

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

Dr. Sreenath V S
Department of HSS, IIT Madras

Week 4 Lecture 26
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, in the previous lectures we have been exploring the different ways in which colonialism altered the traditional institutions in India. In this lecture, we will look at how colonial influence changed the terrain of traditional literature. One important genre that emerged during this time is the novel. Before novels, most literature was based on myths and heroic stories from the past, and understanding literature required special training. However, with the spread of Western education, this changed. Literature started reflecting real-life experiences, and the language became more accessible to a wider audience. Among the new genres, the novel became particularly important. It allowed the newly emerging middle class to express their dreams, struggles, and values. The novel helped the English-educated middle class imagine a modern identity, trying to balance tradition with colonial ideas of modernity. It provided a way to reflect on the social changes happening at the time. However, it's important to note that these novels mainly focused on the lives of the upper-caste and upper-class people and often ignored the lives of lower-caste and lower-class individuals, especially in the early years.

In this lecture, we will explore how the novel helped shape the moral and intellectual world of the colonial middle class. While I will mostly refer to early Malayalam novels like *Indulekha*, *Vasumati*, and *Saraswathivijayam*, the themes and ideas in these novels are relevant to literature across many Indian languages during the colonial period. Some of the texts that you can refer to know more about the points that we discuss here include “Realism and reality : The novel and Society in India,” G Arunima’s “Writing Culture: Of Modernity and Malayalam Novel,” Dilip Menon’s “Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading Saraswathivijayam,” and Meena T Pillai's “Modernity and the Fetishizing of Female Chastity: C.V. Raman Pillai and the Anxieties of the Early Malayalam Novel.”

One of the most significant changes in Indian society brought about by British colonization is the shift in the country’s literary landscape. Indian literature underwent ontological and thematic changes, as a result of colonial education. Prior to colonialism, literary practitioners and theorists in the Sanskritic tradition, regardless of their geographical or temporal locations, agreed that literature was a unique form of expression that was very different from everyday speech. It was also widely believed one could practice and appreciate literature only after receiving kaviśikṣa, or literary training. Similarly, in pre-modern Sanskrit literature, there was often an aura of the otherworldly in both the plot and the characters. This means that stories were not just grounded in ordinary, everyday life but often included elements that were magical, divine, or beyond human experience. Characters might be gods, sages with supernatural powers, talking animals, or heroic figures with extraordinary abilities. The events in the plot might involve curses, miracles, celestial interventions, or journeys across worlds—things that would not happen in real life. This sense of the otherworldly gave the literature a dream-like or mythical quality, setting it apart from mundane reality and reinforcing the idea that literature was a higher, more imaginative mode of expression.

The same was the situation even in the medieval period when the writers had the option of composing their works in vernacular language. Here we should note that the vernacular

language that was used during the medieval period was not the vernacular language spoken by the common people. On the other hand, the vernacular literary language of the medieval period was the Sanskritized vernacular. This shows that literary language was a unique form of linguistic expression distinctly different from the ordinary form of speech. The literary Malayalam language of the medieval period is one specific example that I can bring up in front of you. The literary Malayalam of the medieval period was called the Manipravalam language. Manipravālam. Manipravālam was a hybrid language made up of Sanskrit and Kēraḷa bhāṣa. The text *Līlātilakam* which lists the grammatical rules underpinning the Manipravalam language says that Manipravālam is "a blending of Sanskrit and Keralabhāṣa." Bhāṣā samskr̥ta yogo maṇipravālam. Similar to Sanskrit poetics, which seeks to develop a trans-local language for literary language, *Līlātilakam* combined Sanskrit and Keralabhāṣa to produce a trans-regional literary language that was different from everyday speech. It is important to remember that, despite its apparent opposition to the monopoly of Sanskrit language in literature through the combination of Sanskrit and the vernacular, the Manipravālam literature of the medieval period also recreated the same the mythical world like literary world of earlier Sanskritic literature. Purāṇas, epics and myths were frequently used as the source of literary works' content. This demonstrates two things: first, prior to the colonial era, the language used in literary expression was largely distinct from that of everyday speech, secondly the production and appreciation of literature always necessitated a special kind of training.

The primary problem with this kind of a literary expression was that it catered only to the literary sensibilities of the elite sections of society. In other words, these literary works only got the appreciation of the educated elite, well-versed in Sanskrit literature. This does not mean that literary traditions in Malayalam did not imitate the style and cadence of everyday speech prior to the rise of literary expressions influenced by Western education. For example, Kilipaatu and Thullalprasthanam are two significant literary movements in Malayalam that merit particular attention in this regard. Thullal, an art form developed by the poet Kunchan Nambiar is a humorous and satirical performance-art that combines dance, music, and storytelling. The performance highlights social issues and uses witty language to entertain and inform the audience. In Kerala's cultural history, Thullal is significant on two levels. In order to parody the social ills that are pervasive in society, Thullal established a new poetic tradition in pure Malayalam by separating itself from Sanskrit and Sanskritized Malayalam. Second, it introduced a new performing art form outside of the elite coterie. Before Thullal, most art forms were performed in temples or courts and were meant mainly for the elite. But Thullal, with its lively dance, rhythmic storytelling, and simple language, was performed in public spaces and could be enjoyed by common people. It gave voice to everyday experiences and made fun of social problems in a way that everyone could understand. This made it a truly popular and democratic art form.

The same was true of the impact of Kilippattu on Malayalam literature. Like literary works in Sanskrit and Manipravālam, Kilipaatu and Thullalprasthanam were written in verse. But the verse was composed in the vernacular language. They made extensive use of the potential of Malayalam language, as spoken by a common person. But, very much like the Sanskritic world, the characters and storylines used in these works were lifted from puranic and mythical sources, keeping them removed from historical reality and the experiences of the society in which they were set. For example, Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan's "Adhyathmaramayanam Kilippattu," which retells the Ramayana in Malayalam, was written in an approachable language. But the literary world present in Adhyathmaramayanam was primarily from the puranic world. The contemporary reality of the period was never explicitly

portrayed in the work. The contemporary society found expression in these works only in an allegorical fashion. To put it differently, even though Thullal and Kilipattu allowed laypeople to read the epic in their native tongue, the themes and characters were still very different from the reality they were used to. The characters were gods, kings, and heroes, and the stories were often set in mythical or distant worlds. So even when common people could enjoy and understand the texts, their own real struggles, emotions, and social issues were not always represented directly. Instead, those issues appeared in symbolic or hidden ways—through jokes, satire, or allegories—rather than being openly discussed. Similarly, creating literature in the time of Thullal and Kilipattu also required special training. Even though these forms used the local language, the compositions were still in verse and followed specific poetic rules. To compose or deeply appreciate these works, one needed knowledge of grammar, prosody, and classical literature. So, despite their use of vernacular language, Thullal and Kilipattu were often created by trained scholars, and their performance or interpretation remained somewhat exclusive.

The introduction of colonial education in India caused a shift in how people viewed and interacted with literature. Prose became a significant writing style in Malayalam literature due in large part to English education. Thus in India, a new definition of what was considered "literary" started to emerge by the late 19th century. The older, formal, writing style that was prevalent in precolonial literature was then abandoned in favor of a new style that sought to sound more like everyday speech. In other words, newer literary sensibilities began to challenge the long-held belief that one must write literary works in a language that is very different from everyday speech. This shift contrasted with the classical literature of earlier centuries, which was primarily composed of mythological and puranic characters and plots. Under the strong influence of Western literary sensibilities, many Malayalam literary critics at the time harshly condemned Sanskrit's literary influence. They desired new methods for producing and evaluating literary works that were in line with the sentiments and language of daily life. C. Anthappayi's novel *Nālupēriloruttan* is a prime example in this respect. The author of this novel Anthappayi makes fun of the Sanskritic tendencies of creative writers in Kerala in the late 19th century who were fixated on using Sanskrit verse in plays. The novel proposed that one should not write dramas in a language that was heavily Sanskritized in order to gain respect in society. A character in the novel, Achutha Menon, who is thoroughly westernized, delivers a lengthy speech near the novel's conclusion in this respect. He accuses Malayalam dramas of emulating ancient Sanskrit styles without contributing anything truly literary. According to him, the conventional structure of Sanskrit plays is no longer relevant. He opines that there is no need to employ the same technique today. In the speech, he expresses sorry for the conventional authors who continue to emulate the Sanskritic structure in vernacular dramas. This section of the novel demonstrates how Malayalam dramas of the era mindlessly adhered to outdated customs. Additionally, it criticized these plays for neglecting crucial components like character development and plot.

When English education was introduced during colonial rule, new forms of literary expression in vernacular Malayalam emerged in the 19th century. This led to the emergence of prose narratives, essays, autobiographies. The novel, which struck a chord with the expanding middle-class intelligentsia, was the most important of these. This signified a change in literary style from the classical Sanskritic tradition, which emphasized mythological themes and employed the special language, to the representation of commonplace life in vernacular Malayalam. Western education was not the only factor that contributed to the rise of the novel. The development of the genre was influenced by a number of factors, including the invention of the printing press, the expansion of the reading

public, the growing need for books and libraries, and the rise of female readers (as foreseen by novelists such as Chandu Menon). The conditions that existed in India at this time were similar to those in England in the 17th and 18th centuries, which favored the growth of this new form of writing called the novel.

Initially, the majority of Malayalam novels were either translations or copies of Western novels. Catherine Hana Mullens' "Phulmoni Ennum Koruna Ennum Peraya Randu Sthreekalude Katha" was one of the first books written in Malayalam. It was actually a translation of a book written in Bengali titled Phulmani O Karunar Bibaran. P. P. Raveendran, a literary critic, notes that contemporary Malayali readers who appreciate good literature would not find this book appealing. He claims that Phulmoni was written more as a means of disseminating Christian religious ideas than as a true novel. He thinks it has more to do with Kerala's social history than its literary past. Pathminiyum Karunayum, another translation of this book, was likewise a straightforward translation devoid of much creativity. Even the first-printed-Malayalam-novel Ghathakawadham by Rev. Richard Collins, although it discussed life in Kerala in the 19th century, was a translation of an English book titled "The Slayer Slain." This demonstrates that the early Malayalam novels lacked a distinct literary voice and were primarily direct translations. But as time went on, things started to shift. By emphasizing more regional tales, characters, and themes, Malayalam novels gradually came to define themselves. Kerala culture was blended with Western forms in these new pieces. According to Dilip Menon, these novels became "amphibious"—that is, they combined elements of tradition and modernity.

In the late nineteenth century, formal realism, which sought to present a complete and truthful depiction of real life influenced early Malayalam novels. The first major change that came with Western influence was the shift from the mythical world to a more realistic portrayal of life. This doesn't mean that traditional literary styles disappeared entirely. Rather, the new Western-influenced style emerged alongside the older forms, creating a literary space where both could exist and interact.

Here we should particularly need to note that the the majority of these novels were written by newly educated middle-class individuals who had exposure to Western education. For instance, O. Chandu Menon, a lawyer from an upper caste, wrote "Indulekha," the first significant Malayalam novel. He freely acknowledged that his writing was impacted by his Western education. In addition, he received training in Sanskrit drama and poetry. He served in the government before rising to the position of sub-judge in Calicut. Another novelist C. Anthappayi, who studied philosophy and became a Christian, was raised in a prosperous Christian household. He was a clerk in the Education Department and was well versed in Sanskrit. Despite coming from a lower caste, Potheri Kunjambu, the author of the novel Saraswathivijayam, was fluent in both English and Sanskrit. He was a lawyer, too. The author of "Premamritam," C. V. Raman Pillai, came from an upper-caste background. He studied Ayurveda and Sanskrit and was the son of a Sanskrit scholar. He attended Thiruvananthapuram's first English-speaking school before earning his degree from Madras University. "*Pulleli Kunju*," another early novel, was written by Arch Deacon Koshy, a senior priest from a wealthy Christian family. He was also proficient in English, Latin, and Sanskrit. In summary, regardless of caste or class, all of these early novelists were from the upper classes of society.

The ideals and passions of the well-educated middle class were represented in their writings. This distinguished nineteenth-century literature from eighteenth-century literature and signaled a significant shift in the subject matter and style of writing. The moral and intellectual values of the new middle class, which was attempting to adjust to the concepts of

colonial modernity, were largely depicted in these early Malayalam novels. In order to achieve this, the authors frequently challenged more antiquated beliefs that ran counter to contemporary viewpoints, such as traditional practices regarding marriage, inheritance, and property rights. In many Malayalam novels, this tension between the old and the new is evident. For instance, this conflict is portrayed in Chandu Menon's novel *Indulekha* through Indulekha's grandfather, Punchu Menon, who represents the older generation, and her uncle, Kochu Krishna Menon, who is Western-educated and represents the contemporary middle class. Punchu Menon claims that because Indulekha is older than fifteen, she is eligible to get married. Krishna Menon disputes this, stating that she has not finished her education. He thinks it is more crucial that she receive a good education so that she can lead a dignified and modern life. He claims that once she has received good education, she will be able to make intelligent marriage decisions on her own.

Padinjare Kovilakath Ammaman Raja's novel "*Indumathiswayamvaram*" similarly provides a comparable illustration. In this novel, the King's second wife, who upholds traditional values, berates him for teaching "Indumathi." She claims that girls who receive education become overly independent and may enter into unwelcome relationships, which is why Indumathi fell in love with the hero, Sukumaran. But the king who is modern outright rejects this proposition. So, a characteristic mark of the early novels is the clash between the old world order and the new one.

Although many of these early Malayalam novels showed scenes from colonial Kerala, they mostly focused on the lives of the elite—especially upper-caste, upper-class men. Writers like O. Chandu Menon and Komattil Padu Menon, who belonged to the Nair caste, used their novels to suggest reforms in their own community. Their ideas were shaped by their Western education and the modern values. These early novels' emphasis on morality and reform was, in fact, elitist. In her analysis of novels of Chandu Menon's "*Indulekha*" and V. T. Shankunni Menon's "*Padmavati*," G. Arunima draws attention to this particular aspect. She contends that these books only depicted the internal struggles of Kerala's upper-caste, English-educated middle class, rather than reflecting society at large. Arunima cautions readers that these novels primarily focus on the issues of a select, privileged group and should not be interpreted as complete depictions of Kerala society.

For example, the main issue discussed in Chandu Menon's novel *Indulekha* is the Nair practice of matriliney—where property is passed down through the mother's side. This system did not fit well with the Victorian moral values that many early novelists had adopted. As a result, some educated Nair men began to see their own traditions as old-fashioned or wrong. The fact that Nair women could have more than one husband especially made them uncomfortable. So, these novelists started to question their community's ways of marriage and family life. This focus on reform and moral values shows that these early novels were written from an elitist point of view. Scholar Arunima also points this out in her study of books like *Indulekha* and V. T. Shankunni Menon's *Padmavati*. She argues that these novels mainly talk about the personal struggles of Kerala's upper-caste, English-educated middle class. Arunima warns readers not to treat these novels as full pictures of Kerala society because they mostly reflect the concerns of a small, privileged group.

Early Malayalam novels like *Indulekha*, *Padmavati*, *Vasumati*, and *Saraswathivijayam* mainly focused on the lives of Kerala's upper-caste, English-educated middle class. Scholar Arunima points out that these stories often ignored the experiences of the broader Malayali society, especially the lower castes. She notes that about "three-quarters of Malayali life" is missing from these narratives, which predominantly highlight the lives of upper-class Nairs. These novels frequently used the concept of family to critique the traditional matrilineal system and

promote reforms favoring the affluent middle class. Arunima refers to them as "caste scripts" because they reflect deeper caste-related issues rather than just family stories. In *Indulekha* and *Vasumati*, the main female characters are well-educated in English and Sanskrit. While *Indulekha* represents the new Nair woman, *Vasumati* symbolizes a new type of Thiya woman. Despite being from a lower caste, *Vasumati* is portrayed similarly to *Indulekha*, suggesting that early middle-class authors depicted lower-caste characters in ways that aligned with their own beliefs and values. In *Saraswathivijayam*, a Dalit man converts to Christianity and achieves success through Western education. However, the novel primarily focuses on a Brahmin character, Namboothiri, who transforms from a violent landlord into a humble scholar rejecting caste distinctions. The novel's use of common Malayalam language marked a significant shift, making literature more accessible to a broader audience. Despite these developments, most of these novels remained centered on Kerala's upper class, overlooking the struggles and daily lives of common people. They primarily addressed the middle class's efforts to balance modernity with tradition, reflecting the values of those aiming to align with colonial modernity.

Having analyzed all the major points, let us now revise all the points we discussed so far. Novels brought about a major shift in the world of literature. Until their emergence, literary works were mostly shaped by myths and featured heroic figures from ancient stories. Creating and understanding literature often required specialized training. However, the spread of Western education changed this landscape significantly. Literature began to reflect real-life experiences, and the language used became more familiar and accessible to a wider audience. Among the new genres that rose to prominence during this time, the novel stood out as particularly significant. The novel became an important medium through which the newly emerging middle class expressed their dreams, struggles, and values. It offered a way for the English-educated middle class to imagine a modern identity for themselves, one that attempted to balance tradition with the ideals of colonial modernity. The genre provided a space to reflect the tensions and transformations happening within society. However, it is important to note that while these novels gave voice to the experiences of the upper-caste and upper-class sections, they often ignored the lives of the lower-caste and lower-class people, especially in their early years. This lecture explores how the novel, as a literary form, helped shape and express the moral and intellectual world of the colonial-era middle class. Although my examples will come primarily from early Malayalam novels, such as *Indulekha*, *Vasumati*, and *Saraswathivijayam*, the ideas and patterns we see in them are relevant to literature produced across many Indian languages during the colonial period.