf, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Pablo Neruda, Thomas Mann, Bernard Shaw. . .” were among the international writers who attended the conference (Ahmed 24). Andre Gide spoke in the conference with much enthusiasm about the achievements of Soviet literature. He spoke against the artificial (art without any contact with reality) literature pointing towards the need for a realistic approach in writing. Gide also pointed out that the greatest literature comes from the experience of the ordinary life. This gathering of Europe’s greatest writers happened before the PWA conference that was to happen four years later in Lucknow, India.

In India in 1932 the publication of *Angarey* (Burning coal), a collection of ten Urdu short stories provided a transition from a romantic set up to a progressive phase for Urdu and Hindi literatures. *Angarey* was “the first ferocious attack on society in modern literature, it was a declaration of war by the youth of the middle class against the prevailing social, political, and religious institutions” (Ahmed 18). The young contributors expressed protest against religious orthodoxy, contemptuous social customs and they were highly desirous for social change. As a result the ten short stories in the volume evoked a very strong criticism. This provocative text was condemned for containing obscenity, ridiculing religion and for excessive use of bad language. Shortly the book was banned. The contributors had no option other than defending themselves in the public. The publication of *Angarey* and the following events had a key role in shaping the project of PWA. It anticipated the formation of the PWA before four years of its actual establishment. While the controversies were on in India, Sajjad Zaheer became a student in London and got acquainted with some international writers. During these days he engaged in serious discussions on politics and literature in India and Europe with other young students from India. Mulk Raj Anand, who became a great writer later, was one among the students who gathered in London to support the cause of forming PWA. After thorough discussions Sajjad Zaheer was given the charge of editing the manifesto of

progressive movement which appeared in *Left Review*. The manifesto was a preamble of the tasks for PWA that included the resolution to produce and translate literature of progressive kind and of high artistic standard to prevent cultural reactions which would add to the cause of “Indian freedom and social regeneration” (Ahmed 19). The manifesto begins as:

Radical changes are taking place in Indian society. Fixed ideas and old beliefs, social and political institutions are being challenge. The spirit of reaction, however, though moribund and doomed to ultimate decay, is still operative and is making desperate efforts to prolong itself. (qtd in Ahmad 19)

The manifesto highlighted social commitment of authors. It strongly suggests the idea of defying the elitist and academic literature for having no concern for the poor people in the society. Subsequently the first conference of PWA was arranged in 1936. Premchand spoke presiding the first meeting in Lucknow reaffirming the manifesto. He said;

We shall consider only that literature as progressive which is thoughtful, which awakens in us the spirit of freedom and of beauty; which is creative, which is luminous with the realities of life, which moves us, which leads us to action. (qtd in Ahmad 11)

Two years later in Kolkata Mulk Raj Anand spoke in the second conference. Presiding over the function he echoed Premchand’s speech in the light of his visit to Spain where he saw the brutal killings in Catalonia during the Spanish civil war. In his speech Anand appealed the audience to join with the writers of the world who are struggling bitterly in the hands of imperialism Fascism and Feudalism. Soon after the inaugural conference, the PWA was established in other Indian states also.

In Kerala ‘Jeeval Sahitya Sangham’ was formed in 1937 by a group of young writers. Writers like Ponkunnam Varkey, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai and Karoor Neelakanta pillai were at the forefront of the movement. Despite having a profound beginning Sangam soon lost direction. Members were of two distinct groups. As the quarrel between them took the form of a crisis, a split was inevitable. Perhaps the quarrel on the form and content of writing was related to political ideology too. “Writers like Thakazhi and Kesava Dev who had a Marxist orientation were against the degrading tendency of the artistic side of story writing in terms of ideologies.” (Achuthan 116)

Though a short lived one in Malayalam literature Sangam had a massive influence in revolutionizing the field of literature. Most of the writers of that period belonged to this movement and the progressive phase is an important episode in their career. The best part of writing career of writers like “N.V Krishnavarier, M.P Paul, Joseph Mundasseri, Guptan Nair, Devadas, Kuttipuzha, Thakazhi, Dev, Varkey is bound to the progressive phase of Malayalam literature.”(Achuthan 116).

In conclusion, Malayalam novel found its way forward through its own share of struggle. The difference between the beginning years and early decades of the twentieth century in terms of form and content of novelistic form is of drastic proportion. It was the social, cultural, and political movements in the 20th century Kerala and India from a larger perspective put novel writing and reading to new openings. From the mid twentieth century with modernist phase novel in Malayalam has risen into unprecedented level both in terms of quality and quantity spanning across a wide variety of subject matters.

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End Notes

ⁱ For a discussion on Topi and North Indian Muslim identity see Shahid Amin's article "Representing the Musalman Then and Now, Now and Then", in Subaltern Studies Vol.12 *Muslims, Dalits and Fabrications of History*. Eds. Shail Mayaram, MSS Pandyan and Ajay Skaria. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005 pp.1-35. Print.