The *Indulekha* Moment and the Malayalam Literary Canon: On the Literary History of the Early Twentieth-century Novels in Kerala, South India

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Abstract
This article analyses the politics of the literary canon of the early twentieth century Malayalam novels with particular focus on the impact of the novel *Indulekha* (1889) in literary history. The inception of novel as a literary genre is widely regarded as a point of departure for Malayalam literature leading to the development of modern Malayalam, thereby shaping a distinct Malayali identity. Interestingly, the literary histories which established the legacy of Malayalam prose tend to trace a linear history of Malayalam novels which favoured the 'Kerala Renaissance' narrative, especially while discussing its initial phase. This calls for a perusal of the literary critical tradition in which the overarching presence of *Indulekha* has led to the eclipsing of several other works written during the turn of the twentieth-century, resulting in a skewed understanding of the evolution of the genre. This article would explicate in detail, on what gets compromised in canon formation when aesthetic criteria overshadow the extraliterary features. It also examines how the literary history of early Malayalam novels shaped the cultural memory of colonial modernity in Kerala.

Keywords: literary history, Malayalam novel, *Indulekha*, politics of canon, colonial modernity in Kerala

Introduction

In the legacy of Malayalam literature, *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon holds the coveted position of the work that marks the birth of Malayalam novel. When *Indulekha* crossed its 130th year of publication in 2019, it was commemorated as a milestone in the Malayalam literary historiography. The inception of Malayalam novels has a long history beginning with the introduction of printing press, the subsequent flourish of prose writings, and experiments at writing novels. Interestingly, the novel published by the Spectator Press in December 1889 continues to retain its relevance in public memory, and the canonical literary tradition almost a century later, and is indubitably accepted as a social novel of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala. The second edition getting published within three months and the English translation by the British civil servant W. Dumergue becoming available as early as 1890 had resulted in the novel becoming a part of the legacy of nineteenth century Indian literature itself.

The canonical status of *Indulekha*, arguably reflects the characteristic feature of cultural memory of importing a "self-image" and creating a "collectively shared knowledge of the past" to form a sense of "unity and character" (J. Assman as qtd. in Grabes, 2008, p.311) whereby the novel creates a shared knowledge of Kerala during the turn of the twentieth century. This article intends to: (a) critically engage with the literary status and privilege ascribed to a century old literary event which has endured the test of deconstructive reading of the canon, (b) highlight the consequences of *Indulekha*'s overarching presence, and (c) examine how it results in a reductive and parochial reading of the Malayalam novels written during late colonial period. Thus, this study seeks to critique the unquestioned canonical status of the novel and to examine how it shaped the cultural memory of colonial modernity in Kerala.

The rise of novel in India is regarded to be one of the contributions of the colonial enterprise, much in alignment with the dominant scholarship on the relationship between novel and the modern nation. As Meenakshi Mukherjee (2005) states, "the emergence of the novel in India [is] more than a purely literary exercise" (p. 3), therefore the study of this genre cannot be confined to the disciplinary contours of literature. In the case of the early Malayalam novels, it may be regarded that the genre served as a medium of social reform and functioned as a potent site where the modern self was being fashioned and configured. This article argues for a shift in focus of literary history from its preoccupation with the *first Malayalam novel* towards an "analysis of the textual production of cultural meaning and socio-political conditions of creating texts" (Dalmia and Blackburn, 2008, p. 1). With this intent, the article engages with two important literary moments: (a) the inception of Malayalam novels, regarded to be one of the contributors in shaping a Malayali identity, and (b) the establishment of the canon of Malayalam novels.

The success of *Indulekha* marked the launch of the realist novel in Malayalam and provided a new medium for depicting the social issues of the late nineteenth century. Moreover, *Indulekha* also became the prototype and laid down the yardsticks of literary form and aesthetic standards for writing as well as evaluating subsequent novels. This may be ascribed to what could be termed, *the 'Indulekha* moment' in literary history as it simultaneously marked the birth of modern novel as well a literary critical tradition based on it. For the same reason this literary moment is carefully scrutinised, in this article, to evince the politics of literary canon and the nexus of caste and class which are inherent in the shaping of a normative Malayali identity. The objective is to discursively analyse the popularity of *Indulekha* through a re-reading of selected works and analyse the ramifications of the overarching presence of the *Indulekha* moment in the literary and cultural memory. Through a critical analysis of the literary historiography of Malayalam novels, we proceed to closely examine the historical and critical location of the lesser-known works of the period. Accordingly, the early Malayalam novels such as *Saraswativijayam* (1892), *Parangodiparinayam* (1892) and *Sukumari* (1897) are briefly looked at vis-à-vis *Indulekha*. By foregrounding the possibilities of alternate critical traditions, that could potentially amplify the range of one's understanding of Kerala modernity, this also article seeks to critique the strategies of canon formation in Malayalam literary history.

Tracing the Beginnings: The Emergence of Malayalam Novels

The Malayalam novel emerged in the crucible of colonial modernity in Kerala and it is pertinent to understand that this new genre is a *parergon* of the cultural possibilities opened up by an emergent print culture. The setting up of printing presses by Christian missionaries, and the publication of magazines, booklets and short treatises on religion and science had set the stage for the development of Malayalam prose. In K. N. Panikkar's (1995) words, "by facilitating access to literary products, print contributed to the making of a new cultural taste and sensibility and thus of a new cultural personality" (p. 128). This phenomenon of "commodification of 'vernacular' literature" (p. 129) reflected in the prose writings in Malayalam and the emergence of the novels, therefore, needs to be read in this context as well.

The access to printed works followed by the popularity of novels transformed the reading culture from a group activity to an individual leisure activity. As Panikkar (1995) observes, the "physical presence of the 'book' in the marketplace .... books could now be possessed by individuals [thus] the need for group reading and public recitals sharply declined" (p. 129). Moreover, through the popularity of novels, "the cultural world of the west came within the grasp" of the rising middle class who are arguably their major consumers, "and in turn facilitated its internalisation" (p. 130). For the same reason, early initiatives at novel writing in Malayalam were mostly translations or adaptations of Western novels or drama. For instance, one of the earliest attempts at novel writing in Malayalam is ascribed to Archdeacon Koshy's *Paradesimoksha Yatra* (1847) a translation of Bunyan' *Pilgrim's Progress. Aalmarattam* (1862) by Ummen Philipose was a fictionalized version of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and *Kundalata* (1887) by T. Appu Nedungadi was inspired by Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*. As Dilip Menon (2006) corroborates, the structure of the early novels was constituted by an eclectic mix of "essays, journalism, travelogue and didactic sermonising woven into the fabric of the plot" (p. 74). He states that these novels had a "baggy structure" as this genre was imported from the West as a "do-it-yourself form...without any instructions" (p. 74). This loose structure characterises the early attempts at prose writings in Malayalam which are, therefore, considered by literary historians as the forerunners of Malayalam novels. Despite being a valid critical observation, this perfunctory reading of early Malayalam novels and their history also limits the possibilities of understanding the social contexts and worlds that these early writings inhabited and the ways in which they contributed to the schema of Kerala's colonial modernity narratives.

The '*Indulekha* Moment': Politics of the Literary Canon

The realist narrative was the most seminal quality of *Indulekha* which led to its acceptance as the first finest novel in Malayalam. As stated at the outset, *Indulekha* marked the beginning of realism in Malayalam literature,[1] and set the criteria for critical evaluation. Interestingly, its significance is merited beyond the bounds of regional writings by critics and literary historians like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Meenakshi Mukherjee among

others. For instance, in her critical analysis of the history of Indian novels in *Realism and Reality* (2005), Meenakshi Mukherjee included *Indulekha* within the category of novels that "rendered contemporary Indian society realistically" (p. 16). While other novels of the period such as *Saraswativijayam, Sukumari* and *Ghatakavadham* (1877) are discussed mostly in the context of missionary activities, *Indulekha* does not seem to be appended with such labelling that overtly reflect the agendas of the colonial empire; instead, it was always considered among the early *Indian* as well as *secular* novels. It should also be acknowledged that *Indulekha*'s accomplishments – aesthetic as well as thematic – are unparalleled in Malayalam literature. However, it cannot be overlooked that these merits have also resulted in certain biases in historicising the early Malayalam novels. These inherent biases which have been woven into the critical and historiographical tradition as literary common sense should be addressed while revisiting the early twentieth-century novels.

For instance, the consensus among all the major literary critics on positioning *Indulekha* as the first novel in Malayalam, should not be read merely as a matter of expedience to trace a chronology. It is not the position attributed to *Indulekha* that demands a critique, but, the very process by which the label has been attributed to the novel. Among the early literary critics, M. P. Paul (1930/1963), in *Novel Sahityam*, ascribed to *Indulekha* the status of "the first aesthetically finest novel in Malayalam' in terms of literary finesse" (p. 181).[2] He also reasons out this evaluation by scrutinising the merits and demerits of the work. Contemporaneity of events, organic development of plot, plausibility of characterisation, faithful portrayal of the Nair community, satirising its derogatory practices and suggesting means of reform are some of the merits ascribed to the novel (Paul, 1930/1963). Following the conventional method of Western literary criticism, Paul's evaluation of Malayalam novels elucidates how the process of constructing literary history employs primarily the criterion of aestheticism to decide upon the canonical works.

Within the larger theme of tradition vs. modernity, *Indulekha* presented three major concerns: first, the necessity of modern education for the emancipation of Malayali women; second, the need to emphasise the freedom enjoyed by Nair women within matriliny which was subjected to severe criticism, particularly, the practice of *sambandham*[3] on the grounds of infidelity; third to present a model of ideal Malayali self. These three concerns were of significance to the society for which Chandu Menon wrote the novel. They were presented from an insider's perspective by Menon who was a beneficiary of the colonial modernity and English education. *Indulekha* could be seen as anticipating a resolution of these two opposing positions by attaining a balance between the two perspectives. In that sense, *Indulekha* was a self-reflexive criticism of the Nair community with a proposition about the prospective future for the Nair men and women by means of embracing modernity through education. And towards this end, he created Indulekha, the protagonist, and her lover Madhavan, who are projected as the quintessential modern educated Malayali woman and man.

Another aspect that problematises the description of social document attributed to *Indulekha* is the representation of space where the events unfold. This concern regarding the spatiality of the novel is raised by Arunima (1997) when she asks: "what kind of reality is contained within the novels whose portrayals have apparently left out three-quarters of

Malayali life?" (p. 272). The space inhabited by the characters comprises the inner world of a *tharavadu* and the space outside of this home is set outside of Kerala, in the colonial India – Bombay and Calcutta. Therefore, there is a lacuna when it comes to the portrayal of the other castes and communities of the region. Consequently, it is problematic to accept *Indulekha* as a social document of Kerala when what it actually does is narrate the story of a Nair *tharavadu*⁴ and anticipate the imminent dissolution of of the matrilineal system and the formation of patrilocal family unit. The novel does not account for all the major transformations that took place in the Malayalam speaking regions during late nineteenth century. Instead, it delineates the matrilineal kinship system with focus narrowed down to two communities at the upper echelons of social hierarchy. Therefore, it would be fitting to read *Indulekha* more as a novel of a community, rather than as a social document.⁵ Furthermore, reading *Indulekha* as a social novel would lead to normalising the binaries constructed through the characters. When most of the readings of the novel has lauded Chandu Menon for his adeptness in realistic characterisation, (Paul, 1930/1963, 182–183; Ulloor, 1965, 282–283) they have indirectly or unconsciously accepted his blatant criticism and ridicule of those who are incapable of realising the value of English education, if not English educated. They are represented as antediluvian and orthodox, therefore regarded to as those who do not fit into the identity of the 'authentic' Malayali. Thus, the novel inadvertently promotes the elitist imagining of Malayali identity through the techniques of characterisation.

To explicate the central argument of this article, a select set of novels written during the last decade of the nineteenth century – *Saraswativijayam*, *Parangodiparinayam* and *Sukumari* are read along with *Indulekha*. They deal with some of the topical issues of the period such as religious conversion, slavery, role of missionaries and education, and the plight of lower castes and Christian converts. These works which present alternate conduits of colonial modernity as experienced by the backward and the less-privileged communities are largely jettisoned. For instance, *Saraswativijayam* written by Potheri Kunjambu in 1892 narrated the life of Marathan, a lower caste who is punished for 'polluting' an upper caste. The plot reveals how he is saved by Christian missionary and education enables him to move up the social ladder. Kunjambu proposes to highlight the power of education to release the lower castes from the trammels of caste and untouchability which he conveys through the tile of the novel itself.¹⁰ *Parangodiparinayam* written by Kizhakkeppattu Ramankutty Menon was also published in 1892. It is a travesty of the early Malayalam novels *vis.*, *Kundalata* (1887), *Indulekha* and *Meenakshi* (1890) all of which deal with marriage of the female protagonists as their central plot. Relegation of works like *Saraswativijayam* and *Parangodiparinayam* suggests how literary history conveniently pushes to the periphery those works which dealt with the lives of the marginalised or those which did not necessarily cater to the perceived notions about modernity. More importantly, the limited availability and popularity of these novels in the contemporary are suggestive of how these novels have been erased from literary memory.

When English novels inspired Chandu Menon to write *Indulekha,* its popularity in turn led to the publication of several imitations such as *Meenakshi,*

Indumathiswayamvaram (1890) and *Lakshmikesavam* (1892).[6] *Parangodiparinayam* severely critiques such novels on grounds of their lack of novelty and similarity in plot structure while also presenting a counter narrative to *Indulekha*'s caricaturised portrayal of uneducated Malayali as conservative. The novel was written under the influence of an essay by Vengayil Kunjiraman Nayanar titled "Akhyayika Allenkil Novel" ["Narrative or Novel"] published in *Vidyavinodini* magazine in 1891. The objective behind this travesty is overtly stated in the preface to *Parangodiparinayam*, which parodies Chandu Menon's preface to *Indulekha*. Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer's appraisal of *Parangodiparinayam* is limited to describing it as "a humorous novel" (1955, p. 304). He comments that Ramankutty Menon was successful in his efforts at critiquing the imitations of *Indulekha* to elicit a sense of embarrassment in their authors (p. 306). Geroge Irumbayam's (1982) study not only extends Ulloor's remark but also contextualises the novel vis-à-vis its social relevance. However, according to Irumbayam, Ramankutty Menon is "the representative of the orthodox-minded who frowned upon ideals of modernity and renaissance" (1982, p. 112). He critiques *Parangodiparinayam* as "an experiment to contain and resist the spate of renaissance that gushed through Kerala during the latter half of the nineteenth-century through English and modern education" (p. 112–113). This assessment may be attributed to the novel being a travesty of *Indulekha* and its banal imitations. Thus, it is again proven that the early Malayalam novels are subjected to constant comparisons with *Indulekha* and subsequently graded as inferior to it. Though *Parangodiparinayam* cannot be regarded as a great work of fiction, it needs to be addressed as a work which aptly depicted the mindset of those who are grappling with the changes brought about by colonial modernity.

Unlike novels such as *Parangodiparinayam* or *Meenakshi* which were emulations of *Indulekha*, *Sukumari* written by Joseph Muliyil in 1897 stands apart as one of the early novels that is not inspired by *Indulekha*. Muliyil instead was inspired by the Malayalam translation of *Saguna* (1895) by Krupabai Sattianadhan which kindled in him the idea of writing a novel. He states in the preface that the impetus behind this venture is "...that the youth and Christian women have a taste for such stories [referring to *Saguna*] and that it would be beneficial for the present generation and for posterity if a history of their Christian ancestors and the plight of the community [is written]" (p. 29). Based on real events that took place in Malabar region, *Sukumari* documents the arrival of the Basel Mission in Malabar and the religious conversion of the lower castes. The novel's title also appropriately included a descriptive line which read "A story Descriptive of the early work of the Basel Evangelical Mission" (qtd. in Irumbayam, 1982, p. 134).[7] Thus while set in an entirely different cultural milieu, the novel reflects on the dilemmas faced by the lower castes while fashioning a new self, which was largely based on the religious notions of virtue, vice, sin, salvation and sacrifice.

Interestingly, and unsurprisingly, *Sukumari* does not find a mention in Ulloor's *Kerala Sahitya Charithram* (1955) nor in any other major literary histories. It is Irumbayam who, arguably, brought visibility to the text. According to him, *Sukumari* is fundamentally different from the rest of the novels of the period not just in terms of characters and events but in language as well (p. 134). This novel has thematic similarity with Mrs. Collins' *Ghatakavadham*[8] and can be seen as the work that continues in the pattern of the religious

prose writings before *Kundalata*. This is a significant feature of the novel since it deviates from the format laid out by *Indulekha*. Instead of focusing on the Nair *tharavadu* and the internal conflicts arising from changing structures of family and marriage, Muliyil dealt with the issues faced by the lower caste Christian converts who experienced modernity by embracing a new religion and the resultant changes in their material and spiritual lives. Therefore, this novel shows how novels written in Indian languages influenced each other[9] while also highlighting the role of translations. Muliyil's preface also convey that novel was also employed as a means of documentation of community history. These factors are often overlooked in conventional literary histories when such works are evaluated purely on the grounds of aesthetic merits.

Thus, it becomes quite evident that while evaluating novels solely on the grounds of literary merits, the historical and social relevance of works are often ignored and undervalued. This indirectly leads to a tangential narrative of the history of Malayalam novels. The ramifications of such a straitjacketed narrative of Malayali modernity included the side-lining of some of the equally pertinent issues such as untouchability, religious conversion, and women's responses to the process of self-fashioning. Interestingly, amidst the differences in their themes and plots, the one defining character of all these novels is the emphasis on English education. But, the overarching presence of *Indulekha* seems to have taken away the focus from those other novels. For example, novels like *Saraswativijayam* and *Sukumari* are mostly studied while specifically addressing the issues of untouchability and slavery. Otherwise, these novels are mentioned in passé and are treated as inconsequential in literary histories and were never part of the canon. The socio-cultural issues raised by these novels were also overlooked, creating a notion that these novels and the reality they presented were insignificant to the larger project of constructing the history of Malayalam literature as well as the shaping of a distinct Malayali culture. Thus, by choosing language and aesthetic criteria as tools of canon formation, those works which could potentially unsettle the elitist narrative of Kerala were inadvertently marginalised as insignificant works or mere imitations.

Moreover, it would also be difficult to situate novels such as *Parangodiparinayam*, *Saraswativijayam*, and *Sukumari* in the mainstream discourses on literary history by following the parameters of literary aesthetics and the existing frameworks of the study of novels in the postcolonial framework. This flaw is addressed by Dilip Menon (2006) in his study of the early Malayalam novels. According to him, Benedict Anderson's and Frederic Jameson's theoretical frameworks for reading postcolonial novels are inadequate to engage with and accommodate the subaltern novels (2006, p. 74) In his extensive analysis of the under-appreciated novels of the early twentieth century, he devises a new interpretive framework which would accommodate the forgotten novels. Within this framework he states that the Malayalam subaltern novels are "centrally concerned with the question of fashioning of the modern self and new forms of community" (p. 74-75). It is in this framework that the novels like *Saraswativijayam* and *Sukumari* would find relevance as works to be considered as products of colonial modernity. While it is imperative to evaluate these novels within the framework of caste to deconstruct the politics of the canon, it is

equally significant to avoid further ghettoization of these novels. The inclusion of these works into the discourses on literary history of the early Malayalam novels would enable a critique the notion of literary canon and limits of is aesthetic criteria in evaluating works. It is towards this direction that the discourses on literary histories should be steered to broaden the perspectives on how the inhabitation of modernity was envisioned through the early Malayalam novels.

Literary Canon: Changing Perceptions

The forgotten early Malayalam novels dealing with issues such as caste, slavery and missionary activities began to gain prominence and were reclaimed by the 1980s. It also led to an increased visibility of the early Malayalam novels which were passed into oblivion as mere imitations of *Indulekha* such as *Ghatakavadham, Saraswativijayam, Sukumari*, and *Parangodiparinayam*. The absence of English translations for these novels, unlike *Indulekha*, also affected the scope of comparative study of these works with other regional novels of the last decade of the nineteenth century. The jettisoning of these novels from the canon clearly points out that caste issues and missionary activities were not considered to be themes fit enough to be literary subjects. The bias in literary criticism becomes evident at this point because it was not merely on the ground of literary merit that *Indulekha* was extolled. The novel's realistic depiction of contemporary Kerala society and espousal of women's education were also considered as important factors of its excellence as a work of fiction. On the other hand, while evaluating novels like *Ghatakavadham*, *Saraswativijayam* or *Sukumari* it is the literary/aesthetic merit that is the yardstick of evaluation. The thematic scope is only mentioned as part of summary of the novels.

One of the significant works which elicits the caste and class politics underlining the early Malayalam novels is P. K. Rajasekharan's *Andhanaya Daivam* (1999). This work focused exclusively on the trajectory of the Malayalam novels which had crossed the centennial mark.[10] An observation that Rajasekharan makes about the history of Malayalam novels buttresses the scope of the argument of this article as well. He states, "In novel [as a genre], we find the continuous process of Malayali self-fashioning, development and instability. This quality, which is incomplete in other literary forms, makes the history of Malayalam novels our own history" (p. 14). This unique characteristic of Malayalam novels is the result of the introduction of realistic narration in the genre to deal with contemporary issues. Therefore, the early Malayalam novels also record: a) multiple ways in which Malayali community encountered modernity, b) their responses to the changes taking place in the existing social structures, and c) their anxieties, fears and aspirations about inhabiting modernity. Moreover, all these aspects were primarily recorded from the reformist perspective of the elite upper class. According to Rajasekharan, the Malayalam novel was a medium in which, since its inception, efforts by the society at defining its *Malayali* identity is discernible (1999). He extends this argument further to define the notion of *the blind God* regarding the question of nexus between hegemony and writing. The early Malayalam novels, he argues, revolted against all hegemonies such as the

government, patriarchy, merciless fate, aristocracy, and religion – which he equates to the "blind God" (p. 17). He explains the idea of the blind God thus:

> The novelists confronted the blind God of power in the light of the transforming society and the search for new narrative models. Aristocracy, the all-powerful patriarch, brutal feudalism and capitalism, the omnipresent narrator, the self-fashioned individual... these were the various forms in which the God-symbol made itself present in the novel. It is a totem of power in various realms of society. (pp. 18-19)

This notion of the blind God is visible in most novels of the period. Such a perception of the nexus of power enables to centrally address and engage with the questions of caste, class and gender in the novels. It is in such a context that Udaya Kumar (2011) in his study of the emergence of literary history in Malayalam in "Shaping a Literary Space", states that "literary past [is] an important site for shaping a historical memory for [the] new subjects of Malayali culture" (p. 34). This implies that literary works also function as sites to record a culture and its people during a particular time period. They serve as the medium of remembering the shared past of a culture. This corroborates the argument that the literary memory needs to be rewritten in order to be inclusive of the diversity of cultural experiences.

It is pertinent to question why several studies on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Kerala invoke *Indulekha* as an illustration of Malayali society almost uncritically. This is a privilege exclusive to *Indulekha*; any other novel of the period is cited or studied while only engaging with a specific issue of the period and not to discuss the period of colonial modernity in its entirety. Moreover, this parochial approach implies that caste or religious conversion are of secondary or tertiary importance in discourses on colonial modernity in Kerala and that the dominant discourse is always that of the upper caste elitist groups and their engagement with modernity. The difference between the positioning of the subaltern novels and *Indulekha* in the literary histories is that the latter is invoked as the work representative of Kerala Renaissance without the need for any explicatory footnotes to define its significance whereas every other work from the period require an exposition in order to substantiate its merit to represent the period. This aspect emphasizes the need to re-visit the early Malayalam novels in the critical tradition based on the criteria of inclusion rather than of exclusion. It further reiterates our argument that the critical tradition should engage with a broader perspective than merely tracing the chronology and evaluating the aesthetic and thematic merits. When the subaltern novels are obliterated from literary history on aesthetic grounds, the histories of those communities and castes are consequently pushed to the periphery. Privileging *Indulekha* as the representative novel of Kerala in the liminal phase of inhabiting modernity runs the peril of delineating an incomplete image of the period, focusing only on the upper caste perspective. Therefore, it could be argued that reading the early Malayalam novels as a collective body of works would generate a more comprehensive and accommodative view of Kerala modernity itself.

Conclusion

The Malayalam novels of the turn of the twentieth century can be regarded as works which delineated an idealistic picture of Kerala's inhabitation of modernity while firmly footed in the contemporary reality of the period. The social realism of these works, however, has been only parochially explored in the literary histories which often prioritised the formation of the literary canon. This calls for a re-reading of the literary histories to understand the social worlds which created the literary works instead of a mere appreciation of canonical works which stood the test of time. It could perhaps lead to shifts in perspectives about colonial modernity and identity formation in Kerala. For instance, the canonisation of a novel like *Indulekha* has invariably catered to wards fashioning an elitist cultural memory of Kerala which is mostly silent on the issues of caste and untouchability. As discussed, *Indulekha*'s significance, therefore, should be valued without undermining the relevance of other works written during the period. It could be argued that it is problematic to ascribe the status of social novel to *Indulekha* as the representative work of the period.

Reading back the history of colonial enterprise in India through the history of novels offer potent insights into how the social and cultural conditions which shaped the novels and how these where in turn shaped by the novels. As the literary history of the early Malayalam novels evince, identity formation was not always envisioned through the nationalistic discourse. Instead, there were other channels of reform mediated by class, caste and religion through which identity was forged through literary works. Given the diverse range of topics that were dealt with in the novels written during the early decade of the twentieth century it may perhaps be fitting to consider the novels of the period as a collective body of writings as representing the colonial Kerala. It could offer a better understanding of inhabitation of modernity than the conventional mode of documenting history through the establishment of a canon. As Grabes (2008) states in his study of the relation between literary canon and cultural memory, "canons serve societies to control what texts are kept in collective memory, are taken "seriously" and interpreted in a particular way" (p. 314). In the context of the early Malayalam novels, it could be observed that by evaluating the 'aesthetically inferior' works as mere imitations of the finest novel in Malayalam, a selective amnesia of the lives and plight of those at the margins is also inadvertently favoured by the literary canon.

The early Malayalam novels are significant for the ways they engaged with the changes that colonial modernity had brought in its wake. They presented the lives of people who belonged to the margins and dealt with the ways in which they inhabited modernity. In that sense, these novels are thematically relevant to the period in which they are written and deserve to be read while engaging with discourses of colonial modernity in Kerala. Therefore, it can be argued that instead of a comparative evaluation with *Indulekha*, these novels are to be historicised as the varied attempts by the writers of the period at experimenting with a newly introduced genre of prose writing. Though *Indulekha* perfected the form of the novel in Malayalam, the genre was still in its infancy during the late

nineteenth century. Therefore, an evaluation that is primarily focused on the aesthetic criteria leads to a seemingly biased criticism of the early Malayalam novels. They are to be read as a collective body of works that put together a kaleidoscopic picture of Kerala society during the turbulent phase of reformation. On the one hand, from the perspective of the literary history the early Malayalam novels evince how the genre adapted itself to the regional cultural and aesthetic preferences while simultaneously introducing realism. On the other, the genre became a platform to discuss the contemporary issues of the society. By accommodating the various voices recorded through the early Malayalam novels, the scope of comprehending the variegated and diverse means through which the process of inhabitation of modernity in Kerala came about could be broadened.

Endnotes

[1] Irumbayam, Mukherjee and Rajasekharan provide an extended study of realism in *Indulekha*. They refer to Chandu Menon's explication of the realist narration in *Indulekha* by likening it to the way oil paintings changed the perception of images of Gods. This article does not intend to engage in detail with realism in *Indulekha* as it does not fall within the purview of this study.

[2] The translations from Malayalam are done by the authors.

[3] *Sambandham* refers to the marital system practiced in the Nair community.

[4] Tharavadu refers to the matrilineal joint family. Matriliny is the kinship system in which the descent of a family is traced through the female line. In Kerala, matriliny was practised by the Nairs, the Ezhavas, and the Mappila Muslims.

[5] Ulloor is the only literary critic to call *Indulekha* a community novel in his *Kerala Sahitya Charithram* [*Kerala's Literary History*]. But it should be emphasised that even though he termed *Indulekha* as a 'community story' (*samudayika kadha*), he has not seen it as the narrative of the Nair community. According to him *Indulekha* was the finest Malayalam novel.

[6] Chandu Menon initially attempted to translate *Henrietta Temple* by Benjamin Disraeli but discarded the idea. Instead, he wrote an original novel in Malayalam, *Indulekha* (C. Menon, 2005, p. 237).

[7] This description is missing in the subsequent editions of the novel.

[8] *Ghatakavadham* (1877) is the Malayalam translation of the novel *The Slayer Slain* written by Mrs. Collins, the wife of a Christian missionary. Published in 1864, *Ghatakavadham* is regarded to be the first novel based on the people of Kerala. It dealt with the plight of the lower castes and their eventual conversion to Christianity.

[9] One of the early attempts at novels in Malayalam was a translation of the Bengali novel *Phulmoni-O-Karunar Bibaran* (1852) by Catherine Mullens.

[10] In *Andhanaya Daivam*, the 100 years of Malayalam novels is marked by considering *Indulekha*'s year of publication as the starting point.

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