

DEBUNKING ORTHODOXY IN KAMALA DAS' THE SANDAL TREES AND SARA JOSEPH'S THE SCENT OF THE OTHER SIDE

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ABSTRACT:

The two Malayalam novels discussed in this paper tell tales of women's transgressions. It is a transgression of a sexual nature that forms the theme of Kamala Das' *The Sandal Trees* and Sara Joseph's *The Scent of the Other Side*; in the case of the latter, the violation strikes at the very core of the Roman Catholic religion as it is practised in Kerala. In both the Malayalam novels, the transgressions that challenge and resist the power structures in society, be they of caste, religion, marriage or gender, provoke strong reactions from the dominant power groups who seek to oppress and subdue the violators and to reinforce the norms of orthodoxy. This study primarily attempts to put in perspective the mapping of Kerala in fiction, with reference to the gender question.

Keywords:

Malayalam fiction, transgression, orthodoxy, female psyche, resistance, stoicism

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The modern state of Kerala on the western coast of the Indian Union, which lies to the west of Tamil Nadu and southwest of Karnataka came into existence with the unification of the provinces of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar on November 1, 1956, "effected upon the recommendations of the state reorganization committee, on a linguistic basis" (Samel 308). Legend has it that Kerala is a land raised from the ocean with a throw of the mazu (battle-axe) by Lord Parasurama and gifted to the Brahmins. Historically, it is the land where six religions peacefully co-existed through the centuries, the land where basic Dravidian streams of culture were superimposed with Aryan influences, the land that figured in the world from ancient times as a hub of spices, the land where the Chinese and the Arabs, the Portuguese and the Dutch, the French and the English left their stamp, and the land of Kathakali, Koodiyattam, Mohiniyattam, Theyyam and Ottamthullal. Its rich artistic and cultural heritage is a beautiful mosaic fashioned by diverse people down the centuries (Paul 7).

Kerala, the land of Kathakali and Mohiniyattam, lush greenery and shimmering waters, and the magic of Ayurveda, may seem a veritable paradise to the outsider, a perception further reinforced by

its sobriquet "God's Own Country," but to the Malayali it is an intrinsic part of his consciousness and identity, defining his habits, customs, rituals and mode of life in ways that have cultural, social, economic, even political ramifications. It has made the people what they are—fertile in imaginative, artistic and creative aspirations as is demonstrated by Kerala's long tradition of performing and ritual arts, and oral and written literature dating back a thousand years. Literature—poetry, fiction and non-fiction, written by Malayalis in Malayalam and English—has always sought to understand Kerala, to see beyond the beautiful surface, and to uncover the essence of life lived on it.

Malayalam literature had its beginnings in oral literature, in the ballads of the low-caste landless agricultural labourers who sang "songs with rhythms that aligned with the rhythm of their work and thereby relieved its tedium" (Chaitanya 19). Since the days of Aryan contact in the fifth century AD or earlier and during the Maniavalam era from the ninth to the twelfth centuries AD, Malayalam language and literature underwent Sanskrit acculturation and witnessed a variety of renderings of the two great epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata and other

masterpieces of Sanskrit poetry into Malayalam. The evolution of Malayalam poetry down the centuries, from the Niranam poets of the fourteenth century, the fifteenth-century Cherusseri, the sixteenth-century Ezhuthachan, the hymnal and didactic poetry of the late sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, through the early modern poetry of Asan, Ulloor and Vallathol, the pioneers of romanticism in Malayalam, to the moderns M. P. Appan, Vailopilli, G. Sankara Kurup, Vayalar Rama Varma, Sugatha Kumari, O. N. V. Kurup and a host of others, has been traced in astonishing detail and analyzed with clarity, depth and astuteness by Chaitanya in his monumental work *A History of Malayalam Literature* (18-88, 212-238, 436-512). He maps the course of Malayalam prose that had more or less followed the path of poetry until it was revolutionized by the emergence of newspapers and periodicals which “had a higher frequency and range of impact, created a ferment of ideas, coined new words everyday” (175).

Chaitanya attributes the late beginning of drama as a literary form in Kerala to the early stabilization and abiding popularity of dance-drama forms like Kathakali and Thullal. The early stage productions, in the late nineteenth century, were all translations of Sanskrit plays, liberally interspersed with prose dialogues. In the twentieth century, “it was C. V. Raman Pillai who established the transition to social realism in theme and to the farce as form” (353). Since then, Malayalam drama has passed through the able hands of E. V. Krishna Pillai, N. P. Chellappan Nair who continued the tradition of the farce, Bhattatirippad, K. T. Muhammad, G. Sankara Pillai, N. N. Pillai, Ponkunnam Varkey, Edasseri, Thoppil Bhasi, N. Krishna Pillai, Omchery, K. Surendran and others, and produced modern plays of fine calibre. However, “progress here has lagged behind the headway made by the novel and poetry,” adds Chaitanya (397).

Malayalam fiction, like fiction written in other regional languages as well as English in India, made its appearance in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chaitanya’s in-depth study of

Malayalam fiction in *A History of Malayalam Literature* (259-348) is so thorough and rich in detail, and M. K. Tharakan’s study of the Malayalam novel in *The Growth of the Novel in India, 1950-1980* (57-70) is so perceptive that together they provide a comprehensive critical perspective of the Malayalam fictional scenario. Though Appu Nedungadi’s *Kundalatha* (1887) is arguably the first novel in Malayalam, the Malayali reader was introduced to the form as early as 1845 by way of Archdeacon Koshy’s translation of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Mrs. Collin’s novel *Slayer Slain* (1862) whose Malayalam translation appeared in 1878 is perhaps the first novel set in the milieu of Kerala. The social novels of Chandu Menon and the historical romances of C. V. Raman Pillai that came out in the last decade of the nineteenth century moored the form firmly in the social and political milieu of Kerala and set the stage for the tremendous growth of the Malayalam novel in the century that followed.

The period from 1942 to 1962, the period of “Progressive Literature” as Chaitanya terms it (279), saw the renaissance of the Malayalam novel in the hands of iconoclasts like P. Kesava Dev, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, Vaikom Mohamed Basheer, S. K. Pottekat and P. C. Kuttikrishnan popularly known as Uroob, all of whom stood for social revolution. Kovilan, Parappuram, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Kakkanadan, M. Mukundan and O. V. Vijayan and a host of others including Mundasseri, Vilasini (M. K. Menon), Malayatoor Ramakrishnan, E. M. Koor, Vivekanandan, Anand, Punathil Kunjabdulla, to mention a few, continued the great tradition and gave a new direction to the Malayalam novel with their social, autobiographical, psychological, stream of consciousness, and satirical novels, many of them influenced by the development of Western thought and techniques of fiction.

Women writers in Malayalam, whose writings appeared in the late 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century in women’s and other magazines and public forums, espoused their concerns about “the status of women, their

education, aspirations for freedom, work and so on” (Geetha x). Fiction writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam, K. Saraswathi Amma and Annie Thayyil, and poets like Balamani Amma, Mary John Thottam (Sister Benigna), Mary John Koothattukulam and Muthukulam Parvathi, who wrote in the first half of the twentieth century, had to brave the rampant male-domination in the literary world and face discrimination as they indulged in literary pursuits. Among them, Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909–1987) whose oeuvre includes nine volumes of short stories and six collections of poems, is the most prominent. Women writers in Malayalam, whose writings appeared in the late 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century in women’s and other magazines and public forums, espoused their concerns about “the status of women, their education, aspirations for freedom, work and so on” (Geetha x). In the second half of the twentieth century, there appeared the fiction of Rajalekshmi and later, other eminent writers like Kamala Das (Madhavikutty), Sara Joseph, P. Vatsala and Gracy, as well as the younger generation of writers like Sithara S., C. S. Chandrika, Ashita and others whose voices are chiefly feminist in tone.

This study primarily examines Kamala Das’ *The Sandal Trees (Chandanamarangal)*, and Sara Joseph’s *The Scent of the Other Side (Othappu)* to put in perspective the mapping of Kerala in fiction, with reference to the gender question. A recurrent theme in these novels is the gender issue in institutions like marriage and family, the issue of women confronting patriarchal norms imposed on them. There is a focus on women’s lives, their concerns, experiences, exploitation, frustrations, struggles, quest for identity, etcetera. A woman who breaks free of the fetters of tradition, society and male domination is forced to face stringent ostracism and hostility both within the family and society. The social and material setting of Kerala, which is represented in the novels of these women writers, may be studied to gain an insight into the time-tested manner in which literature mirrors life.

Madhavikutty, the renowned Indian English poet Kamala Das Suraiyya, as the one who dared to take the road not taken, to venture into the untrodden territory of the woman’s quintessential self and to explore the intimate realities of her life, thereby established a new idiom in Indian poetry in English and Malayalam fiction for the delineation of the woman. The inimitable Kamala Das who wrote short fiction largely in Malayalam under the *nom de plume* Madhavikutty, wrote her poetry mostly in English. She is “the incomparable author of hundreds of exciting short stories that have helped redefine the genre to a considerable extent in Malayalam” (Harris and Ummer vii). Born into an aristocratic South Malabar Nair family known for its rich literary tradition, as the daughter of V. M. Nair, a former managing editor of the widely-circulated Malayalam daily *Mathrubhumi*, and Nalappat Balamani Amma, the renowned Malayalam poet, she took to writing like a fish to water and rose to a pre-eminent position among Indian poets writing in English, bagging a number of awards like the Asian Poetry Prize for *The Sirens* in 1964 and the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her *Collected Poems*. Das’s publications in English include anthologies of poems like *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), winner of Kent’s Award for English Writing from Asian Countries, *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985), *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996) and *Yaa Allah* (2001), her autobiography *My Story* (1976), a collection of short stories *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), and her only novel in English, *Alphabet of Lust* (1977) which narrates the tale of a beautiful woman—also a famous poetess—who, driven by greed and ambition, hobnobs along the corridors of power using her sexuality for upward mobility. In her fiction written largely in Malayalam, she has challenged the male order and depicted female protagonists who refuse to conform to the patriarchal concept of the woman. Some of her important works of fiction are *Thanuppu* (1968) which won the Sahitya Akademi award, *Balyakala*

Smaranakal (1987), *Neermathalam Pootha Kalam* (1994) which won the Vayalar Award, *Nashtapetta Neelambari* (1998), a collection of short stories, and *Chandana Marangal (The Sandal Trees, 1988)*, a novella.

Unflinching candour and astonishing sensitivity in the portrayal of the female sensibility are the hallmark of Das's writing, be it poetry or fiction, which won her the label of a "feminist" writer. Commenting on her poetry, Mittapalli and Piciucco aver that "she celebrates femininity, woman's body to be more specific, and in the process proves herself to be a feminist of the most radical kind" (v). The controversy, which always dogged her writing like a shadow, is not very surprising, for the uninhibited and frank expression of woman's sexuality, her physical and emotional desires, longings and frustrations were undoubtedly iconoclastic for a poet of her generation. Naik offers in her defence that "her rebellious frankness is not merely an attempt to make your flesh creep. . . . She is the eternal Eve proudly celebrating her essential femininity" (146-147). There is no gainsaying that she instituted a new idiom in Indian poetry with her poems boldly exploring the woman's intimate experiences. Das's prolific bilingual writing has most definitely added substantially to Indian literature in English and Malayalam literature and given her a permanent and well deserved place in the annals of both.

Sara Joseph is another Malayalam novelist who deserves special mention, whose prominent novels are a trilogy that includes *Aalaahayude Penmakal* (1999) which won the Sahitya Akademi Award and Vayalar Award, *Maatathi* (2003) which won the O. Chandumenon Award, and *Othappu (The Scent of the Other Side, 2005)*, *Oorukaaval* (2008), etcetera. She is certainly one writer who represents the feminist voice on the Malayalam literary scene: "She steers clear of ideological and propagandist obsessions and focuses steadily on the deprived, marginalized, underestimated, misinterpreted, and misused women. Her creative energies engage unwaveringly the condition of downtrodden

women, irrespective of their social or cultural sites" (James xviii). Her writings not only seek to challenge male domination and oppression of the woman but also to provide models of empowered women, women made strong by their convictions and by the strength of their moral, mental and spiritual character.

The agrarian society of Kerala was divided into numerous communities on the basis of religion, caste and sub-caste. The Namboodiri Brahmins were at the top of the social hierarchy—the very representatives of God on earth—followed by the Kshatriyas who were mainly landlords and rulers, and the Nairs who were originally "a military body, holding lands and serving as a militia" (E. Thurston, qtd. in Samel 321) held a position below these two castes. Among Hindus, all castes below the Nairs were polluting castes—the untouchables—who faced victimization at the hands of the high-caste Hindus. At the nadir of the social hierarchy were placed the agricultural labourers. In the agrarian society of Kerala where the entire social structure was based on feudalism (R. Ramakrishnan Nair 14), social relationships, economic status and the individual's position in the society, all were linked to the power of the upper caste landowners. High-caste Hindus—Brahmins to Nairs—owned and controlled the land, the most important wealth in an agricultural community. Next only to the Brahmins, the Syrian Christians enjoyed the ownership of different types of land, thanks to the Hindu higher caste tendency to sell out their lands and the land reform measures which favoured the Syrian Christians (Kurian 40). Though, strictly speaking, Syrian Christians were outside the caste spectrum of the Hindus, they claimed an upper-caste position in the society of Kerala by virtue of both their avowed Brahmin ancestry in the days before Christianity came to Kerala and their current exalted status as wealthy landlords, and followed all the ostracism practices of high-caste Hindus against the lower castes. Echoes of caste/class prejudice are heard in novels written in Malayalam by women writers.

In Kamala Das' *The Sandal Trees*, when Sheela's family, which believes in maintaining a distance between itself and people of a lower class, questions the liberties taken by her friend Kalyanikutty—"How dare this girl sit on Ammu's bed?"—Sheela puts up a spirited defense of Kalyanikutty: "She belongs to our caste, studies better than me, and her poverty—it isn't contagious, is it?" (2). This instance, while betraying the class consciousness of the upper caste communities of Kerala on the one hand, also showcase, on the other, the image of change in the words and actions of individuals like Sheela who seem to place a premium on human relationships rather than on caste or class superiority.

This paper takes a look at how social apparatuses work to effect the subordination of the woman so that power relations are kept intact. Kamala Das' novella *The Sandal Trees (Chandanamarangal)* captures in the friendship between her twin protagonists, the narrator Sheela and her bosom friend and companion Kalyanikutty, a complicated relationship that transgresses the accepted norms of sexuality in a conservative society. Disregarding the contempt with which her class-conscious family treats the rustic girl, Sheela allows herself to love and be loved by Kalyanikutty: "I became her beloved" (4). Kalyanikutty becomes her "man and girl at the same time" (9). Sheela's mother, not finding any other way to separate her from Kalyanikutty, marries her off to a rich and educated relative who is twenty one years older than her. Kalyanikutty criticizes Sheela's willingness to conform to the normative standards set by others: "You don't dare be yourself. You've never been bold enough to admit that you love me. You too know that you'll get rest and peace and happiness only when you live with me. Still you chose for yourself the traditional path. The path to decadence" (21).

Kalyanikutty herself resists the path of decadence by refusing to give birth to her husband Sudhakaran's child: "I've never had any respect for Sudhakaran. I'm not prepared to carry in my body for ten months the child of an ordinary man like him. I'll never give birth to his child" (7).

Later, she obtains a divorce from Sudhakaran and leaves for Australia. As Sheela's husband tells her, "there are two types of women One, mothers. They have the ability to console. And forgive. But the other type—they sow destruction. Furies! They can't help destroying everything" (25). In his patriarchal conception of the woman as a self-effacing angel of love, Kalyanikutty, the "avenging angel" (1), who returns years later to seek her former husband Sudhakaran and have a fling with him, thereby putting his current marriage on the rocks, belongs to the latter type.

Sheela has all along worn the mask of a happy woman and wife, never complaining about her husband's lack of interest in her, ever performing her "wifely duties in the manner of eating leftovers, of eating leftovers over and over again" (16) and practicing silence as a shield until it "grew and stood between me and my husband like a sandal tree, giving me much happiness" (13). She schools herself to cherish no role other than being a good doctor. But her mask is finally shattered when Kalyanikutty returns and her husband admits with blunt candour, "Even during our honeymoon her shadow had fallen between us. I realized that you were comparing every display of love on my part with hers. I was somebody who had reached you after her. I was a mere drizzle arriving hesitantly, timidly, after a full storm" (26). These words open her eyes to her true self that loves Kalyanikutty unconditionally and passionately, and she cries out, "Oh, my love, how can I live now?" (26). At this moment of realization, Sheela who cannot forget nor attain her true love, loses both self and happiness. Thus Kamala Das in *The Sandal Trees* pictures a network of complex human relationships that challenge certain dominant marital and sexual power relations.

Sara Joseph's *The Scent of the Other Side (Othappu)*, also tells the story of a transgression, of a sexual relationship between an erstwhile nun and a Roman Catholic priest. Joseph satirizes the Church and its functioning through her protagonists, a priest and a nun, who are unable to conform to the vows of their vocation and the

rigidities of the cloister, and who deploy sexuality which in turn provokes the ire and contempt of the Roman Catholic community. Roy Francis Karikkan, a reverend priest rumoured to be the vicar in waiting, comes to the help of Margalitha, a nun who has walked out of the convent and the divine calling. Karikkan and Margalitha are drawn to each other, and in the early days of her love for Karikkan, Margalitha believes that “the body was not necessary for love” (189). But each time she meets Karikkan, her convictions falter and it becomes evident that “her assumptions were that of a nun; her desires, that of a woman” (189).

Later, Margalitha begins to know spiritual joy through physical love: “In love, my mind transcends the body; and the body, my mind. Never before have I known the joy born of such a state. It cannot be the exclusive pleasure of either the body or the soul. My whole being is swimming in joy—joy that overflows from me and becomes a river of peace on the face of the earth” (106). Margalitha basks in the bliss of love, seeking God through her body: “This thought did not terrify her, or plunge her into guilt. ‘I cannot separate the perishable body from the imperishable soul’” (106). It is the conviction that “her body is also her soul” (169) that frees Margalitha from a sense of guilt.

Karikkan, on the other hand, is mindful of the social consequence of his actions: “What he had defied and walked out on was an awesome structure of power” (167). Karikkan’s mind “dithered at having stumbled on the sin called body” (21) and he “fled, trailing fear and guilt, at the thought of having sinned against God, the Church, the priesthood, and himself” (104). He walks out, leaving Margalitha to fend for herself and to battle the world all by herself. Margalitha, in contrast, shows her inner quality when she—an unwed, expectant mother deserted by her lover—rejects the offer of marriage from a man known to her family, who is “willing to overlook Margalitha’s transgressions altogether” (235). In Karikkan, Sara Joseph pictures the weak-willed man who succumbs to the pressure of handling the condemnation of society and resorts to the time-

tested strategy of escapism in the face of opposition. Margalitha, on the other hand, emerges as a stoic character, endowed with great inner strength.

The two Malayalam novels discussed here tell tales of women’s transgressions. It is a transgression of a sexual nature that forms the theme of Kamala Das’ *The Sandal Trees* and Sara Joseph’s *The Scent of the Other Side*; in the case of the latter, the violation strikes at the very core of the Roman Catholic religion as it is practised in Kerala. In both the Malayalam novels, the transgressions that challenge and resist the power structures in society, be they of caste, religion, marriage or gender, provoke strong reactions from the dominant power groups who seek to oppress and subdue the violators and to reinforce the norms of orthodoxy. The transgressors emerge from the ordeal scathed yet strong and stoic.

Malayalam fiction, which began with the reformist quest of Thakazhi, Kesava Dev, Pottekat, Basheer and others, evolved into the psychological fiction of the 1960s, and in the hands of O. V. Vijayan, Mukundan, Sethu and Anand, as Jancy James writes, “shed the pretence of social satire and . . . focussed on human relationships and the individual psyche” (xvi). Following this pattern, the woman writer in Malayalam has moved to the introspective female protagonist of Sara Joseph: “Dissatisfaction with social evils steadily gave way to juxtaposing external realities with the inner storms of the female self” (xvi).

The paper has taken a look at the position of women within the institutions of family and marriage in the society of Kerala as depicted in the novels under study here, and it is found that many of the problems of women pertain to the patriarchal power relations that operate within the family structure. Notions of male superiority, secondary importance given to the female, the domestic sphere of activity of the woman, her need for protection, her inability to continue the family line, etcetera, are all vitally related to women’s status in the context of power relationships within the family and the more

general position of women in society. Other issues are connected to marriage, such as the inviolable authority of parental choice in the formation of marriage ties, the custom of dowry, male domination, chastisement of the resisting female, domestic violence, divorce, separation, widowhood, etcetera. The deployment of sexuality, in particular by women, to form adulterous or extra-marital or even love relations that are deemed transgressions within the established caste and patriarchal framework receives the severe censure of society. Marital unions, thus, operate to sustain the power structures of caste and patriarchy in the interest of maintaining the stable structure of society. They give voice to women's aspirations for independence and sense of individuality by embodying their resistance to patriarchal powers by means of a subtle revolt.

Thus, as the foregoing discussion reveals, the woman writer in Malayalam focusses more on attempts made by women to resist the orthodoxies that circumscribe their existence within the family and in society. She is seen to lend a feminist voice to expose the gender discrimination in society and to project the strength of the female psyche. The transgressors emerge out of the ordeal of societal censure like the proverbial phoenix, not, submit to the pressures of patriarchal power that seek to reinforce the norms of caste and orthodoxy. In short, the novels are more concerned with human relationships and individual aspirations portrayed from a feminist perspective than with socio-political realities.

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