

Literary Movements in Malayalam During the Twentieth Century

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Literary history, of late, has become a contested field of conflicting interests. Instead of tracing a linear progression of literary trends, this essay would explore the nature of the shifts in sensibility that obtain in the history of Malayalam writing during the course of the present century. I shall also examine whether the Nationalistic-Romantic phase of the early part of the century, the Progressivist Movement of the thirties and forties and the Modernist period of the sixties and seventies evidence certain common concerns that will enable us to comprehend the nature of conflicts that operate in Kerala society. My examples will be largely drawn from the fields of poetry and fiction. At the very outset, I would like to emphasise that to describe the paradigm shift in the history of literary sensibility is to interpret and evaluate its nature. The existing canon is largely an effect of the prevailing poetics. Each shift in sensibility redefines the canon in the process of projecting a new horizon of expectations for the reader and the author. The dynamics of literary forms and the dialectic of socio-political changes together contribute to the definitions of literary history.

Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) provides a convenient starting point because, besides being a major poet of the Romantic period, his name has been invoked both by the Progressivists and the Modernists at various points, to endorse their manner and substance of writing. In 1900 Asan was twenty seven years old when he returned to Trivandrum after spending three years in Bangalore and two years in Calcutta, having completed advanced training in Sanskrit and gained some proficiency in English. He had also been exposed to the winds of change blowing through Bengal in the wake of the cultural Renaissance of the late nineteenth century. Still his early poems belonged to the neoclassical Sanskrit tradition as can be understood from their titles like *Sankara Satakam*, *Subramania Satakam*, and *Siva Stotramala*. But by 1907 he emerged as a major poet with the publication of *Veena Poovu* (The fallen flower) at the age of thirty five. It was an elegiac poem on the transience of life but its significance lay in redefining the reader's horizon of expectations in terms of craftsmanship and subject matter. The poem completely transformed Malayalam literary scene. Asan breached the hegemony of the aristocratic upper class in literature. In choosing to write about a fallen flower, which was seen in feminine terms, Asan made available to the reader the voice of anguish and introspection which could not be admitted into the decadent tradition of the Brahmin poets, who wrote

libidinal verses and devotional rhymes with equal ease. This was the submerged voice of the Bhakti poetry going back to Ezhuthachan modified and adapted to the needs of self-expression in the social context of a community long considered *avarana*. Asan's moment in Malayalam, thus, is constituted by the dynamics of a poetic tradition going back to the very origin of Malayalam poetry and reaching out to the aspirations of a community which had woken up to its socio-political activity. M.G.S. Narayanan has shown how the voices of Sri Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan represent the process of Sanskritisation of the Ezhava community. The Progressivists and Modernists trace their ancestry to Asan variously because his poetry captures the paradoxes and contradictions of his social situation resulting from the conflicts between the artist and the activist, the lover and the ascetic, the reformer and the revolutionary. In the best of Malayalam writings throughout the century these conflicts are variously articulated. This is to say that Asan was one of the earliest writers to critically examine the content of his modernity.

It is the absence of this critical sensibility that makes Vallathol Narayana Menon (1878-1957) a poet of fluctuating fortunes in the history of Malayalam. The modernists found his celebratory tone and revivalist attitude characteristic of a tradition which could not see beyond surface realities. During the period between 1907 and 1923 when Asan wrote his major works, Vallathol was engaged in the writing of an epic and the translation of Valmiki's *The Ramayana* and of *The Rig Veda* into Malayalam. Vallathol came into his own during the subsequent decades as the freedom struggle gained momentum under Gandhian ideology. Though Asan was sensitive to the needs of social change, the colonial situation did not figure in his major works directly. Vallathol, despite his regressive vision of the glorious heritage of the Indian past, merits discussion as a nationalist poet of 'decolonisation and revolutionary nationalism'. Through his short lyrics and narrative poems he addresses himself to the task of reclaiming the land through an act of imagination. While several of Asan's poems are set in locales far off from Kerala, what is local and sensuously specific in Kerala landscape informs Vallathol's poetry. His poem "Ente Bhasha," written in 1927 to counter the charge that the mother tongue was incompetent to express modern knowledge, begins by charting the linguistic boundary of the region which houses the language. This cartographic impulse offers cultural resistance to the process of colonisation. What is significant here is the fact that the regional identity Vallathol projected was subsumed within a larger pan-Indian national identity. At the core of Asan's poetry is a deep disquiet which is the first intimation of a deep identity crisis that surfaces in clearer and more complex terms in subsequent phases of Malayalam poetry. This is the reason why the context and content of Asan has not fully disappeared from Malayalam poetry even now. Though both Asan and Vallathol worked within the confines of the dominant tradition, Asan was acutely aware of the constraints imposed by the hegemonic nature of this tradition as can be seen

in his *Sita in Meditation* where the entire story of *The Ramayana* is reviewed from Sita's point of view. Vallathol fully subscribed to the sanctity of this tradition.

In the second generation of Romantic poets the quest for identity becomes a theme that recasts the relations between the author, the reader and the poem. To appreciate the nature of this shift it is necessary to trace the nature of influence at work in the cultural field from the twenties to the forties. During the period between 1900 and 1940, a social transformation through the spread of education and the rise of political movements completely altered the status of the writer in society. If there were about 32 periodicals, mostly weeklies and monthlies, in Malayalam at the turn of the century, by the 1940s their number has multiplied many times and print journalism and formal education have firmly established a view of literature as something written, printed and published. Institutional frameworks begin to mediate the relation between literature and the reader. This may be seen as part of the larger process of modernisation and urbanisation when intellectuals replace bards and literati of the earlier generation. As traditional bonds between the members of the society weaken further, the writer as the solitary individual makes his presence felt in literature. The poetry of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai (1911-1948) has a haunting melody which fully exploits the musical potential of the Dravidian metres. The suicide of Edappalli Raghavan Pillai, his associate and another significant poet of the same group, occasioned the famous pastoral elegy *Ramanan* (1946) which has sold over a lakh copies in Malayalam. What makes the *Changampuzha* school of poets significant is their refusal to identify their individual selves with the cosmic self or the social self. They could not see poetry as part of a spiritual or social mission. In the poems of Edappally Raghavan Pillai written before his suicide and the poems of Changampuzha Krishnan Pillai written as he was dying of consumption, the world was seen as false and one's own self as unauthentic. The themes of angst and alienation which were to become central to the poets of the sixties figured prominently in some of the poems such as *Padunna Pisach* (The devil that sings) written by Changampuzha.

By the 1940s literature had ceased to be synonymous with poetry. The centrality of fiction in the field of literature in the subsequent decades is partly due to the social awareness that spread among the lower classes of society which came to be mobilised through political movements. For the sake of convenience the history of the Malayalam novel can be divided into three phases. The period from 1889, the year in which *Indulekha* was published, to 1944, the year of publication of Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's *Balya Kala Sakhi* (The childhood friend), represents the first phase. Most of the novels of this phase could be described as social or historical novels. The fact that the early examples of Malayalam novels such as *Indulekha* and *Marthanda Varma* (1891) were never excelled in this period shows that novelists of this period conformed to set patterns and

predictable themes. Many of them were inspired by a reformist zeal and exposed the evils of a ritual-bound, caste-ridden corrupt society. They saw the world in black and white, rarely evidencing any complexity of characterisation and innovation of narration. The political movements against colonial domination do not seem to have stirred their imagination. The novelist as the omniscient narrator would not only tell the story but comment on the events and characters to drive home his didactic purpose.

However, the novels of the forties mark a sea-change which may be partly traced to the emergence of a well-defined progressive movement in literature. In April 1937 some of the socialist and leftist thinkers such as E.M.S. Namboodiripad, K. Damodaran, K.A. Damodara Menon, P. Keshav Dev, N.P. Damodaran and C. Narayana Pillai formed a forum called *Jeeval Sahitya Samgham* which in 1944 was rechristened the Progressive Literary Association (*Purogamana Sahitya Samghatana*). Among the proclaimed aims of the Association were: (a) to write as well as translate literature of a progressive kind, (b) to fight against the reactionary forces in the field of culture, (c) to bring art and literature closer to the life of the common people, (d) to promote a critical sensibility that resists regressive tracts and encourages progressive attitudes, and (e) to protect freedom of expression and the interests of progressive writers. The intervention of ideologues in the field of literature brought out the differences between the existing view of literature as largely a matter of linguistic competence and stylistic perfection and the social realist thrust emphasised by the progressivist writers. The history of bitter controversies fought between two camps would require a separate volume. Suffice it to say that the depiction of social reality as a criterion for judging literature was firmly put on the agenda of literary interpretation during this period.

During this phase the novelist comes out of the narrow confines of his community to see the society as a whole as a vital organism with its inner contradictions and conflicts. He subjected to analysis social disparities, the consequent exploitation of the depressed sections and evils like prostitution. Novels like Thakazhi's *The Scavenger's Son* and *Two Measures of Rice* and P. Keshav Dev's *From the Gutter* had for their heroes peasants and workers whose lives were never considered fit materials for literature. Basheer's novels like *The Childhood Friend* and *Me Grand Dad Had an Elephant* have not lost relevance even now because they concern issues of self-definition and social change in the orthodox Muslim community in Kerala. In the latter novel which has sold over a lakh copies in Malayalam Basheer perfects his ironic mode. The feudal world of pomp and pride is seen through the innocent eyes of Kunjupathumma who is jolted into the real world of struggle and survival after her father loses all his fortunes in litigation. Under the influence of a progressive Muslim family, Kunjupathumma comes out of this agonising world of orthodox habits and corrosive passions. The novels of the Progressive phase are structurally more innovative than those in the past. In fact, they have very little in common with the novels of the earlier phase.

Instead of categorising characters as good and evil, the novelists explored their complex psychological make-up and the formative impact of their social conditions. The style becomes more innovative as in Basheer whose works often defy characterisation as they are a curious amalgam of autobiographical material, philosophical reflection, satirical portraits and ironical comments. Thakazhi's use of a folk myth in *Chemmeen* is one instance of the social imagination finding its tone and texture in the novelistic form. The novels of this period by their insistent interrogation of the social reality sharpened the critical awareness of the reader and helped transcend the limitations of the regional experience. The novel becomes truly dialogic in this phase.

It may be noted that novels like Thakazhi's *Two Measures of Rice*, P. Keshav Dev's *From the Gutter* or Basheer's *Pathumma's Goat* are nothing more than extended short stories. P.K. Balakrishnan, the novelist and historian, has pointed out that books of fiction were in great demand among the soldiers from Kerala who joined the army in World War II. Some of these soldiers later turned writers, and stories based on army life, often called barrack stories, became a significant form during the fifties and sixties. The fragmentation we noted earlier in the second generation of Romantic poets could be understood better if their poems are read against the existential anguish and the deep sense of powerlessness in the face of impersonal structures of power conveyed by barrack writers like Kovilan. In the late fifties and early sixties a new generation of short story writers appears on the scene. The prominent among them are M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Kamala Das, N.P. Muhammad and T. Padmanabhan. A greater inwardness of form and a deeper awareness of complexity of human characters inform their well-crafted stories. The lyricism of their style is inseparable from a sentimental humanism that appeals to the common reader. Perhaps the most accomplished writer of this group is M.T. Vasudevan Nair. A typical story by M.T. suggests more than it states. As a child M.T. had witnessed the collapse of the feudal set-up and the traumas of transition in decadent Nair families. Writers like M.T. and Kamala Das bring out the pity and terror involved in the agonising encounter between the emerging new social order and the relics of the past. They are the forerunners of the modernist writers.

The publication of O.V. Vijayan's *Khassakkinte Itihasam* in 1968 is seen as the modernist breakthrough that changed the idiom of the Malayalam novel. Here it may be noted that the typical hero in the novels of the sixties was the introvert rebel, tortured and restless, engaged in futile searches. The trends obtaining in the modernist phase of Malayalam fiction may be illustrated with reference to some of the prominent novels of the late sixties and seventies. O.V. Vijayan's *Khassakkinte Itihasam* is centred around Ravi who goes to the mountainous village of Khassak as the only teacher in a local school. It is not so much in the portrait of Ravi as in that of the decrepit village and its primitive environment that Vijayan conveys the horror of human existence as well as the confrontation between the inward-looking

innocence of a pre-literate society and the levelling forces of modernising process. Vijayan's novel can be read as a parable of colonialism in a post-colonial society. From the fictitious village of Khassak it may seem a long way to the urban hell of Bombay against which Anand's *Alkoottam* (The crowd) is set. Anand's characters are middle-class intellectuals adrift and lost in their subjective world. Their alienation is complete and convincing against the urban crowd of the 'sixties. In novels like M. Mukundan's *Mayyazhi Puzhayude Theerangalil* (On the banks of the Mayyazhi river) and Punathil Kunjabdulla's *Smaraka Shilakal* (Memory stones) the protagonist-centred novels give way to a less personalised and more wide-ranging point of view. In these novels action does not take place in a remote landscape of the mind shut off from time and space. In the best novels of the eighties a shift towards the public and the social may be noticed. Rather than term these traits as post-modernist, I would describe them as critical-modernist, to emphasize their deployment of modernist strategies. They partake of a vision of man as a social being caught in the drama of human passions. More than ever the Malayalam novelist seems to be aware of the limitations of modernism as he explores the heritage of narrative techniques to find a socially relevant as well as personally significant mode of writing fiction.

Even as the Progressive Writers' Association broke up amidst bitter controversies regarding the true function and nature of art, these debates influenced the world-view of some of the poets who distanced themselves from the melodious, sentimental style of the second generation of the Romantics as well as the blatantly propagandist mode of some of the more enthusiastic progressivists. During the forties Tagore came to be widely translated into Malayalam. The most prominent poet of the fifties, G. Sankara Kurup, spoke primarily in the cadences of Tagore. During the same period Vyloppilli Sridhara Menon, Edasserri Govindan Nair and N.V. Krishna Warriar exemplify certain traits which help us define the modernist shift at the beginning of the sixties. These poets, while working within the parameters of traditional forms, revolutionised the content of poetry by breaching its elitist bias. The publication of Ayyappa Paniker's *Kurukshetram* in 1960 and the appearance of *Kerala Kavitha* under his editorship in 1968 from Trivandrum are important events in the emergence of modernism in poetry. In forging an appropriate idiom for a fragmented world, Paniker also foregrounded the quest for identity as a major theme which found echoes in the poems of N.N. Kakkad and Madhavan Ayyappath. Though Paniker's influence on a generation of Malayalam poets has been seminal, he remains a formalist of the High modernist variety mainly because of his obsession with the language of poetry. In the sixties M. Govindan and his periodical *Sameeksha* the first issue of which came out in 1963 played a constructive role in shaping a fraternity of writers, painters and translators mostly based in Madras, whose interaction with writers and artists from other states gave them a wider perspective of the various avant-garde movements operating in several Indian languages. The poets who came into contact with this

fraternity of artists, notably Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan whose interest in lines and colours has been persistent, became alerted to the possibility of using tradition as an art language. Panikers *Kurukshetram* is a poem of 294 lines in five sections written between 1952 and 1958 and finally published in 1960. Though Eliotian echoes can be heard in many lines, its success is in having reconstituted the vocabulary of romantic feeling to verbalise an experience which interrogates the romantic world-view. Poems like "1963" by N.N. Kakkad and "The Sleepwalk" by Madhavan Ayyappath were also similar "lengthy monologues of momentous hesitations where the actual and the timeless, the phenomenon and the idea met eye to eye in the equivocations of disinherited minds." In the seventies the modernist poets came under the influence of some of the resistance movements and were also exposed to the repressive experience of the Emergency. As their sensibility came to be politicised, their poetry increasingly dealt with themes of quest for socio-political identity. K.G. Sankara Pillai's long poem *Bengal* (1972) which set the new trend used the metaphor of *Kurukshetram* in the socio-political context. The poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by Dhritrashtra whose blindness underlines the self-fragmentation that afflicts the Indian situation of the late sixties and early seventies. The poem symbolises the anguish of an awakening revolutionary consciousness which has passed through several stages since the partition of India.

In concluding this survey I would like to note that the formative foreign influences that have contributed towards the shaping of these shifts in sensibilities are too numerous to recount. Joseph Mundassery, the Malayalam critic, has analysed the several debts Asan owes to the British Romantic poets. During the Progressive phase Victor Hugo, Maupassant, Flaubert, Dostoevsky and Gorky were models which inspired several writers. Eliot has influenced a large number of modernist writers. In the seventies, among the poets who were translated into Malayalam were Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, Langston Hughes, Leopold Senghor and Nicanov Parra.

Modernism in Indian Poetry

Comparative Studies in the Poetry of Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi

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The modernist moment in Indian poetry has passed, but it has left behind rich resources. Ramakrishnan revisits the years of modernism to critically assess its achievements in the poetry of Malayalam, Marathi and Hindi. He traces its trajectory while at the same time noting the parallels and divergences in the three literatures and connecting the rise of modernism with that of print capitalism. The book is divided into three parts. The first part of three essays spells out the nature of the larger context. Against this context the second part offers readings of various groups, such as the modern Dalit poetry in Marathi, the Nativist-Modernist poets in Malayalam and the Progressive poets in Hindi. The third part of three chapters offers readings of three individual poets, namely Dilip Chitre, K. Sachidanandan and Kedarnath Singh. The book also has the transcripts of three long conversations the author had with Kedarnath Singh, Dalip Chitre and K. Sachidanandan.

CONTENTS

Towards a Materialistic View of Modernism in Indian Poetry ◊
Ambivalence as Resistance: Myth and Modernism ◊ 'Meanings Change
with Changing Questions': From High Modernism to the Avant-Garde ◊
'The Unachieved Absolute Expression' and the Modernity of Muktibodh.
◊ The Dialogic Imagination in Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry ◊ The
Search for a Dravidian Poetic: Nativism-Modernism Conjoint in
Malayalam Poetry ◊ Reclaiming the Peripheral Voices: The Dissident
Sensibility in Kedarnath Singh's Poetry ◊ Black Exclamations and
Savage Silences: The Poetry of Dilip Chitre ◊ Living on the Fault-line:
The Poetry of K. Sachidanandan ◊ The Poets Speak: Interviews with
Poets.

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