

Fiction Today in Malayalam

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A review

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From "Kundalata" to "Ibbemmin" the distance is great; but the fiction in Malayalam has covered this distance in the short period of seventy years. "Kundalata", though the historians of literature call it a novel, is really only a wonder-tale. Our first real novel, "Indulekha" by C. Chandu Menon, came ^{two} ~~the~~ years later. The customs and manners of two prominent communities of Kerala, the Nayars and the Nambudiris, form the warp and woof of "Indulekha". By the charm of a simple love-theme, by the lucidity of style, by the realistic portrayal of life; by the sparkling wit, above all by the burning passion for social reform, "Indulekha" still remains a favorite of Malayalis, and ~~will remain~~ a classic of Malayalam literature.

No wonder, then, that "Indulekha" became the model for a host of imitators, and that a great satirist, Kizhakkappat Ramankutty Menon, had to write our first satirical novel

"Parangoti parinayam" in the year 1892 is a permanent stop to this stream of imitation. But the remedy proved perhaps worse than the disease, and for a long time the field of social novel lay uncultivated. We might point to one or two shining stars, like "Apphante Makel" (Uncle's daughter) by Moothringode Bhavatratan Nambudrip^{ad}, ^{Vinayan Sankar by Kesat Achutha Menon} even in this utter darkness. But for a worthy successor of "Indulekha", we had to wait till comparatively recent times when Vairam Muhammed Basheer published his first novel "Balajakala Sakhi" (Playmate of childhood). Portraying the ~~unfortunate~~ tragic life of a Muslim youth of North Travancore, this masterpiece sounds the depths of sympathetic hearts by its infinite tenderness. In "Ntuppuppetkorane-ntarman" (My grandfather had an elephant), a novel again on ~~his~~ Muslim life, Basheer employs laughter where he employed tears in his former work, and produces the same effect.

Mention may also be made here of the two famous novels of Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai, viz., "Rantitairazhi" (Two measures of paddy) and "Chemmin" (Prawn). In the former, which has been translated into Hindi by the Sahitya Akademy, the life of the Pulayas, the lowest

Community of landless near-slave agricultural laborers in the marshy paddy-fields of Central Travancore is vividly ~~portrayed~~ ^{depicted} against the background of the rising tide of national movement.

In "Chemmīn" the life of the fisher-folk near Alleppey, ~~and~~ all its precarious beauty, forms the subject-matter. In "Ummāchu", a very powerful and exceptionally popular novel, Mr. P. G.

Kutti Krishnan goes to the roots of the Hindu-Muslim problem of Malabar. It is the same problem of communal animity which forms the theme of "Mōṭṭu-patam" (The veil) by Mr. S. K. Pottakkat.

The solution advanced by both these authors is inter-religious marriage. In "Viṣakanyaka" (Poison-girl) Mr. Pottakkat pictures the struggles for existence of a group of Syrian Christian settlers from Central Travancore in the inhospitable, wild malarial tracts of north Malabar.

"Odayil ninnu" (From the gutter) by Mr. P. Kesavadas, ~~is~~ which deals with the life of a Rickshawallah is our first proletarian novel.

Thōṭṭyute Nakan (The scavenger's son) by Mr. Takazhi ~~and~~ ~~"Thōṭṭi"~~ ~~(The scavenger)~~ ~~also~~ belong to this class. In "Professor" ~~Mr.~~ Mundesser has drawn in bold outlines the stark tragedy of an underpaid teacher's life.

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"Māttānda Vāma" by E. V. Raman Pillai is our first historical romance. Published in 1890, it also remains, to this date, our most popular historical novel. "Dharmarāja" and "Rāmarāja Bahadur" by the same author paint in epic proportions the struggles of the Royalty of Travancore against internal subversion and external invasion preceding and during the Mysore wars. "Bhutarayar" by Appan Tampuran, dealing with traditional history of Kerala, "Kerala Simham" by Sardar Paniker, extolling the exploits of Kerala's Paghassi Raja who lost his life battling against the British, and "Cheraman Perumal" based on the life of the royal saint of that name, are some of the best specimens of ~~our~~ historical romance in Malayalam.

A recent and welcome development, which deserves mention, is the emergence of soldier-novelists. Many young Malayalees had their first taste of life in barracks during and after the second world war, and at least three of these young men have added permanently to the riches of our literature. Of these the most beauty-conscious is "Nandanar", whose "Ariyapetatta Manuṣya jīvikal" (Unknown Humans) describing the life of a ^{small} platoon in Kashmir is a ~~ette~~ ^{in miniature} masterpiece. In "A minus B" "Kovilan" dissects a few extremely varying

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temperaments brought against each other by the exigencies of military life. A soldier's relation to his far-away home is the theme of "Ninamavinna a Kalpāhukal" (Blood Stained Footprints) by "Pārapphurath".

So far I have spoken about serious fiction. We have also works of pure wit and fun, of sarcasm and satire, as exemplified by the most recent works of Mr. Basheer. Mr. P. K. Rajaraja Varma has created a superb source of unending comedy in "Panchu Menon" and "Kunshi Amma", a middle-aged middle-class couple.

Time being short, I cannot go to all the ramifications of our fiction which has developed in these seventy years to embrace all aspects of our life. ~~As~~ Inevitably many works have been consigned to the limbo, but there remain enough to ^{widen} ~~enhance~~ our vision, ^{enlarge} ~~deepen~~ our sympathies and enrich our life. Though we have our writers in the lighter vein too, our approach to fiction had been rather too serious, and many of the failures in this field, ^{are indelible} ~~may be accounted~~ to the missionary zeal of the authors. Even our most prominent writers have not been immune from this besetting sin. But of late the realisation seems

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to be, demanding that after all the business of the writer, ^{is} to be faithful to life, while leaving his philosophy to take care of itself. Another welcome aspect of our fiction is the absence of rigid specialisation. While no single label ~~of~~ like psychological, ~~stream-of-consciousness~~, panoramic, etc. can be attached to them, our best novels show the happy result of a blending of these various technical devices.

In this brief survey I have left out the vast field of short story, which is more fertile than that of the Novel, and where every year some new talent is blossoming and unending experiments are going on. The time does not permit me to sketch the influences exerted by fiction in other literatures, Indian and foreign, on Malayalam fiction. ~~Through~~ ^{In} translations we have read most of the novels of Bankim Chandra, R. L. Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore and Saratchandra from Bengal. We are familiar with most works of Premchand. Of Marathi writers we know only Khandekar; and we have hardly any translation from other Indian languages. Malayales can read in their own tongue many of the masterpieces of French, Russian ~~and~~ and English fiction, and what they have got has only whetted their appetite for more and more of this literary fare.
