THINK INDIA JOURNAL

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

Construction Of 'Tradition' Through Narratives: Reflections On Early Malayalam Novels

Dr Dinesan V.,
Dept. of History,
Govt. Arts and Science College, Uduma,
Kasaragod, Kerala.
Kerala.

Dr Santhosh V.M.,
Dept. of English,
Payyanur College, Payyanur,
Kannur,

ABSTRACT

The present article attempts to explore into the dynamics of constructing 'tradition' through narratives as a foil to 'modernity' which has been effected on the foundations of the rationality of the colonial enterprise. Drawing parallels with certain historical/official records, it focuses on how the early Malayalam novels have been instrumental in this discursive construction. Two 19th century Malayalam novels – *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon, and *Meenakshi* (1890) by Cheruvalathu Chathu Nair – are taken as referral points for analysis here. How the colonial masters and the subjectified natives speak the 'same language' with respect to tradition and modernity is also exposed in the article with due illustrations from the afore-said novels.

Key words: tradition, modernity, Kerala, novel, subjectification.

Knowledge has been a leverage employed in the game of power to construct, contain, and control the other. For such purposes, one might appropriate any branch of the existing system of knowledge or device a new genre of discourse. This system of knowledge and genre of discourse will have meaning only in relation to the existing milieu. They can take root, by and large, by positioning them against practices in that milieu which can be posited as the 'other'. Empirical evidences from history about this 'othering' would enable us to substantiate this notion. Genealogical table in Indian Puranas, argues Romila Thapar, served as legitimizing mechanism of the "lowborn" ancient Indian rulers by linking them either with the *Sooryavamsa* or *Chandravamsa*, thereby qualifying them as fit to rule the land (36). Scholars have identified

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

relations between the emphasis on non-violence in Buddhist texts and the distinctiveness of Northern Black Polished Ware culture (Sharma 102). When we come to the medieval period, knowledge, as a legitimizing mechanism, displaced its earlier forms of "genealogical skeleton to the fuller forms of biographies and chronicles" and further "to science during the modern age" (Thapar 1991, 36). Benedict Anderson asserts that "the coalition between Protestantism and print capitalism, exploiting cheap popular editions, quickly created large new reading publics – not least among merchants and women, who typically knew little or no Latin – and simultaneously mobilized them for politico-religious purposes" (54). Either by devising a new one or by making active a dormant body contextually, the constitutive practice, resulting in structural identity, proceeds.

Nothing comes out as 'natural' or nothing is "inevitable", rather an entity is constituted in relation to other entitles or is effectuated as the result of the working of different, but related elements. The existing genre may often fail to pose new questions relevant to the structure and may not be able to measure up to the new 'problematic'. Even if it posed new questions and delineated new things, the possibility of being passed by those to whom it is addressed cannot be neglected. Hence, while endeavouring to constitute a cardinal alteration in the existing structure, often a new genre of knowledge may be introduced.

The birth of a new kind of literary production in the late 19th century Kerala could be read from this background. Though there were different kinds of literary production in pre-colonial Kerala, novel, as a form of literary production was completely unknown to them during the period. The present article, though not tracing the history of the birth of Malayalam novels, addresses how novel effectuated the discursive constitution of Kerala as a traditional society while apparently claiming to transform it to a modern society. To substantiate the argument, instances from two 19th century Malayalam novels – *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon, and *Meenakshi* (1890) by Cheruvalathu Chathu Nair – are taken.

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

Colonial modernity was the historical force which set the background for the birth of Malayalam novel, which emerged as a corollary to the larger social reform movements that Kerala had experienced (Irumpayam 182-84; Thomas 65). Colonialism is viewed as a state of mind of the colonizers and the colonized, a colonial consciousness which includes the sometimes unrealized wish to make economic and political profits from the colonies, but other elements too (Nandy 1-2). When the discursively constructed colonial subject – in other words, the agent of change – begin to speak from the paradigm of the colonizer, the sufficient condition for a structural change comes. Here the idea of reform discursively built through the novel did the same and also constituted the conditions for the persistence of colonial rule as well as legitimized its practices.

Speaking from within the regimen of colonialism, the colonialists call the native practices 'barbaric' which, in turn, confers on the colonialist the 'burden' to civilize natives. The native people are made to believe that in contrast to the people of the west, they 'lack something' which is indispensable to consider them civilized. Accepting such an assertion as true, the natives felt a need to reform themselves. Thus emerges a moment of the confluence of both the voices, the colonial voice of 'white man's burden', and the native voice of redressal of their 'lack'. When the demand for reforming the existing practices emerges from the natives themselves, it would sufficiently provide ideological support to colonialism and ensure colonial domination.

Now let us have a look into the social texts which will enable us to substantiate our argument that the colonialist and the reformist natives were speaking a similar language. Till the early decades of the 20th century, the major system of marriage and inheritance practice that prevailed in Kerala was *sambandam* (a kind of polyandry) and *marumakkathayam* (matriliny) respectively. Both these were viewed by the colonialists as barbaric, in contrast to their system of marriage and inheritance, which are monogamy and patriliny. Colonial administrative and missionary records have abundance of references regarding how they viewed these two practices and why should they be erased. Even the appointment of the Malabar Marriage Commission must

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

be perceived as a colonial move to reform the existing practices which they construed as barbaric. In the early 20th century, there was a wide acceptance to the perception that the colonialists advocated. The following statement of Nagam Aiya could be viewed as such a merger of the voices of the colonizer and the colonized. He says:

> With the advancement of education Marumakkathayam is becoming hopelessly unworkable. It offends against every principle of political economy and of healthy family life. It is based on the doctrine that there is no merit in female virtue and no sin in unchastity; and of this doctrine the very founders of this system are heartily ashamed. By freeing a man from the obligation of maintaining the wife and offspring it sanctions the reckless propagation of the spices, destroying all motives of prudence and forethought and forces up the population to the point whence it must be put down by the actual want of the means of subsistence. (364)

Here the education referred to is the English education introduced by the British. *Marumakkathayam* became a "hopelessly unworkable" institution since the advancement of education, say the natives who think like the colonialists. The inauspicious pervasiveness of marumakkathayam in Kerala was reckoned as a cause to construe the native's practices as barbaric. It is the new education established here that ignited this kind of thinking in the natives. Since *marumakkathayam* was based on "the doctrine that there is no merit in female virtue and no sin in unchastity" and the like, it "offends against every principle of political economy and healthy family life". This disrespect towards female virtue and their chastity and allied obnoxious practices of the natives negatively affects the healthy family life, says the educated native. To acquire the lost healthy family life they want to end these fulsome practices and to rectify the existing laws of inheritance. Here Aiya and those who are referred to as 'advanced' by getting education have been uttering not the language of the natives but that of the British, from whose institution they acquired this knowledge. These people who are advanced in education are natives,

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

indeed, but speaking a non-native language. At the same time, being confronted by the colonial ideology, even though they speak like the colonialist, they also speak on their own privation; hence they may not be called real colonialists, but subjectified natives.

We have cited above a passage from a historical document written by a native lamenting on the lack of civilization. Now we look into a colonialist's assertion, to substantiate that these two utterances hardly differ. Francis Day writes:

> The Bride lives in her mother's house, where she has separate rooms, and indulges in indiscriminate polyandrism, with any of her own caste or of a higher grade: but should she receive the visit of inferior caste to herself, she becomes an out-caste. The infamy and shame, which in most other part of India, attends an erring wife, and extends to her family, is here unknown. Such deeds can be no subject for vituperation against the Shudrumma, for in Malabar no disgrace attends them. Until a change in this system occurs, this portion of India can hardly be said to be advancing in civilization. (317-18)

The above-quoted passage shows that Day too emphasizes the natives' lack of civilization. He finds out that to be advanced in civilization they must quit the custom of indulging in "indiscriminate polyandrism". Since the passage is self explanatory, we do not attempt to explain it here. Now we look into early Malayalam novels to show where these texts stand.

It is already noted that the advancement in education induced the natives to rethink their practices and to re-discover them as anachronistic. The novel *Meenakshi* contains passages providing analogous notions: "Necessary knowledge, development of the intellect, the capacity to discriminate between dos and don'ts and maturity can be obtained only through education; the uneducated are simply equal to beasts" (153. Translation of passages from the Malayalam novels under analysis is done by us. Page numbers given are of the corresponding pages of the source language texts given under the works cited at the end).

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

Gopala Menon, a character in *Meenakshi*, extends his idea further to argue on the imperative nature of English education in transmuting one from barbarity to civilization. Why English education is important and imperative? He responds: "To derive these benefits easily English is more convenient than other languages. It is difficult for women to find time and convenience like men for education, yet English education is essential for women" (143).

To obtain virtue and urbanity, English education is indispensable, not only for men but also for women. Firstly, the colonialist called the natives uncivilized. Secondly, by imparting education the latter were taught that such and such practices were the signs of uncivilized nature and that those must be reformed. Finally, thinking from the discursive plain of the colonialist, the natives "realized" that reform is necessary, i.e., they were taught to think that the very thought of identifying oneself as 'traditional' is an indication of civilization.

A passage from *Indulekha* conveys a notion similar to that of the two passages quoted above: "The women of Kerala, unlike those of others do not observe the laws of chastity, they accept and reject husbands at will" (43).

These homogenous assertions emanating from different narratives impel us to infer that they are articulated from within the colonial discursive regime. By emphasizing the identical nature of the voices of the colonizer and the colonized, we do not mean that there was no difference in their vocabulary; but the effects of those differences are negligible since both were engaged in a 'civilizing mission'.

Nineteenth century Malayalam novelists spoke of the native practices from such a subjectified position, the effect of which was the constitution of these practices as traditional and uncivilized. M. P. Paul, while commenting on *Indulekha*, asserts: "That Chandu Menon's novel and their imitations introduced certain timely reforms among Malayali Brahmins is beyond doubt. Moreover, many customs that had taken roots among the Nair community came to be recognized as bad customs since the publication of his works" (178).

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

The idea is that till Chandu Menon's – subsequently other 19th century novelists' too – objectification and narrativization, the natives hardly realized whether their practices were traditional or not; but while reflecting upon such objectification and narrativization, the natives began to look back and speak about their own practices as 'bad' and 'uncivilized'. That is, till the appearance of such narrativization, the colonized never felt that they were traditional. The new realization was made possible by the presence of a modern alternative paradigm provided by colonialism; in relation of difference with it the natives construed their own institutions and practices as traditional.

Nineteenth century Malayalam novels achieved this creation of consciousness by specifically characterizing their heroes and villains and ascribing them dialogues appropriate to achieve such an end. The heroes, heroines and the other virtuous characters emerge as exemplars of modernity having conduct of the above-said subjectified natives, while the wicked characters represent their 'other'. Madhavan, Kunhisankaran, Indulekha, Meenakshi,– the heroes and heroines of some of these novels – have the qualities that the natives lack and what the Europeans consider as necessary to be treated as cultured. The 'orthodox' natives (like Panchu Menon, Soori Namboodiri, Puruhoothan Namboodiri) become villains in these narratives since they lack the attributes the colonialists consider as the signs of civilization and also the 'righteousness' the heroes and the heroines have. The biographical sketch of Madhavan illustrated by Chandu Menon in his novel is indicative of this: "The remarkable and rising reputation he had in school since his beginning of learning English to the completion of his B. L. degree itself clearly and completely illustrates his intellectual excellence" (17).

Madhavan has got English education (the other heroes of the 19th century novels too), and that makes him distinct and distinguished. The distinctiveness is achieved through English education, or in other words, through accepting the ideology of colonial modernity. To attain this distinction, he has to abandon the 'customary' and 'usual' practices of the society into which he is

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

born. When Sankara Menon, a character in the novel *Indulekha*, says, "Appu [nick name of Madhavan], don't forsake our customs and traditions, just because you have turned clever, with your English education" (20), he is tacitly referring to this tension between tradition and modernity. Madhavan renounces the native system; this abdication casts on him a new identity, the identity of a subjectified native. This makes him different from others of his age. Unfolding his character, the novelist says, "I can assure that Madhavan is an exception to those ordinary youth who from their age of eighteen till they get married in due course unfortunately indulged sometimes in certain bad habits" (18).

By the term 'ordinary youth', the author is referring to the native youth who are devoid of education and other virtues which the author and the British consider as necessary for civility. What the native lacks, and what is indispensable to be considered as virtue and sign of civilized life, is ascribed to Madhavan and other heroes and heroines of the novels under consideration.

As said earlier, there is a merger of the voice of the author and the 'virtuous' character of the novels when the tension of choosing between the constituted tradition and modernity comes. In these novels the omniscient author often makes comments on native practices, which hardly differ from the dialogue the author ascribes to his characters who are critical of the existing social order. For example, the author of *Meenakshi*, while describing Kanakamangalam, where the events of the novel take place, speaks at length on the native practices and concludes by asserting, "I am certain that customs of this type are not to be found among any civilized people … simply brutish!" (68-69). It hardly differs from one of his protagonists' assertion on a particular native practice: "If they had at least a hint that the purpose of *thalikettu* [prepubescent marriage which need not lead to cohabitation] is marriage, they would not have spent so much of money for this beastly custom of proposing a single husband for all the girls in the *tharavadu* [matrilineal joint family]" (182). What it indicates in simple terms is that just like the author, his protagonist stands for virtue and has been speaking like him as a subjectified native. The omniscient author in

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

Chandu Menon's novel comments on Indulekha, the female protagonist: "Any sensible man will say that children should be educated" (24). Then he describes the qualities of Indulekha,

> She was imparted education in English, taught Sanskrit upto the point of dramas and figures of speech; music as much as needed to recite 'pallavi' and different 'ragas'. She was also trained in piano, fiddle, and veena. He [Kochukrishna Menon] acquainted his beautiful niece with needle works and painting, as is the practice among European women. This great and intelligent man wanted that Indulekha should posses all the knowledge and accomplishment that an English lady would get in Britain. Kochukrishna Menon almost achieved this, by that time she was sixteen (24).

Is Indulekha a native girl? No. Is she a European? Not at all. Then what is she? A European-like native: a subjectified character like the hero and the narrator. She also speaks like them: "If Madhavan thinks that we women of the Nair community are immoral or unchaste just because we are unlike those Brahmin women, who do not talk to anyone else other than their kin, and lead an animal life, without getting educated, he is utterly wrong" (44). The ideal gentleman, the model girl and the omniscient author have similar features and they speak from within a single plane of discourse devised by colonialism; from a position of colonial subjecthood.

Now let us look into the positioning of others in these texts. We have been arguing that the novels of the period have to be placed in the wider context of colonialism and that its discursive effect was the constitution of a divided society that consists of a civilized one, that includes the colonialists and the subjectified natives, as well as an uncivilized native that adheres to the existing practices. Here the languages of those who speak as colonial subjects and of those who defend the existing social practices are incompatible. This incompatibility is an effect of the difference in the rationality that both parties follow to arrive at their own positions. There is a difficulty in valuing these conflicting rationales by using a single measuring rod. The explanatory paradigm that one makes use of to arrive at one's position and argue for the realization of one's

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

goals may not be an acceptable explanatory paradigm for the other. Therefore, the conclusion arrived at by the self may not be the conclusion desired, expected, or accepted by the other.

It is a fact that in the lived everyday life of the 19th century Kerala, the voice of the reformists and that of the traditionalists were incommensurable. The possibility of them becoming commensurable without the loss of one's ontological status was remote. But the space of the novels, contrary to the lived life, assimilates the otherwise incommensurable voices to attain its desired goals. Here, novel, as a genre of discourse, apply techniques which appears in the text in the form of knowing, teaching, being just, becoming seductive, justifying, evaluating, rousing emotion, and the like (Lyotard xii), and thereby links the incommensurable voices to attain the desired goal of colonial subjectification and domination.

The subjectified natives have to reject the native customs as obsolete so as to project an alternative. They have to negate the existing to posit another which would bring them up as equal to the British. For that they have to construct a 'traditional' society. As a preliminary to it, the subjectified natives would ask the 'referent' to speak about themselves so as to prove that what the latter utters are signs of the traditional, obsolete, barbaric etc. By referring to such norms of the other, self, modernity, civilization etc. can be created. Since the utterances of the other are structured by the self so as to legitimize its own stand, the representation of the other through their own discursive regime does not appear in these texts. That is, here the other has been muffled. It handicaps the other with respect to bringing evidences that could justify its position and perspective. Being unable to produce evidence to defend one's stand means to accept failure prior to the beginning of the combat. On the other side, since everything is done within the discursive regimen of the reformed native, the novels invariably end with an assertion that no damage has been done to the native. It is in and through these narrativizations that the novels effectuate the construction of the tradition and legitimize the values that colonialism vouchsafed.

Works Cited

ISSN:0971-1260

Vol-22- Issue-14-December-2019

Aiya, Nagam. *The Travancore State Manual* (Volume I & Part II). 1906. New Delhi: Asian Education Series.1989.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* London: Verso, 1983.

Day, Francis. *The Land of Perumals or Cochin: Its Past and Present*. 1863. New Delhi: Asian Education Series, 1990.

Irumpayam, George. *Malayala Novel Pathonpathaam Noottandil (Malayalam Novel in the Nineteenth Century)*. Kottayam: SPCS. 1984.

Lyotard, Jean Francois. *Differend; The Phrase in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbece. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988.

Menon, Kizhakkepattu Ramankutty. *Parangodi Parinayam*. 1892. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2013.

Menon, O. Chandu, *Indulekha*. 1889. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2013.

Nair, Cheruvalath Chathu. *Meenakshi*. 1890. Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 2013.

Nandy, Ashish. *The Intimate Enemy*: *Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. New Delhi: OUP, 1991.

Paul, M. P. *Novel Sahithyam*. Kottayam: SPCS, 1953.

Sharma, R. S. *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India.* New Delhi: McMillan, 1989.

Thapar, Romila. "Genealogical Patterns and Perceptions of the Past", *Studies in History*, 7. 1 (1991): 1- 36.

Thomas, Thupamon. *Malayala Novalinte Verukal (The Roots of Malayalam Novel)*. Kottayam: SPCS, 1983.

****

