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**A Comparative Study Of Malayalam Literature And Paintings In Kerala**



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## **A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MALAYALAM LITERATURE AND PAINTINGS IN KERALA**

Visual Aids, as the name suggests, are the AIDS for better learning. Painting is one such AID and help us appreciate literature better. Moreover, there is a close link between literature and painting. The changes in Paintings have greatly influenced in the literature. The concern of this paper is to make a comparative study of Malayalam literature and paintings and to investigate how the interface of the two has contributed to the progress and enrichment of the literature.

Sound is the basic and natural form of language. The alphabet or the letter is a means through which we try to record the uttered sound,. “Varamozhi” (Pictorial writing) presents an object or idea through painting or alphabet. It also emphasises that registration of some technical lines is necessary for forming the meaningful words. The lines form the letters or alphabet.

The letters are the written form of sounds pronounced by man. The sound is grasped through the senses. The five senses help man to receive and understand the meaning of the word. ‘Aksharam’ means Na Ksharam’-mean that which does not perish, is eternal or everlasting. The body of sound is formed with vowels or by the union of vowels and consonants. The physical structure of the letter is the alphabet and its ‘soul’ is pronunciation. The linguists opine that the practice of registering ideas with the help of sounds or signs of letters has a history of only 4000 years.

### **PICTOGRAPHY**

The ancients were blissfully unaware of the alphabet. Awareness of the figures of objects in nature made him reconstruct them through paintings. These reflected his creativity. Pictography may be the beginning of 'writing' for the ancient man. The pictures which he created to indicate the objects in nature are the primary forms of alphabet. In the second stage he started to paint his ideas (ideography). The examples of ideography began in the countries like Egypt, China, Babilona, Assyria etc. The picture of the Sun depicted a clear idea of the Sun.

Later it developed into single colour paintings (syllabaries). The different parts of a figure denote the various signs for each syllable. The sound which represents man formed into particular words which justified the implied meaning.

The expansion of alphabet formed the alphabetic system. The evolution of representing sounds from paintings to writings is a remarkable progress in the history of human civilization. "Alphabet is the key to history of mankind" The statement of Dr. David Deringa supports this. The alphabets are the result of man's continued effort. Gradually there developed different new alphabets in various languages.

The most ancient alphabet of India is 'Brahmi'. The historians note that there was a system of alphabet called 'Kharoshti Lipi' in India. There is another opinion that the 'Sindhi Lipi' which is seen in Harappa and Mohanjo-daro, later formed in to 'Brahmi'. Grantha Lipi is the system of alphabet in South India. The alphabet, used to write Sanskrit texts was called 'Arya ezhuthu' (first writing) or 'Granthakshara' (the textual alphabet).

In olden times, there were systems of alphabet called 'Vattezhuthu' (round-writing) 'Kolezhuthu' (long-writing) in Malayalam also. There is proof of "using vattezhuthu till the 15<sup>th</sup> century in the Chera and Pandya regions. 'Southern Malayalam, Nanamona, chera-pandya ezhuthu etc. denote vattezhuthu. These letters are shaped round. That is why they are called 'Vattezhuthu'.

Dr. L.A. Ravi Varma prefers to describe it as 'Vettezhathu' instead of 'Vattezhuthu' as Vatta-means round and vetu-means cut. This is because the letters are written after cutting some of the parts. Anyhow 'Vattezhuthu' has become the popular usage because it is round-shaped. Kolezhthu is the sub-division of vattezhathu. 'Kol' mean stick (Narayam) used to write. Kolezhuthu are mostly seen in palm leaves.

The system of Kolezhuthu started in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Till 1819 the government documents were written in Malayanma (Malayalam and Tamil). The modern alphabet of Malayalam was introduced by King Swati Thirunal. Kolezhuthu was predominantly used in Cochin and Malabar. In North Malabar, Muslims and Christians mostly used this system of Kolezhuthu for all their dealings. The literature of 'Mappila' (Muslim literature) is mainly written in a mixed text of alphabet of Arabi-Malayalam. It is surprising to note that even ninety years back the people of Wayanad used Kolezhuthu till nine decades back. There are some official documents to prove this. Malabar was known as 'Kolathu Nadu' because the alphabet which was in use there was Kolezhuthu. This is also the opinion of some linguists. Malayanma lipi became popular only in Southern Kerala.

The famous linguist Dr. Burnal suggests that the cave characters culminated in the alphabets of Southern India. Dr. L.A Ravi Varma also proposes that the alphabets including Vattezhuthu have developed gradually from Brahmi. It is not correct to say that Thunjath Ezhuthachan has developed the alphabet of Malayalam. 'Granthaksharangal'- or Arya Ezhuthukal- were in practice since the 7<sup>th</sup> century in South India.

The emergence of 'Manipravalam' literature helped the Malayalam alphabet to survive and gain roots. 'Granthaksharangal' turned into the alphabet of Malayalam by the 9<sup>th</sup> Century.

There were only 30 letters in the Dravida Bhasha. It consisted of 12 vowels and 18 consonants. They are called Uyirezhuthu (Uyirukal) and Meyyeyzhuthu (Meykal) in Tamil respectively.

Vowels:

Consents:

All these letters were taken from Sanskrit and added to the above. Thus the Malayalam alphabet now consists of 16-vowels and 37- consonants, total of 53 letters. The pronunciation of the letter ' ' and ' ' which is not used in common but contextually. It differs according to the position.

Painting can convey the idea beyond time, region and language. There were paintings even in the Urns Sindhu river banks. In visual arts like Kathakali, Kootiyattam etc., the mudras or signs are used to convey ideas. The 'mudras' is the language used to communicate

words with the audience. Thus we understand that the theatre forms tried to transform the symbols sound to a visual symbols.

Traditionally Kerala is rich in oral, written, spatial and performing arts. As in other cases, visual art also was patronised by kings, and wealthy people of the upper castes. At the same time each village had its own problems for which they found out their own solutions through ritual ceremonies. Most of the activities were linked to the modes of agricultural work, distribution of products, taboos and sanctions ordained by tribal chieftains. For propitiating the revengeful devine powers people pasted their bodies with colours and decorated with costumes for different rituals. This body decoration and making of mythical icons connected with the festivals of each folk were the art activities associated with the life of the village. These activities were integral part of the village life and are the artistic expressions of rustic aspirations. The art history of Kerala has to be studied in this back ground. When contemporary art or the 20<sup>th</sup> century art of Kerala is looked at these factors cannot be ignored. The ‘gallery art’ in the modern urban sense is very late in Kerala; the ‘off gallery ‘ art rooted in rural life represented the genuine aspirations of the people. Technological, economic, cultural, sociological and religious factors and also different contexts divided the art forms, styles and execution. As in folklore tradition these village forms were not termed art in the modern sense connected with the aesthetic of exhibition. These art forms of the people are even today practiced by the folk keeping it a living tradition.

The post-Ravivarma period regarded individual sensitivity and creativity in high esteem relegating the collective activities of the masses. This urban –centered and west-oriented concept alienated the traditional forms of Kerala from public domains. This trend is seen all over India as the colonial masters introduced their visual language of a personal signatory character ignoring the collective consciousness of the masses. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century a tendency to refuse the prescribed formulae in visual art is visible, but the traditional arts connected with religion, caste and ritual remained unchanged. The new vision of life continued the oft-repeated forms, styles and themes to limited space.

The art of Kerala for centuries remained confining to the walls and floors of architecture and also to the face and the body of the performers. the fixed and conventionalised representation of prescribed themes on sanctioned spaces and places communities to execute the works in set patterns , and also to react to them in terms of particular dispositions of forms and colours. As in the case of society, visual art activity in

general had this problem of stagnation in Kerala though different characteristics for each period divided according to the methodology of art history can be attributed to a certain extent. Almost all the mural paintings of Kerala are on the walls of temples, palaces, and Christian churches and all are thematically religious. The Walls, Sreekovil, and Gopuram are the prominent locations where paintings are generally portrayed. The period between Sanskrit and Malayalam- Melpathur Narayanan Bhattathiripadu's Narayneeyam, Ezhuthachan's Ramayana and Bharatha translations, Poothanam's works, Cherussery's Krishnagatha, King Manaveda's Krishnageethi which is the text for the krishnattam performance, Kunchan Nambiar's Tullal to name a few..... and paintings showed artistic and thematic rapport with these. Among the Hindu Gods Vishnu, Siva, Ganesha, Sastha, Lakshmi, Parvati, Saraswathy and a variety of combinations of figures were the favourite themes for usual paintings.

When other parts of India including Tamil region witnessed a conflict between Vaishnava and Saiva cults, Kerala had an amalgamation of these two in the figure of Harihara which became a prominent theme for mural paintings. Sastha considered to be the son of Vishnu who impersonated the female form Mohini and Siva, illustrated these diverse cults.

Five are the basic colours (panchavarna – yellow, red, green, white and black) of which white is the wall itself and all other pigments are prepared from stones and leaves; the wall preparation is an elaborate process and on the specially prepared wall the picture is drawn first in line and then coloured, the iconography of most of which are based on Dhyanaslokas. Blue, one of the most powerful colours in nature is not seen in mural, floor, face/body paintings or the Kolams of Patayani though the sky and sea are observed as the blue infinity of human perception. In Kathakali the characters Karkotakan and Bahukan of Nalacharitham have blue/black garments giving blue a chromatic connotation of poison.

The mural painting in Christian churches of Kerala have their own style derived from the iconographical and stylistic features of western pictorial forms, and some of them are as old as four centuries. The paintings in the Hindu temple/palaces are only in five colours while those in the churches have more colours to give an effect of illusion of reality and likeness. Though the perfect style of the Renaissance period cannot be seen, most of the works have been executed, with a deliberate attempt to create perspective, but not in places easily accessible to devotees.

Another tradition of painting is the preparation of diagrams using colour powders on the floor connected with rituals, beliefs and religion, a practice seen here also, as in the other parts of the country. Flawy lines creating geometrical design with squares, circles and some floral patterns are diagrammatic talismans very much connected with daily life, belief and feminine authority of domestic protection, and from generation to generation this tradition of visual ritual art practice of magical nature is transmitted by mother to daughter. Other floor diagrams/pictures executed again in connection with beliefs, rituals and religion by professionals of both sexes, but belonging to certain authorised communities, are figurative in nature. Intertwined serpents, Kali, Vettakkorumakan and other figures with definite iconographic features done in five colours have specific purpose to ward off evil for which they are rendered in beautiful but frightening expressions. If the mural paintings have flat pictorial surface of perfect two dimensional characters at eye –level having no recession or thrust coming of space/figure, the floor pictures show a perspective of projecting up from the floor. Very sharp colours, ‘compressed ‘ anatomy to get a feeling of bulging up from the floor with ferocious energy and terrifying facial/ formal expression are some of the features of these pictures, which are unlike the mural figures that are sober even in the most heroic act because of its classical stylisation as in Kathakali or Koodiyattom. These floor pictures are meant to propitiate gods/goddesses of unnamed fierceness and these figures are to be ‘domesticated’ to help the devotees by appearing them to direct their native wildness against the evil spirits devastating the humans. Not meant to exist permanently as the annihilating the evil have to go behind the mental curtain of social/individual domestic subconscious and they are erased immediately after the ritual.

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala too, as other parts of the country, was stripping gradually, the centuries old customs and rituals. Many social and religious reformists spearheaded the movement towards a cultural renaissance in which literature played a prominent part, but the contribution of visual art was not properly evaluated till recently, as the visual language was not seen as one other than a decorative item. The western way of showing illusion of reality in art becomes a powerful communicative style in Ravi Varma. When the art space sanctioned to each caste corresponding to closed social and cultural one slowly opened up with the emergence of Ravi Varma , the crowded and closed compositional space of the mural painting could be replaced by the new pictorial awareness, and the new art and its style and technique became more public. As Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Kelappan and others later tried to open up the closed shrines and roads to the

public, pictorially Ravi Varma opened it during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century . As Chandu Menon, the contemporary of Ravi Varma opened up new vistas of social, cultural and aesthetic space in the form of novel in literature as a result of his exposure to English spoken and written language, Ravi Varma too did the same through English visual language. This was a silent pictorial space of revolt analogous to the one in Chandu Menon's novel. But as the visual language was not a popular –medium of communication in Kerala it was left unnoticed. By the introduction of English language and the communicative links like railway, Postal service etc. an integration of the land in some aspects to a certain extent, was achieved. But a relation of another nature could be achieved by the English visual language as it was retinal naturalism in quality and nature, that even uninitiated lay people could communicate. Though the official declaration of temple entry was promulgated in 1936, one has to note the fact that pictorially, all these gods and goddesses have already took their abode in the houses of people of all castes/religion through the oleograph prints by Ravi Varma in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century itself without the permission /Knowledge of the Brahmins and other upper castes. The scenic grace and excellence of the back ground in Ravi Varma 's picture is analogous to the literary descriptions of forest scapes and mansions in the classical poetry though visually this was not shown till then in naturalistic way corresponding to the 'realistic' narration in literature. When the figures of gods and goddesses were depicted in an atmosphere of romantic grandeur, the epic world in the imagination of the people got a Naturalistic representation in pleasing colour and form.

Indian aestheticians have estimated 'vakrokti' and Dhvani far superior to 'Swabhavokti' though in literature a number of exemplary evidences of Swabhavokti are cited taking episodes from Kalidasa and others.

Kerala got a populist theatre during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and it was the same milieu that could be seen reflected on the art scene too, and a number of translations into Malayalam from Sanskrit and English appeared during this period. As a resultant, Sakunthalam translated by Kerala Varma Valiya Koyi Thampuran(1882)and some Shakesperian plays were staged in many parts of Thiruvananthapuram. The picturesque descriptions in the play could be seen in Ravi Varma's paintings of Sakunthalam themes during the same decade and people accepted it as a reality of correspondence between theatre and painting. The novels of C.V.Raman Pillai and Chandu Menon had also been staged as plays, "the desire to see the familiar characters in literature on stage in flesh and blood was among the people a phenomenon quite applicable to Ravi Varma's painting also. But the fact that the depiction



of the same epic themes in paintings showed almost a 'theatrical text' was derived from a literary text. Most of the new theatrical ventures then, to create a realistic atmosphere used back-drops (curtains) with 'painted scenery' which naturally attracted the spectators, that was more akin to the British Academic Naturalism in style or rather imitations of Ravi Varma. As G.Sankara Pillai has rightly noticed the backdrops became a part of the theatre language. Even Kathakali, the classical theatre was not spared, for there were attempts to use backdrops, as in the case of the same period, to create a realistic atmosphere.

In Kerala painting brought the common Malayalam prose language to the people the elite poetry was handled by a few. Though it slowly started through printed translations of Bible and also through the printed texts of the poems Ezhuthachan, Poonthanam, Cherusseri and Kuchan Nambiar by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it acquired a momentum in social activities as a number of protagonists tried to see things in an objective and democratic way. The oleograph prints of RaviVarma's works also broke some taboos in the society silently as they became popular among people..

Reformation in every branch of thought began and a number of intellectuals, activists, religious protagonists and reformers sprang up vehemently with new objectivity and social perspective. Sree Narayana Guru (1856-28), Chattampi Swamikal(1854-24), Ayyankali (1866-41), Chandu Menon(1847-99),KumaranAsan (1873-24) were contemporaries of RaviVarma. The horizon of the culturescape of Kerala was opened up and widened literally as it was seen in the background landscape of the pictorial space of most of the works of RaviVarma

Madhava Menon created a lyrical nature of Kerala's atmosphere, climate flora and fauna, humans and village life. To be in Santiniketan in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and be a native painter without falling into simplistic approaches to technique and also to themes and moods was the healthy aspect of Madhava Menon that could not be seen in many others. Madhava Menon's pictorial images are lyrical when rendering nature as that of P. Kunjiraman Nair in Malayalam poetry. Intensive love and ideosyncratic attachment to nature and its each component made him a painter of unique quality which could not be taken up/followed/improvised by many others in Kerala. Madhava Menon, impressed by the thoughts of revivalism might have estimated the state of art in Kerala. His work with strong order and qualities of the grammar of visual language are meticulously articulated compositions reminding the subtle power of his observation. Painting somehow had a channel in the form of illustration for literature in periodicals. Camera-realism dominating

society of Kerala had illustrations too in the Snap-shot realism of a hyper dermic nature in some popular publications like MALAYAL MANORAMA weekly; but JAYAKERALAM, MATHRUBHUMI WEEKLY, and a few other journals which gave importance to illustration for short stories, novels and poems opened up a new TRANSITION for art M.Bhaskaran, K.C.S.Panikker, M.V.Devan , A.S.Nair , Namboodiri and presently a number of others have contribution of their own with intricate character of line and stylisation. Of late in the 90's some of the illustration by the younger generation are almost paintings of nearly independent existence. Linear and expressive qualities of drawing figures in the tradition of MADRAS SCHOOL were the main features that made the illustrations of K.C.S. Paniker look innovative and rhythmic in the works he mainly did in JAYAKERALAM. Later when M.V.Devan did illustrations for literary works of Muhammad Basheer and others he could take up the challenge following the masterly touch of K.C.S Paniker in such a way that those figures and compositions become as powerful a graphic attempt as the strong characterisation in the literary medium. Along with literature Devan's illustrations were also discussed, and a new awareness about art appeared in Kerala. A.S.Nair had his own style of figuration, modelling, shading and hatching. A stylisation A.S.Nair derived from graphic arts like wood cut/lino cut could be very expressive with its broken lines; some had the quality of water colour treatment with a WASH EFFECT. The spectacular graphic spread he did for O.V. Vijayan's KHASAKKINTE ITHIHASAM and sculptures effect in the figures for the novel YAYATI stood distinctly in the art of illustration.

Literature-graphic relation from 1950's onwards invoked chances of seeing characters, situations and emotions in linear images distanced very much from the repeatedly used "realistic" drawings/photographs, and the artists and the intellectuals took it as a topic of discourse on par with the far advanced literature. Namboodiri's illustration became as famous as the literary works themselves for which he did them. The liner quality of Namboodiri can be seen on three axes mainly. (1) The vertical exaggeration for the male figures. (2) The horizontal elongation for vehicles and animals (3) Voluminous exaggeration for female figures. Expressive gestures and distorted faces with suggestive poses brought in a new experience in the field of graphic/visual art.

During 1960's almost all branches of art all over India began a search for the identity of the local culture signs. Kerala experienced this through G. Sakara Pillai and Kavalam Narayana Panikker, though they drew criticism from different corners. A few theatre artists tried to haemonise amalgamate MARGI and DESI concepts of classic and folk art forms; and

in literature the presence of M. Govindan created a flutter in the intellectual circles. Visual art too had its own contribution almost in the same direction through K.C.S. PANIKKAR who excavated some of the signs and colours of local and somewhat obscure traditional visuals/culture. He created in water colours the local panorama of Kerala with riverlets and country boats making the natural modulations of topography and made visible the villagery of Kerala of 1940's and 50's. His figurative works are extensions derived from the general concept of anatomy. The anatomical features in 'GARDEN SERIES', 'RED INTERIOR' etc. have a particular character. The figural distortion in K.C.S PANIKKAR can be divided at least into three.

- (1) The rhythm of the compressed limbs. MOTHER AND CHILD has this language where the dwarfening and compressings of the limbs to create a pattern is obvious. Floor paintings of Kerala (KALAM) have a particular way of compressing the figures to give an impression of forthcoming from the floor towards the beholder who has an angle of depression in looking at the picture. If that phenomenon is transformed on to canvas at eyelevel the figures can be somewhat similar to the distortion one can feel in MOTHER AND CHILD. By using the Indian concept of TRIBHANGAM AND BAHUBHANGAM and by shortening /dwarfening /compressing the curvaceous forms he could create and make an effect of figures seemingly forth coming directly or at rather an oblique angle.
- (2) The figural distortion is the next quality which is connected with the beauty of the seemingly stunted growth of limbs. Head, face and eyes are exaggerated keeping hands and legs in diminution.
- (3) The third aspect of stylisation K.C.S PANIKKAR adopted was a derivation of the tubular quality of torso and limbs similar to the one familiar in the DANCING GIRL figure of Indus valley period and also CHOLA sculptures.

Indian aestheticians have discussed the effect of distortion in connection with HASYA. One of the nine aesthetic sentiments that provoke laughter in literature and theatre; but figural distortion in art is not of that sort as it is mostly connected with expression or esteemed formal articulation. In K.C.S PANIKKAR figural distortion is individualistic, traditional, formal, art historical and modern. Re-presentation, re-alignment and re-statement of the tradition in art by him were almost parallel to what M.GOVINDAN did in literature, and G.SANKARA PILLAI and KAVALAM NARAYANA PANIKKAR did in theatre. Modernity in Kerala was not one-dimensioned in growth or linear in progression. Colour, form, Script-like Scribbling in the series "WORDS AND SYMBOLS" were signs of a

culture for connecting a tradition. It creates a painterly quality of pre-literary and literary levels of a society by making evocative even the inactive pictorial blank space.

The 1960's are significant in the socio-political scene in the post-independence era; all the dreams the youngsters nurtured in connection with the independent status of India were shattered during this decade. Those born in the second half of the 40's were in the 1960's youths who saw the Chinese and Pakistan wars, the split of the communist party (in Kerala it had a strong cultural impact), the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, the split in the congress party and the rise of Indira Gandhi to power establishing a dynastic rule by eliminating the stalwarts in the organisation. Disillusioned and alienated youngsters, Naxalism, Existentialism etc. manifested the intellectual milieu of the 1960's. Modern poetry in Malayalam was 'inaugurated' with the work of a few poets. Ayyappa Panikkar's 'KURUSHETRAM' got critical appraisal comparing it with 'THE WASTE LAND' of T.S. Elliot, N.N. Kakkad's poem 1963 brought in new images. Short story and novel got new dimensions through O.V. Vijayan, Kakkanadan, M. Mukundan, Madhavikutty, M.P. Narayana Pillai and others. "NARABALI", the poem by P. Kunjhiraman Nair was of 1962. M.V. Devan too felt the situation and his "Homage to Hero" was a visual socio-political statement.

In the art context of Kerala perhaps K.P. Soman's work in Kadammanitta village and the Independence Golden Jubilee Monument in front of the secretariate in Thiruvananthapuram are the participatory public Art worth its name.

Kadammanitta project is a public/participatory art work giving a significant sculptural text to the poetry of Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan. Most of the poems by Ramakrishnan are based on the mother Goddess element latently active strongly at the social and personal subconscious level, and also the male/father prowess vigorously surrounding the Kadammanitta KAVU. KAVU literally meaning grove is a cluster of trees that becomes the abode of the mother goddess, who, without any roof above her head and walls around her, lives in nature (NANA DURGA-THE WET DURGA AND VANA DURGA- THE FOREST DURGA) in the Dravidian linkage of the culture. This concept, culture and space were usurped later by the Aryanised/Sanskritised practices, as a result of which the open-air Durga was enclosed in the temple and even entry for the people to her abode was restricted imposing different rules based on caste, religion and dress code. The 'sculptural grove' is a miniature indicator of the land and poetry. The slope from the top of the simulated sculpture grove to the bottom steps of the top of the clustered forms signified an apparent river flow.

Being a participatory work, the villagers along with SOMAN have sculpted figures and written the lines of Ramakrishnan's poems there; and this Panchayat sponsored work was named by the villagers "KAVYASILPA" affectionately. This site sculpture is theatre too, like the KADAMMANITTA KAVU that becomes a theatrical space of performance during the PATAYANI, when people participate and perform with painted forms of different characters and manifestation of mother Goddess accompanied by songs. This project began in 1993 and was completed in 2001.

Painting is relevant even today as an effective form of communication and learning. The change in paintings influenced all fine-arts.

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