

# MODERNISM, POSTMODERNISM, CREATIVITY, AND COLONIALISM IN MALAYALAM LITERATURE

M.G.S. Narayanan

It has become fashionable among critics to indulge in the fireworks of modernist and post-modernist Jargon, obviously in a bid to perplex the poor reader. The modernist and the post-modernist in the West invented then- new phraseology to convey something different from their existing tradition, some new experience related to social change in the twentieth century, following the two World Wars which shattered all values and banished all finer sentiments from life. They were the victims of their own enlightenment faith in progress, equality and peace. Their predicament was unenviable. This agony gave birth to cynicism about human nature and the future of civilization.

Bookish Indian scholars who never went through the hell and horror of such European war-experience, but blindly aped their counterparts in the West, cut sorry figures in their comic roles as critics. Their pretentious and hollow preaching shows the distance between them and the realities of life among the people. The artist, the poet, the fiction writer has to be an organic part of life in the society in which he lives and moves, breathes and thinks, and shared the passion of human existence. Living in an ivory tower, or pretending to live there, is an act of snobbery in a fool's paradise, - no, in a fool's inferno, if there is one. In Kerala, fortunately for us, we had a bunch of writers who were steeped in the passions which moved the people - poverty, betrayal in love, inequality, dishonesty, perversion, ambition, disillusionment and frustration. Their work has been rooted in our tradition, its strength and its weaknesses. They did not need the modernist Jargon to justify or legitimize their work. They stood firmly on our soil, but they could absorb the craft and the techniques of their Western contemporaries. Some of these were S.K. Pottekkatt, who wrote about simple country love (*Naadan Premam*), Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai who wrote the epic of his village in a big volume (*Kayar*), the great inimitable Basheer, the only Basheer, who picked up the destitute as his

immortal characters (*Aana Vaariyum Ponkurisum*). In their own time some critics had written openly, and others went on with a whispering campaign, to the effect that some of their stories were imitations of Mopasang, Chechov, Steinbek and others. Did they steel or imitate? 'Yes', in one sense, and 'no' in another sense. Kesari Balakrishna Pillai was the mentor and the guide for some of them. He had thrown open the gates of European literature. They all certainly read and enjoyed the best short stories and the best novels that came from the West. They must have felt inspired. They must have seen parallels between characters and life experiences in European literature on the one hand, and real life in India. There were certainly many similarities in the problems and patterns of life in modernizing societies. But they metamorphosed very thing they borrowed with the magic touch of then' genius, with the result that their characters are typical Keralites from contemporary society. Their life situations were similar to what could have obtained in Kerala. From Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* to Changampuzha's Ramanan, all through the works of storytellers and poets, you can catch elusive glimpses of Western authors, philosophies, moments and styles. This is true of T. Padmanabhan, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Vallathol, Asan, Sankara Kurup, Vailoppilli, Sugatha Kumari, Vishnu Narayanan Nambootiri, and Valsala, almost every contemporary writer who wrote well and got enthroned in the hearts of Keralites. Only a few like Ponkunnam Varkey and Kesava Dev among storywriters, and Kunhi Raman Nair, Edasseri and Akkitham among poets, have been almost total strangers to Western literature. However, they too were consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, brought Western influence.

Some critics pointed out that Sankara Kurup imported mysticism and symbolism in Malayalam poetry. Others claimed that Edappalli Raghavan Pillai and Changampuzha Krishna Pillai imitated the romantic lyrics of Keats, Shelly etc. Takazhi, who created *Chemmeen*, had followed in the footsteps of Hemingway, the author of *Old Man and the Sea*. O.V Vijayan had reproduced the plot of a Maharashtrian writer, or was it a Hindi writer? The story of a single-teacher school, said other critics. M.T. had echoed a well-known Hindi writer in *Mist*, according to some one.

Well, these cases are not even worth investigation. Even if they are proved, they prove nothing, because in all these cases it is not the foreign seed, or artificial manure, or the machine packing or the advertisement that has made the poem or story significant for Keralites. They have enjoyed it as their own, because it carries as its birthmark the flavor of the native soil, the genius of the Malayalam language. And when it comes to language, a language in the creative context is not merely a language, a man-made

tool with prescribed grammar, but an organic being, a deity if you like, who has her own love life that cannot be forced or purchased. No master or mistress of Malayalam language whose characters are remembered or lines are quoted or memorized, can be called a fake.

I had occasion to move closely and intimately for many years with at least one of these master creators in contemporary Malayalam language P.C. Kuttykrishnan, who wrote with the pen name Uroob and wrote novels and short stories about the previous generation and the present generation. Though not “educated” in the formal sense, he had mastered enough English to understand some of the best fiction and poetry available in the English language. He was very proud of that and even boastful. He was very outspoken in his comments about friends and enemies, politicians, prominent citizens etc. at least in the small circle of close friends. We spent several evenings going far into the midnight and shared books, thoughts and eatables. Though much older to me in years he treated me like an equal and put some faith in my ability to appreciate literature. From these experiences and from contacts with some other masters with whom I was not so close, I have known that whatever they borrowed from other countries and societies, they drew most upon their own childhood, home environment and early adolescence. This means that they possessed a reservoir of spiritual energy that enabled them to internalize much that they encountered. Whatever came later through reading or living they pushed into a frame that was already formed in early life.

The genuine writer finds his first love in every other girl that he or she admires in later life. He or she reproduces unconsciously his/her own early situation in every human situation that he draws from, with umpteen permutations and combinations in details. His characters are drawn from the model characters in and around the parental family, school and city or village. He/she may enlarge them or distort them, but if you scratch their skin, you find his mother and father, sisters and brothers, teachers and rivals recreated from memory, which of course plays many tricks with reality. He cannot liberate himself from his subconscious mind in his creative moments. He may be describing an emperor or saint, but a shadow of his father or uncle or teacher must be lurking there. The battlefield in creative fiction is the camouflaged scene of a country courtyard where children have been fighting for ages. The love triangles are not far from his wishful thinking in the daydreams of adolescence. I mean they have to be so, if they happen to be impressive. Psychologists tell us that deep instincts, perhaps dictated by the genes and the DNA structure, determined our choices in company, career, working, reading, philosophy,

rituals and hatreds or desires. These instincts are the instincts powerful when they are least understood, seeking outward expression through compulsive action like producing poems or stories. Only such creations are capable of making an impact on society and Surviving beyond their own age.

When there is a temporary withdrawal from outside world - all the inner conflicts and Suffering and unfinished drama of life are carried inevitably by the self when such withdrawal occurs - the dream world and the daydream world take charge. Creative activity takes place in the tile 'T'wilight of consciousness. It is the mysterious process that gives birth to art and literature. For this to happen, the artist or writer has to come out of all forms of hypocrisy and feigned passions based on experience in other societies that are totally strange to the members of the present society in India. Imitation and creativity are contrary to each other. Imitation may help the development of craft through repeated practice. However, the end of imitation marks the beginning of creativity; and the end of creativity marks the advent of self-imitation and pompous proclamations about the latest fashionable isms and slogans. When the spring of creativity starts drying up, or in a situation where it is not opened at all, jargons are employed to cover-up the deficiency.

In Kerala, such trends are noticed among a few critics, and often surface in periodicals, but on the whole this cancerous growth has not affected the mainstream of literature and culture. The chief players in the fields of arts and literature, whether it is Sugatha Kumari, Akkitham, O.N.V.Kurup, Vishnu Narayanan Nambootiri or Balachandran or Vinayachandran or Vijaya Lakshmi - all these poets have been drinking deep from the perennial waters of our classical tradition and drawing tile strength to promote humanism and protest against the delays and distortions of Justice. The same is the case with our veteran storytellers like Vijayan or Padmanabhan, M.T. Vasudevan Nair or Madhavikkutty, N.P. Moliainmed or U.A. Khader, Anand or Mukundan. They have then, feet planted firmly on social reality that represents unbroken continuity of Culture with openness and tolerance.

Among poets Ayyappa Panikkar, N.N. Kakkad, Arroor Ravi Varma and K.G. Sankara Pillai have been hailed at one time or other as Modernists. Some of them proudly acknowledged it also. Some of them wrote good poetry but some of their poetry is unimaginably dry and dull. Sometimes Kakkad claimed to be a modernist and a follower of T.S. Eliot, the famous author of *Wasteland*, reflecting the post-World War mood of desperation, frustration and cynicism. However, it appears that Kakkad was closer to the neoclassicism of Eliot rather than his modernism. He was a good

scholar and Sanskritist, and steeped in Vedic lore. He also used Sanskrit passages inserted into his Malayalam verses. It is this superficial feature, a matter of style rather than content, that made some half-backed scholars compare Kakkad with Elliot who was deeply into the Latin spirit. At one stage, Kakkad himself shook free of this dubious title. Though he was often difficult and obscure, on account of his Sanskrit bias, Kakkad has also written good romantic poetry as in *Saphalamee yatra* — recording a nostalgic view of his past love life and poetic efforts. Towards the end of his short life, he claimed that he did not like the attribution of modernity by some critics. Arroor is different from other poets in that he always shunned the smooth musical sounds and sentiments, but this is the only modernity about him. He is more in love with the permanent loyalties of life. His poetry is remembered for his biting epigrammatic remarks and firm stand against hypocrisy and humbug. Ayyappa Panikkar is more admired as a critic and a satirist though he perhaps likes his own role as a poet more. He is erudite and sensitive, and there is nothing of the frustration and anarchy of the European modernists in his life or poetry. K.G. Sankara Pillai is brilliant in his ideas, but critics who failed to understand him should have called him modernist because they confused modernity with obscurity — some of them have even called him Post-modernist, because he seemed to be more inaccessible than others. If a simple love of experimentation with form and life is modernity, all of these are examples of modernity. If a natural predilection towards the extreme left, especially the revolutionary Communists or Naxalites who struck a sympathetic chord in the heart of every youth protesting against injustice can be termed modernism, all these poets can be accused of it in some measure. But that would be a strange definition of modernity indeed! — certainly a far cry from what is known by that name in Europe. What is common to all these poets is their sound scholarship in modern Western literature. In reading culture, they are typically modern, but in writing culture, each one is different, rebellious against tradition but ultimately in line with twentieth century democratic liberalism in modern India. However, modern India has nothing in common with modernity in European poetry. Our society is just entering the struggles and conflicts of early industrial society similar to what Europe experienced in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

An interesting new development in the field of critical writing in Malayalam language is the introduction of what is called postmodernism. This has been there for about two decades.

A group of writers, mostly teachers of philosophy, history and literature in colleges and universities, familiar with Western theoretical writing, have imported into Malayalam a large number of technical terms. They are the

self-styled advocates of post-modernism. Their language is not the ordinary Malayalam known to native speakers, not even the artificial journalistic *abracadabra*, but a new artificial language full of obscure terminology. To what extent this is meant to clarify the meaning, and to what extent it is deliberately employed in place and out of place to befuddle and frighten the reader into surrender is not easy to decide.

It must be admitted that new ten-ns have to be coined in a language if you have to express new concepts and experience. However, if life in one's own society does not produce them, and they are imported from another distant society about which you have only bookish knowledge, the chances of tolerance are bleak. They continue to remain foreign bodies without being assimilated.

These new terms were not creations but translations from English, though readers ignorant of this process often took them as the indication of original thinking and hailed the writers as new thinkers. The writers also encouraged this attitude through pretensions and proclamations of loyalty. What they were actually doing was to import European or American terms and debates, sometimes even without referring to their European pedigree. Some of the mutually contradictory concepts were jumbled and promoted at the same time indiscriminately in Kerala, and paraded as well as received as an extension of Marxism! The craze for things foreign, and especially the latest fashions in foreign (Western) countries, among the neo-literate sections of the people created a blooming market for such works. This behavior on the part of writers and then- clientele may be taken as the typical expression of intellectual colonialism in the post-colonial era.

The strange thing about it is that such scholars even started identifying some identify, recent works in Malayalam, mostly short stories, as the product of post- modernism. In a society where even modernism, as understood in the West, is a concept of dubious relevance, the protagonists of post- modernism were making a bid to be recognized and leaned as the revolutionary prophets of a new movement. They were successful to a certain extent, being able to enlist support from teenagers in colleges, neo-literates and half-literates eagerly looking for sensationalism and adventure. These people welcomed as great new big ideas what they could not understand properly. In this period of the proliferation of printing techniques, many publishers came forward to exploit the trend for commercial advantage.

The result was all round concision among students of literature and Culture, but this development need not be condemned as entirely negative. The over-enthusiasm and misplaced expectation produced a sober

assessment of literary works at least in some circles. The debate that followed in the highly sensitive print media in Malayalam has already led to a reassessment of creative works, old and new.

Who were the real culprits, the critics or the creative writers, or both of them? It is interesting to note that many of the protagonists of post-modernism who glorified and celebrated *Ganja* and *Charas*, brutal violence and permissive sex life and championed complete anarchy Naxalite revolution, were meek and mild citizens in their private life, conservative in family relations and orthodox in religious and political attitudes. They might have indulged in sexual excesses and sown their oats at some stage status and Income, but nothing more. These gentlemen-revolutionaries had succeeded in getting into safe and secure jobs, often high-paid jobs, for themselves, their children and relatives. They lived and moved in urban middle class society with complete ease. Not only that, they were not misfits or outsiders in society though some of them created such models in imitation of European novels in their literature.

For instance, Kakkanadan, the self-styled post-modernist, wrote a novel called *Ushnamekhala* on small pox, reproducing closely the atmosphere in Albert Camus' famous novel, *the Plague*. Futile sense of exasperation and uncertainty in society following the breaking out of the terrible epidemic of plague was responsible for the disintegration of the value system and the mad pursuit of momentary pleasures in sex in violation of all the social taboos. Similar scenes are described in Kakkanadan's novel also, though even an ordinary reader could see that such situations are not associated with smallpox in India. This type of novels and short stories had good sales, not probably on account of their so-called post-modernism, but in spite of it, for the vulgar sex vulgarly portrayed, with a clear eye on commercial gain ("*Mankachi is better than tender coconut*").

Mukundan of Mahe is another storyteller, for long resident in Delhi, and serving in the French embassy. He knows French and has successfully recreated many techniques of modern authors in French novels, exploiting them admirably to produce intimate accounts of Malayalee life in his native village. His craft is modern, fashioned upon the French works, but his characters and situations are his own, spontaneously arising out of the soil in the special environment of Mahe in Kerala. He has been for long in the front rank of creative writers in Malayalam language. However, he wrote a short story called 'Delhi' which reads like a horror story, quite out of tune with the rest of his output in literature. Immediately he was hailed as a post-modernist, exposing the anarchical underworld inhabited by criminal gangs and millionaires. Probably he wrote the piece with an experimental urge, and his fans took it too seriously. For his part he did

not repeat tile performance and kept mum, neither accepting nor discarding tile allegations of post modernism.

N.S. Madhavan is another good writer, author of several powerful short stories, who has consciously donned the mantle of post- modernism. He selected strange and exotic themes and even stranger titles like *Higuita* for his stories, and made use of broken images, mystery and modern craft that have made readers put him in tile category of post-modern writers. Again, he is just another brilliant bureaucrat in the Indian Administrative Service as far as life style is concerned, steadily climbing tile ladder of promotion. This is not the picture that is found in the case of post-modernist writers in the West, critics or authors of creative fiction. They are the genuine martyrs of the crisis of civilization. Their aesthetic sensibilities made them revolt against the establishment, seek refuge in philosophy and live as outsiders in society. They broke the prescribed rules of conduct in respectable society and received the natural punishment through alienation, going mad or getting infected, often perishing in asylums or slums. For them, life was brutal, selfish or short. Their expressions of suffering, anxiety, frustration and protest were straightforward and genuine, and they paid the price for revolt with then' own lives. On the other hand, our Malayalee pretenders have done nothing but pay lip service to post-modernism and make a name and profit for themselves.

Paul Sakkaria is (or was?) another distinguished and famous short story writer who contributed a number of good stories in which lie used modern themes and techniques with great competence. He also employed sex with great effect for venomous communal and political propaganda as illustrated by his erotic story about the Vivekananda rock and the Tehelka website story about a foreign student of Indian culture. Though some critics have called him post-modernist, he would better be considered as a modernist in the realm of short story. It is a pity that he has moved more and more into the field of sensational journalism, and has developed an obsession with fascism, abusing and branding every other writer, poet, fiction writer and essayist, with an intolerance unsurpassed in Malayalam literature. Sarah Joseph is out and out feminist with a vengeance, and post-modernist to the extent to which feminism forms an integral part of post-modernism. Now it is up to life in modem Kerala to catch up with post Modernism in literature!