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Gender and Humour: Early Malayalam Novels and the Ambivalence of Tradition and Modernity

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Introduction

Different from the pre-modern tradition of laughter, the newly educated intellectuals acquired cultural competence in both traditional and modern knowledge through new cultural resources such as modern Western education and print brought about by colonial modernity. Newly educated intellectuals contributed to the development of Malayalam literary lore, which includes novels, essays, short stories, dramas, poems and various genres of print humour which is characterised by satire, parody, irony, epigram, and wit. Humour became widely used as a medium to negotiate the new changes brought about by colonial modernity. Nineteenth and twentieth century Keralam witnessed new developments in the history of gender too. Different from community identity, the modern individual emerging under colonial subjectification was already gendered.[1] With the emergence of a nascent public sphere in Keralam, women's organizations, club activities, educational and literary initiatives gradually developed and got strengthened.[2] New notions of women and men, family, romantic love, new marriage practices, and property relations evoked home-centred anxieties among the male groups in the patriarchal society. Among the newly emerged intellectuals, 'progressive/ modern' and 'conservative/ traditional' interests began to gain prominence. The present paper explores these aspects through a comparative analysis of two early Malayalam novels: *Indulekha* by O Chandu Menon and its burlesque *Parangodiparinayam* by Kizhakkeppattu Ramankutty Menon.[3]

Colonial Modernity and Gender: *Indulekha* and Caricature in *Parangodiparinayam*

In Keralam, modernity was mainly characterised by the formation of civil society under colonial rule through the emergence of various forms of institutions and

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practices like modern schooling, print media, legal apparatus, socio-religious reform movements, political organisations, etc. The novel *Indulekha* (1889), written by Oyyarathu Chandu Menon, is a widely discussed modern Malayalam text, and its various aspects have been analysed by different scholars.[4] One of the main focuses in this novel is the romance of modern, English-educated Indulekha and Madhavan. *Parangodiparinayam* is the main literary work of Ramankutty Menon.[5] He presents a story similar to that in *Indulekha* in a satirical manner. His novel was inspired by and took cues from Kesari Nayanar's sarcastic essay prescribing how to acquire literary fame by writing novels, as the imitative trend of new novels were mushrooming. This is the first satirical novel in Malayalam, though many satirical essays, poems, etc., were written well before its publication, for instance, by Vengayil Kunhiraman Nayanar. After the genealogical description of Parangodan and Parangodi, the hero and heroin, the story begins with their sudden encounter with a European riding a horse which they mistook for some strange animal or evil spirit and fled to home out of fear. The story proceeds by illustrating various characters like lustful Namboodiri, scarlet Varasyar and clever Marar who deceive the Namboodiri. Even though Parangodan and Parangodi fled from a European during their childhood, now they have grown up and become 'modern'. Parangodan has passed exams and become a lawyer while Parangodi got English education. She has acquired skills for doing modern appliqué works, and is able to read English magazines, and novels. The central part of the story begins when Parangodi's parents propose a match between Parangodi and another protagonist in the novel, Pangasa Menon. Parangodi immediately writes to Parangodan about the new state of affairs and the much agonized Parangodan prepare to come home soon. But the story turns when Pangasa Menon rejects the match with the proud and English educated Parangodi. Different from the womanizer Suri in *Indulekha*, the author revengefully introduces a traditional but strong-willed character, Pangasa Menon and thereby his satire evokes superiority over the west and poses a serious critic against the newly emerged educated people's affinity for westernization. Menon's education, convictions and occupation are consistent with tradition. While Menon is depicted for his positive qualities, Parangodan is mockingly caricatured as weak, as well as foolish. Finally, it was a bit of an anti-climax when Parangodi is at last united with her lover

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Parangodan. Throughout the novel he launches sharp criticism against the newly emerged novels which celebrate modernity and the romance between, for instance, English educated Madhavan and Indulekha in *Indulekha*

Rather than idealizing the image of the English-educated man and woman within the context of colonial modernity, Ramankutty Menon, in his novel *Parangodiparinayam,* attempts to create a projected orientation of the 'ideal' image of the English-educated woman, while the man appears ridiculous. Throughout his novel, he offers a mockery of *Meenakshi* in its frame and *Indulekha*, in its theme of modernity.[6] Deviating from the previously mentioned articulations of the visions of the 'ideal' image of woman and man, Ramankutty Menon expresses a voice of discord rather than consonance regarding the projected image of 'ideal' models of 'woman and 'man'.

Ramankutty Menon's burlesque is primarily subversive in its attitude towards the Western orientation of twentieth-century reformism, as it articulates a defence against the collapse of the established social system. His sarcasm highlights the differences between Indian and Western systems, employing this contrast as a means to defend against the discontent introduced by modern ideas. He ridicules and questions the projection of Western-educated men and women as universal 'ideal' images. In another sense, Ramankutty Menon's humour critiques his own people's attachment to modernity and English education, who are the major 'others' in his novel. Through this humour the author conveys his anxiety about celebrating the new importance of English education, particularly among women. He expresses strong contempt for English-educated people, their obsession with Western ideals, and their disdainful attitude towards traditional individuals. His main argument is that although the Western system and education are commendable, they do not fit into our social system due to their differences. It addresses the ineffectiveness of English education within the existing framework. The main protagonists of this novel are the English-educated Parangodi and Parangodan. By satirically caricaturing these characters, the author highlights their disdainful remarks and gestures against traditional values and art forms, as well as their contempt for those who do not speak English.

In the novel *Parangodiparinayam,* the author presents various contentions regarding the depiction of 'ideal' models of manhood and womanhood in early novels, such as

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*Indulekh*a and *Meenakshi*. He expresses dissent through the character Pangasa Menon, reflecting his vision of the 'ideal' man. The author presents a contrasting vision of an 'ideal' society. By mocking these early novels, he also critiques aspects of European history.[7] In *Indulekha*, the 'ideal' man Madhavan depicted as handsome, tall, and golden-skinned, while Pangasa Menon, the model of manhood in *Parangodiparinayam,* is portrayed for his beauty in dark complexion and relative shortness of height. Pangasa Menon is celebrated for the material wealth he gained early through agriculture, an indigenous occupation. It is important to note that Madhavan in *Indulekha* relied on his *Karanavar*/father for a long time. Pangasa Menon is well educated in indigenous learning and is disciplined in adhering to traditional culture, values, and norms. The author idealises a model of manhood aligned with tradition, positively evaluating qualities such as maturity, gentleness, and meekness in front of gurus and respected individuals, sympathy for others' hardships, concern about damaging his reputation, and indifference towards others' wealth and another man's wife. He is characterised as lacking the negative traits often associated with English-educated youth. By mocking the West, the author implicitly critiques another group, the Namboodiris. This is evident in Pangasa Menon's indifference and disdain for superficial appearances and lustful behaviour toward others' wives. The lascivious image of the Namboodiri is even caricatured in the third chapter of *Parangodiparinayam*. The important thing to note here is the centrality of the 'innate' dimension of the construction of the 'ideal'. By identifying Parangodi's 'unusual' qualities, the author caricatures its 'unsuitability' within the traditional system, narrating how these qualities become the butt of people's jokes. Parangodi is depicted as adamant and independent, making her unwilling to obey her parents or other respectable individuals. The author questions whether Parangodi's distinctive educational background in English and her skill in appliqué work are essential for our society. The author conveys his viewpoint through the voice of the 'ideal' character (Pangasa Menon) in the story. He states,

> "What is the special need for English? I am not a Whiteman. My native language is Malayalam. We don't have any relation with Europeans. What is the special use of knowing about many foreign languages,

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> especially for our women?" Regarding 'modern' women's aptitude for sewing and embroidery, he asserts, "Are we going to live as sewers? If that is the case, Parangodi is necessary for us. That is not the case. There are reasons for European women to learn this skill. Since the style of their frock is in such a manner, it is good to have the skill to stitch it by oneself, which would help ordinary people to avoid expenses. So it is necessary for Europeans to teach their women appliqué work. How much is it necessary for our women and their dresses?"[8]

Here, he logically counters the notion that although education enhances intelligence, English education merely entails language acquisition. Education does not equate to language education. He reflects on the idea of education as a process of becoming aware to discern what should be embraced and what should be rejected in life. According to him, one must gain this education through the words of gurus, through personal effort, insights from celibates, and through one's own life experiences.[9] By expressing his doubts about people's deep knowledge of English, he logically argues that merely learning the language is inadequate and constructs a form of defence by referencing tradition and its relevance.

By caricaturing the English-educated Parangodi as lacking the prevalent conduct and virtuousness, the author discusses how she would be unfit in a *tharavad*. Instead of perceiving a shift towards a new form of 'ideal domesticity', his sarcasm is shaped by the *tharavad* centred lifestyle and its nostalgic sentiments. Meanwhile, the author highlights how the English-educated Parangodan flatters himself and seems foolish among the native people, despite holding a BA degree. He is depicted as someone unable to see through the flattering words others use to mock him.

On the one hand, the author expresses concern about the youngsters' affinity for the English language and education, their pride in knowing the language, and the disadvantages it creates for the native people's culture. On the other hand, he portrays it as 'insufficient' education that native people receive, as most of their learning is limited to the English language. Additionally, he argues that if a woman does not know English, her abilities remain unaffected. Women's dignity and worth are judged based on patriarchal gender norms such as their nobility, conduct, and

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'innate' qualities and capabilities to manage a home. He suggests that those who do not know English tend to exhibit good manners and politeness, while those who do pass exams may appear discourteous and foolish. The author highlights the point that 'quality' is not solely based on passing exams, but also on displaying good manners and actions. The criteria for a virtuous wife and a suitable husband do not rely on education or exam results. Here, it is crucial to note that the public debate during this period was about the necessity of education for both men and women, which is considered essential for the future generation, especially for women who are the primary drivers of development for the future generation. In contrast to this view, any form of choice for modernity was ridiculed as it disturbs the traditional gender performativity.

End Notes

1. colonial subjectification means the discursive process of the construction of subjects. J Devika discusses in a detailed manner the entry of women into the public domain restricted following 'natural' divisions defining the genders. J. Devika, *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Keralam*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007) pp. 35-110, 172-230. See also Binumol Abraham, "Gendering the Public Sphere in Colonial Keralam," *New Themes in Indian History: Art, Politics, Gender, Environment and Culture*, ed. Rattanlal Hangloo and Atlury Murali (New Delhi: Sundeep Prakasan-Black & White, 2007), pp. 283-310
2. In the broad sense of the term, the 'public sphere' is a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Jurgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans by Thomas Burger & Frederick Lawrence, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992; Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1996,
3. O. Chandu Menon, *Indulekha* (1889; Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademy, 1998). Kizhakepattu Ramankutty Menon, "Parangodiparinayam" (The Romance of Parangodi) 1892; *Nalu Novelukal,* ed. George Irumbayam, Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademy, 1985, pp. 228-269.
4. For example, see, K. N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony. Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Tulika, 1998.pp. 123-144; Udaya Kumar, "Seeing and Reading: The Early Malayalam Novel and Some Questions of Visibility," *Early Novels of India*, ed. Meenakshi Mukherjee (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2002), pp. 161-192; J. Devika, *En-Gendering Individuat. The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Keralam*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007; G. Arunima, "Writing Culture: Of modernity and the Malayalam novel," *Studies in History* 13, no. 2 (1997), pp. 271-290. Satheesh Chandra Bose & Shiju Sam Varghese (Ed), Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2015.
5. Kizhakepattu Ramankutty Menon, "Parangodiparinayam" (The Romance of Parangodi)
6. The author mocks at the newly emerged novels like *Kundalata, Meenakshi,*and *Indulekha*, and the theme of celebrating modernity through idealizing the image of modern woman and man who are educated and their free choice of marriage different from the traditional style of arranging a marriage. Especially he taunts the novel *Meenakshi* for its similarity with the frame of the novel *Indulekha* and ridicules all these novels' as adaptations of and inspiration from English novels. For instance, *Kundalata* imitates the English novels of Scott. In the novel *Meenakshi* the author engages with the issue of women's education and argues for it. See,

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Appu Nedungadi, Kundalata, Calicut: Vidya Vilasam Press, 1887; Cheruvalathu Chathu Nair, *Meenakshi*. 1890. Trichur: Kerala Sahitya Akademy, 1990.

7. By giving folk names, Parangodan and Parangodi, the main protagonists in this novel, the author mentions about the 'purity' in the traditional identity of the Nair families that did not mix up with Aryans who came from outside. At the same time, the author justifies the names saying that names such as Indulekha, Madhavan, and Kundalatha are Aryan names, and hence he prefers folk names to specify the ethnic identity. See, Kizhakepattu Ramankutty Menon, "Parangodiparinayam," pp. 224-225.
8. Ibid., p. 246. All translations from the original text given in this chapter are mine.
9. Ibid.

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