
COLONIAL SUBJECT AND EMANCIPATED WOMEN: OYYARATHU CHANDU MENON'S INDULEKHA

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Abstract

The first major Malayalam novel *Indulakha* (1899) is written by Oyyarathu Chandu Menon (1847–1899). An attempt is made in this paper is to reveal the changing social relation between Nair and Nambudris during the colonial period narrated in this novel. This article explore how modernization brought by the British and missionaries in Kerala society. The English language and the liberal ideas acquired by the Keralites from the British and Missionaries shaped their ideas with the mindset of the British Indians. That reading helped him to understand the forms of novel completely. Being inspired by literature, he started to write a novel titled '*Indulekha*'. As the novel deals with the turbulent period in the history of Kerala, a large number of issues that are responsible for this turbulence come up for discussion, particularly the issues like Nambudri dominations, western education, and marriage practices as portrayed in the novel. This novel advocates the need for reformation.

Keywords: Colonial, Reformism, Rationalism, Education, Language Politics, British rule, Indian women

The introduction of print technology facilitated the growth of newspapers in Kerala. The earliest newspapers in Malayalam dealt with religious matters. However, papers like *Satyananda* and *Kahalam* provided space for non religious writings. The newspaper *Kerala Mitram* was published in Kerala from Cochin by an industrialist Devji Bhivaji is considered the first secular news paper in Malayalam. Later, *the Kerala patrika* played a crucial role in political criticism. It freely discussed political issues. Along with English education, the question of re thinking also took place on a large scale. The newspaper provided a platform for expression of new ideas and they had crucial role in changing the very nature of Malayalam media. In this context, Parameswara Nair says:

It was the journalist who made Malayalam prose more flexible and expressive. It gained more from him than from all the conscious and organized efforts of litterateurs to develop it as a literary medium. The style which he developed was such as would enable the statement of common

things in an easy idiom. This new prose was put to far more uses afterwards and its effectiveness for literary purposes was also enhanced.

Nair, 1968: 140

The English language and the liberal ideas acquired by the Keralites from the British and Missionaries shaped their ideas with the mindset of the British Indians. This mindset naturally embraced the British culture including its literary forms. One such literary form is the novel. Before taking it for discussion, we have to examine the opinion of Nicholas B. Dirks in his work *Caste's of Mind* talking about how colonial knowledge classified cultural forms as traditional and how they were countered by the modern forms. He says:

Colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it, in certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about. Cultural forms in society newly classified as 'traditional' were reconstructed and transformed by the transformed by this knowledge, which created categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and Asian, modern and traditional, West and East.

Dirks, 2006:9

In his works, Dirks observe relating to the effect of English education on the social structure, especially on the Hindu social structure during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. According to him the knowledge of colony had been acquired by the colonizer and the colonized was exposed to the knowledge of the colonizer. The same knowledge shaped the mind of the colonized subjects. It was called in a way a new era of awakening. The need to explain these movements emerged from English education, industrialization, conversation and the development of representative institutions. In this context, writers like Oyyarathu Chandu Menon (popularly known as O. Chandu Menon) (1847–1899) by being exposed to the west in every aspect, started voicing out certain liberal ideas in the form of fiction. The English education functioned as a catalyst for reformist movement and played a vital role in molding the literature and the thought of the time which might have prompted the authors like Chandumenon to come on to the scene. This is a clear cut relationship between academic background of writers like Chandumenon and their writing. Further, Chandumenon was educated in English and was in government service. Later he joined the government service. The educational career of Chandumenon is reflected in the following lines:

In 1863, at sixteen, while still at school, he cleared the uncovenanted service examination and continued with his education. At seventeen, while preparing for the matriculation examination, he received an appointment as the sixth clerk in the Tallassery Small Causes Court. There he caught the

attention of Judge G. R. Sharp. The turning point in his life, however, came with as assignment as assistant to William Logan, the author of the famous Malabar Manual, also sub- collector at Thallassery. Logan, who learnt about Chandumenon's abilities had him transferred to the collectorate at Calicut. By all accounts, Chandumenon was of great help to Logan in the preparation of the Malabar Manual. Also, with Logan's encouragement Chandumenon became a dedicated reader especially of English novels, acquiring new arrivals as soon as they were published. He moved quickly up the ladder of government service, and by 1871 had become head munshi in the Calicut secretariat. In 1872, Chandumenon was promoted as head clerk in the Calicut Civil Court.

Chandumenon, 2005. 227

Chandumenon joined government service at an early age after his formal education and rose to eminence. His knowledge of English was almost self-acquired. It was good enough to make him enjoy novels in English. He was a voracious reader of novels. In his preface to first edition of *Indulekha* he says:

Around the end of 1886, after I had left Kozhikode, I began reading a large number of English novels. Any time I had while not engaged in work related to my government job, I spent seated comfortably at home and reading novels. I noticed that this led to a growing dissatisfaction among my close friends, who would earlier have spent this time enjoyably in conversation with me. I did not as a consequence cut down on my reading in any way.

Chandumenon, 2005: 237

That reading helped him to understand the forms of novel completely. Being inspired by literature, he started to write a novel titled '*Indulekha*'. He began to write on June 11th, 1889 and completed it by August 17th, 1889; in a span of two months.

The novel *Indulekha* is named after its heroine Indulekha. Indulekha is a talented Nair girl falls in love with Madhavan. Madhavan got his B. L., degree and is waiting for a government job. Indulekha's grandfather Panchumenon strictly follows the tradition in practice at that time, especially among the aristocratic Nair families. Madhavan the grandson of Pandavan is an English educated young man, who criticized traditional social set up. Panchumenon intends to marry Indulekha to a rich, but foolish Suri Nambudripath. So, he invites Suri Nambudripath to see Indulekha. But the awkward attitude and antics of Suri Nambudripath failed to impress Indulekha. She is very strong in her love for Madhavan. But Panchumenon gets angry at Indulekha's refusal to marry Suri Nambudripath. As he was pestered by Suri Nambudripath, Panchumenon secretly arranges another girl to go with Suri

nambuthiri. He spreads the rumors that Indulekha has wedded the man chosen by him. Madhavan came to know about it while he was at the railway station. On his way back from Madras, being disturbed by the news, he will be moving here and there aimlessly. A group of people along with his father find him in Bombay after a long search. They inform him that Indulekha rejected Suri, in spite of her grandfather's pressure. Madhavan repents and feels ashamed. Finally comes back home and marries Indulekha which is appreciated even by her grandfather. So the novel portrays the dominance of matriarchal system, specifically the evil of Nair girl's marital alliance with Nambudris. It even highlights the need for female education and pleads for freedom for women.

The novel *Indulekha* presents the life of Nairs and Nambudris of Hindu society in Kerala. The story deals with domestic issues with simple dialogue which is very faithful to the spoken idiom. The novel is filled with progressive thoughts on various social issues. By making the characters to discuss the social problems, the author exposes the problems in the society. In this context, the opinion expressed by Krishna Chaitanya is very significant as he says:

There is a ferment of progressive ideas in the whole book. Sometimes it comes to the surface in direct discussion – though by the characters, not the author – when its aesthetic propriety becomes rather debatable. But mostly it is a general ambience that it nearly absorbed into the episodic stream of the story, for it is the progressive aspirations of some characters of the younger generation that provoke conflict with the conservative older generation and lead to the episodic evolution with its crisis and ultimate resolutions.

Chaitanya, 1971: 262

As we have seen already the basic characters in the novel belong to Nairs and Nambudris belong to two dominated castes in Kerala. The Nambudris are a community of priests and land owners; they are Brahmins by caste. Whereas, the Nairs belong to the Sudra community; they are land owners. The inter-caste arrangements created close relationships between Nairs and Nambudris. Though the relations in the economic field were successful, particularly in terms of land hold, as it consolidates property in both caste groups, in the social domain it had created some problems. Nambudris could claim any Nair woman in the social domain. This indicates the supremacy of the Nambudris over the Nairs. The novel portrays this social setup.

The novel also focuses on how the men in the matriarchal Nair families were unable to survive in the modern age. This novel delineates a variety of temperaments of the individuals. From one perspective the novel seems to be criticizing the Nambudri communities. In fact, there was resentment around in the Nambudri community when the novel appeared first. A close reading of the novel proves that the author did not spare even the Nair community. The

author captures the longstanding societal conflicts and aspires for social change. The novel narrates the domestic interests of these two communities. These two land-owning communities are shown as if they are not interested in production. In chapter 18 of the novel certain problems are found which are a result of the encounter with modernism and the rise of nationalist movement in India. At one point in the novel, Madhavan's father Paddikkal blames him for running away from home and causing disturbance in the family. According to Madhavan's father, modern education is the cause of this indiscipline.

Like all other South Indian novels of the Nineteenth century, this novel also portrays the social problems of particular communities in Kerala. It even equals the cast stratification that focuses on underprivileged community and communal conflicts. *Indulekha* is totally a social fiction reveals on condemnable degeneration in the two communities. The author portrayed how the Nair women are treated as play things by Nambudris. On the other side the author also finds fault with the orthodoxy of Nair parents. The Nambudri married Nair women do not take any responsibility in rearing the children. They behave and treat a Nair woman as mean companions than wives. Chandumenon as an English educated writer was moved by the plight of Nair women. The same has been depicted in the novel and considered it an element to be reformed. To drive home his point he has created various characters represent the earlier and later generation and exposed the conflict. In the process, he has created certain unforgettable character like Panchumenon, Surinambudripath, Karathedan and Indulekha, though not the real characters but emerged from realistic situation.

As the novel deals with the turbulent period in the history of Kerala, a large number of issues that are responsible for this turbulence come up for discussion, particularly the issues like Nambudri dominations, western education, and marriage practices as portrayed in the novel. This novel advocates the need for reformation. As many critics observe that Chandumenon not only chose to write but he put it in a concrete form and language that exactly reconstructs the lives of the Nambudri and Nair families. The characters that are created in the novel were inspired by reformist ideas; mostly by the European education and culture. Chandumenon shows Indulekha as a woman who can read English novels, and a woman of firmness, independence and self - confidence as the resulted her by English education. The author has shown the beauty, intelligence, refined manners of Indulekha because of her exposure to English culture. In the novel, Panchumenmon at one point of time accepts his weakness by stating that he was afraid of Indulekha because of her English formidable reason and logic.

Indulekha also reflects the changing relationships among the Nambudris and Nairs in Kerala during Nineteenth century. It levels social criticism against the rotten customs of the two communities and the transformation they have undergone because of the modernization brought by the Britishers and missionaries. The novel gives detailed discussions relating to the modernization, which took place in education. Though the discussions are in way deviations

from the basic frame work of the novel, the author deliberately put them with an intention to articulate his reformist views. In this context, the arguments of Chandumenon are compelling. Chandumenon has contributed much to the debate of Indian modernity and this debate is through fiction, particularly *Indulekha*. In the novel, he charted out the Nair household, its history, its everyday life, its spoken tongue and the strong women as it was observed by the well-known critic in India Sasie Tharur. The author has created the character Indulekha as a Character with all flesh and blood equipped with English as well as classical education. She is independent, beautiful and a rebel with a sense of humor. Commenting on the character of Indulekha Susie Tharu says:

When Indulekha uses the first – person singular as she rejects the advances of Surinamnuthri, the attitude reverberates across Nair society, much as the door Nora would slam a few years later when she leaves her ‘doll’s house’, echoes through Europe. This is not modernity by fiat; it is a modernity muscled and shaped in combat with its immediate antagonists (among them those who depict Nair society as perverse and Nair women as victim to their strange customs).

Chandumenon, 2005: XI

Chandumenon portrays the character Indulekha as spirited and intelligent Nair woman who is able to use the new education to help her own community in relation to Nambudhri. According to Kunhun Raja:

Chandu Menon’s famous novel, Indulekha, boldly challenged the doctrine of the classicists and demonstrated effectively that literary prose of the highest quality could be written in the daily language of the people.

Raja, 1957: 124

By portraying the English educated male and female characters against the conservative and the rigid family structure, the author could exhibit the progressive natives that the British wanted to propagate. By such an act Chandumenon makes the comment on late nineteenth century Kerala visible as a parallel life style to the western style of living. In many instances the male protagonist Madhavan depends on the English education and talks about the benefits of the English rule in India. He even goes to the extent of declining that without education, knowledge and unity, Indians should not attempt to setup parliament of their own. He even condemns the Indian civil servants for not having administrative capabilities. He openly declares:

The English who have one religion and who are united are themselves finding it difficult to run a parliament properly. We Indians, who belong to

diverse religions, sects and who are terribly opposed to each other, are planning to form a parliament at the behest of these bearded English – speaking babus, Iyers, and Mudaliars. Nothing can be more stupid than this. People live in mutual peace because they fear the bullets of the English. If these Englishmen leave India tomorrow, we will see the boldness of these babus. They won't be able to protect the country even for a minute. If they really have a sense of pride, they would have acquired by now what they so passionately desire. Actually, these people have no courage, smartness, enthusiasm, and patience; they just want to make a lot of noise.

Chandumenon, 2005: 205

The Pro - British statements in a way reflecting the attitude of the author which favors the British rule in India. Because of these various reasons, *Indulekha* stands as a novel that portrayed the typical reformist desires of the western educated on the English educated Indian of late nineteenth century, who by being disturbed by the age old traditions wanted to change them in the interest of the fellow men. Whatever may be the consequences, we can't find fault with the writers like Chandumenon who strongly felt that there was a need to reform the Kerala society and he used letters for reformation and the novel *Indulekha* is a mighty creation from the mighty writer Chandumenon.

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