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## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Malayalam Novels

Dr Saidalavi Cheerangote  
Dr Ganesh Cherukad

The major turning point in the history of Malayalam novels took place in the 1940s with socio-political movements of Kerala collectively referred to as the Renaissance period. The reformist movements among various castes and religious groups and anti-caste consciousness were the major socio-political turn in the decades before and after the 40s.

**I**n an attempt to mark the unique journeys of the Malayalis (people of Kerala) and their identity formation, the plots of a good number of the novels of the present century are interwoven with history. Interestingly, untold local histories and myths are preferred to the established academic history.

Based on the themes, the contemporary Malayalam novels can be classified into seven broad areas. This classification may not be precise in all sense but would help streamline the major trends in the present century Malayalam novels. The plot and narrative techniques entwined with history is the primary category among them. Deconstruction and re-reading of the classical works, including *epics* and *puranas*, falls in another set. Experience, voice and aspirations of subalterns including dalits, women, sexual minorities, and diaspora community, have been considerably represented. The works satirising the socio-political environment of contemporary Kerala and India have also been widely celebrated.

T.D. Ramakrishnan's "*Francis Itty Cora*" deals with the adventurous life of Francis Itty Cora and his successors. Widely acclaimed by the critics, the novel deals with the exploration and expedition of the protagonist, Francis Itty Cora, a 15<sup>th</sup> century Kunnampulam based trader. Incorporating the global historical characters of the 15<sup>th</sup> century including Vasco da Gama, this novel discusses the way by which Malayalis attained a global cultural identity. It also flares up and problematises the themes like mathematics, sex, power, etc. Using the langue and narrative style of a typical history text at surface level, it enthralls the reader through a perfect amalgamation of conflicting experience of sex and violence at one end,

and arts and mathematics at the other. Other two novels of the same author "*Sugandhi Enna Andal Devanayaki*" (*Sugandhi alias Devanayaki*), and "*Mama Africa*" treat the history of civilian unrests in Sri Lanka and Ugandan Malayali life, respectively.

Adopting the background of the historic struggles led by Sahodaran Ayyappan against caste discrimination, M.R. Ajayan's novel "*Mishra Bhojanam*" brings the memory of the reformist movements of past. *Mishra Bhojanam* was a community feast organised in 1917 by Sahodaran Ayyappan. The feast where people of all castes dined together was a revolutionary venture during those days. By connecting the past with the present, Ajayan's novel set in the villages of 'Ochanthuruthu' and 'Pulachonmar' retells the history with a fresh flavour.

"*Delhi Gathakal*" (*Delhi Stories*) by M. Mukundan describes how Delhi functioned as the mosaic and museum of Indian democracy. He traces the history



Dr. Saidalvi Cheerangote is Associate Professor, Department of Linguistics, Malayalam University, Kerala. Email: drsaid@temu.ac.in  
Dr. Ganesh Cherukad is Assistant Professor, Department of Malayalam (Creative Writing), Malayalam University, Kerala.  
Email: drganesh@gmail.com

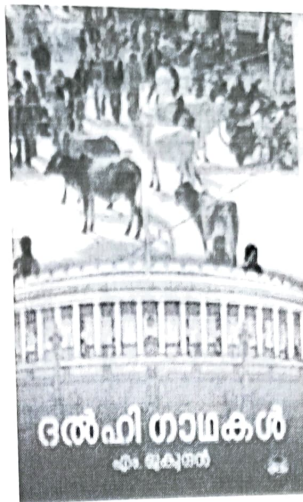
Indian democracy from the 60s to the present. M. Mukundan's "Kesavante Vilapangal" (*The Laments of Kesava*) is also based on a political theme embedded with the history of Kerala. The protagonist is a communist who finds it difficult to link his own life with political ideology. Criticising the ethical laxity and compromising ideology of the present-day leaders, the novel idealises that involvement in a revolutionary activity needs dedication and commitment towards one's own life.

P.P. Rajeevan's "KTN Kottur: Ezhuthum Kottayam" (*The Life and Writings of KTN Kottur*) is a novel that depicts the mysterious and volatile personality of the central character, Kottur who was a poet, politician, and activist. The novel often labelled as a magical history, presents an epic like canvas of the history of politics and social events during freedom movements. The narrative techniques take the readers on a journey from real to the surreal world.

In the background of the local history of Thachanakkara and Ayyattumpilli Tharavad (traditional family of Nair community), Subhash Chandran's masterpiece "Manushyanu Oru Aamukham" (*A Preface to Humankind*) foregrounds the history of the last century Kerala.

Punnappa-Vayalar, a revolutionary struggle in the history of Kerala is depicted in "Ushnarasi" by K.V. Mohan Kumar. It has been translated into English with the title "Manhunt". N. Prabhakaran narrated the local history through his novels "Bahuvachanam" (*Plural Marker*) and "Thiyoor Rekhakal" (*The Thiyoor Records*). "Budhini" by Sara Joseph tells the story of the expelled tribes. "Thakshankunnu Swaropam" by U.K. Kumaran depicts the history of a village in Malabar, "Sufi Paranja Katha" (*What Sufi Said*) by K.P. Ramanunni highlights the secular life of ancient Kerala, and "Kunjalthira" (*The Waves of Kunjali*) by Rajeev Sivashankar tells the life of Kunjalimarakkar. "Acharya" (*Preceptor*) by C. Ganesh and "Maraporul" (*Enigma*) by Rajeev Sivashankar are based on life and philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya.

In addition to this kind of novels linked with history, there are some satirical works based on the socio-cultural history of Kerala. "Azhukillam" by Rafeeq Ahmed is



such a work that lampoons on the glorified past where the voice of the lower caste and class was ill-represented. "Prathi Poovankozhi" (*The Cock is the Culprit*) by Unni R is a satire with a seemingly simple story of a rooster which crows at inconvenient times and disturbs important events in a Kerala village. At a deeper level Unni R rises and tackles the key question about contemporary Indian

politics. "Nireeswaran", a great work of V.J. James is a beautiful depiction of a belief system that questions the boundary between theism and atheism and reveals how atheism becomes another religion in disguise.

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The works satirising the socio-political environment of contemporary Kerala and India have also been widely celebrated.

A good number of novels on Subaltern's life have come up in the last two decades. "Chavuthullal" (*Ecstatic Dance in Memory of the Deceased*) by Raju K. Vasu represents this group of novels. Portraying the life of a Pulaya man who was a migrant to Kanjirapally from Central Travancore, it depicts the conflicts and crisis faced by the Pulaya community. Pradeepan Pambrikkunnu's "Eri" (*Blaze*) describes the discriminations faced by Dalits even when they are highly educated and placed with well-paid jobs. P.A. Uthaman's "Chavoli" is another celebrated work under this category. The victims of the modern concept of development, and environmental issues gained considerable emphasis in many novels. In the novel "Enmakaje", Ambikasuthan Mangad describes the Endosulfan victims of the northern regions of Kerala.

Feminist thoughts for the liberation from patriarchal ties are



still alive in Kerala and its reflections become clearer in the novels of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "Barsa" is a novel about the female resistance against religious dogmas. Set in Bengal, K.R. Meera's "Aarachar" (*Hangwoman*) tells the story of a family of executioners with a long lineage, beginning in the fourth century BC. The protagonist of the novel, Chetna, is a determined woman who struggles to inherit this profession.

Many myths, legends, and plots in epics have been deconstructed and re-read in the form of novels in the last few decades. Sara Joseph's "Urukaval" (*Translated into English with the title The Vigil*) is such an attempt for retelling based on Ramayana. Angadha, the son of Vali is the central character of this novel that rereads Rama's action. Ambikasuthan Mangad, in his novel "Marakkapile Theyyngal" depicts the transformation in a village concomitant to changes in belief and ritualistic art form.

A few novels representing the struggle for survival of the Malayali diaspora captured wider readership during the past two decades. The prominent among them are: "Aadujeevitham" (translated as *Goat Days*) by Benjamin, and "Alia" by Sethu. One of the top sellers, *Aadujeevitham* is a hard-hitting story of a Malayali emigrant to Saudi Arabia who was destined to lead a slave-like life. *Alia* is about the Jewish minority in Kerala returned to their promised land.

Unlike the past two centuries, the life of the sexual minorities has been represented in the novel of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "Aalohari Anandam" is a work of Sara Joseph on women's freedom and sexual orientation, including homosexuality. Written by Sangeetha Sreenivasan, "Acid" describes the strength and vibrancy of male-female relationships in the city of Bangalore through the life of Kamala who loves her husband Madhavan and Shali (her girlfriend) simultaneously. Treatment of the theme like

bisexuality and lesbianism in the changing socio-cultural milieu makes this novel exceptional. "Salabham Pookkal Aeroplane" (*Butterfly-Flowers-Aeroplane*) is another novel of Sangeetha which weaves fantasies and creates new narratives through its female protagonists.

The paradigm shift in the diction and theme of the present century Malayalam novels can be described by a brief linear history of the development of these novels. The novel as a literary genre had not been established in Malayalam until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Indulekha" (1889) written by O. Chandu Menon, is considered as the first significant Malayalam novel. Some novelistic works published before *Indulekha* are not considered as novels in the strict sense. Mrs. Collin's "Ghatakavadham" (*The Slayer Slain*) (1872), Dicken Koshy's "Pulleli Kunju" (1882) and Appu Nedungadi's "Kunthalatha" (1887) were prominent among them.

Unlike the earlier works, *Indulekha* claims some uniqueness as the story and characters are set in Kerala society of that time. It was the contemporariness and beautifully depicted socio-cultural transformation, which made critics assign it the status of the first significant Malayalam novel. The background of the novel is the dilemma of tradition and modernity in a Nair (upper caste Hindu) family. The author attacked the feudal lordship and the then prevalent Namboodiri-Nair marriage pact called *Sambandham* (an informal mode marriage between Nair women with Namboodiri [Brahmin] men).

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*Indulekha* was followed by the historical novels by C.V. Raman Pillai such as "Martandha Varma" (1891), "Dharmaraja" (1913), and "Ramaraja Bahadur" (1919). Some critics consider "Parappuram" (1908) by K. Narayana Kurukkal as the first political novel and "Bhaskara Menon" (1904) by Appan Thampuran as the first detective novel. Appan Thampuran's novel "Bhutarayar" (1923) is also historically significant, for it portrays the second century

Kerala. With its epic features, "Kerala Sanham" (1941) by K.M. Panikkar also attracts the readers and the critics alike. The first Malayalam novel that dealt with the socially backward classes was "Saraswathiccijayam" (1897) by Potheri Kunjambu.

The major turning point in the history of Malayalam novels took place in the 1940s. The two decades after the 40s was strongly influenced by the Association of Progressive Writers that owes its ideological standpoint to socio-political movements of Kerala collectively referred to as the Renaissance period. The reformist movements among various castes and religious groups and anti-caste consciousness were the major socio-political turn in the decades before and after the 40s. It was with this movement a group of writers began to depict elaborately the minority experiences in Malayalam literature. "Odayil Ninnu" (From the Gutter) by P. Kesavadev (1904-1998), "Balyakalasakhi" (Childhood Companion) by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994), "Thakarma Thalamura" (Ruined Generation-Short Stories) by Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987) "Shabdikkunna Kalappa" (The Talking Plough-Short Story) by Ponkunnam Varkey (1910-2004), "Chemmeen" (Prawn) by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912-199) "Vishakanyaka" (Venomous Nymph) S.K. Pottekkatt (1913-82), "Amina" by Uroob (1915-79) represents the realistic narratives of the socio-economic, and political transformation that took place in those decades. K. Saraswati Amma (1919-75) portrayed the innate strength of womanhood through short stories and a novel "Premabhajanam" (Darling) that influenced Women Liberation Movements of later periods.

Another turning point in the sensibility of Malayalam readers happened in the 1960s by M.T. Vasudevan Nair with his unique portrayal of virtues and tribulations of olden and disintegrated feudal social structure. His masterpiece novels depicting these features are "Naalukettu" (1958) (translated into English with the title 'Naalukettu:

Another turning point in the sensibility of Malayalam readers happened in the 1960s by M.T. Vasudevan Nair with his unique portrayal of virtues and tribulations of olden and disintegrated feudal social structure. His masterpiece novels depicting these features are "Naalukettu" (1958) (translated into English with the title 'Naalukettu: The House with a Courtyard') and "Kaalam" (1969) (Time).

The House with a Courtyard) and "Kaalam" (1969) (Time)

Introducing a poetic style of prose in the narration by swaying gracefully between myth and reality O.V. Vijayan's "Khasakkinte Itihasam" (The Legend of the Khasak) became another milestone in the history of Malayalam novels. Though the short-stories outnumber the novels penned, "Madhavikutty" (also known as Kamala Das and Surayya) also deserves a unique place in the history of Malayalam novels with her works, including "Neermathalam Pootha Kaalam" (When Neermathalam Bloomed) is worth mentioning. Kakkanadan, Vadakkke Koottala Narayanankutty

Nair (V. K. N), N. P. Mohammed, M. P. Narayana Pillai, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, Vilasini, Rajalakshmi, M. Mukundan, Kovilan, Nandanar, Sethu, K. Surendran, Punathil Kunjabdulla, Anand, Zachariah, P. Valsala, T.V. Kochubava, Geetha Hiranyan, Rosemary, K. L. Mohana Varma, Ashthamurty, K. P. Ramanunni, Sethu, C. Radhakrishnan, C.V. Balakrishnan, are a few among the prominent writers of this period. "Oru Sankeertham Pole" (Like a Psalm), one of the much-admired novels of the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century penned by Perumbadavam Sreedharan deserves a special mention. Based on the life of the Russian author Dostoyevsky, the novel surpassed its 100<sup>th</sup> edition in a period of about 25 years.

It can be found that the nature of the novels in the last century was predominantly realism. Combination of myth and reality and magical realism as narrative techniques started appearing in the works published at the last decades of the twentieth century and such narrative experiments in imaginative inquiry in Novels thrived in the present century. A paradigm shift occurred in the literary sensibility of the readers and the style and themes of works by the contemporary novelists who started writing in the last decades of the twentieth century is arguably due to the influence of post-modern literary trends. □

