SOCIOLOGY THROUGH LITERATURE

A STUDY OF KAAROOR'S STORIES

S. Devadas Pillai

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This book presents a comprehensive study of nearly 100 of Kaaroor Neelakanta Pillai's short stories. Kaaroor is one among the Big Six of the 'new wave' in Malayalam literature which began in the mid-1940s. The Big Six and their immediate followers wrote about the common man, peasants, pavement-dwellers, fishermen, rickshaw-pullers, underpaid school teachers – their lives, aspirations, and vulnerabilities. By treating Kaaroor's stories as case studies, the book takes a sociological approach to understanding the representation of a wide array of themes: romantic overtones, erotic pursuits, marital episodes, issues of family, lives of children, behavioural patterns, shades of greed, spiritual themes, and political episodes.

With its technique of annotated transcreation and detailed commentary, this book brings Kaaroor's works to the general reader, and will be useful to scholars and researchers of South Asian literature, English literature, linguistics, and cultural studies, besides those interested in Malayalam literature and the Malayali/Indian diaspora across the world.

S. Devadas Pillai is a research sociologist and was previously affiliated with the University of Mumbai, India for 15 years as a scholar, Senior Research Officer, and Deputy Director of major research projects. Subsequently, he was with Amsterdam University on a WOTRO-ZWO fellowship, followed by visits related to two major Indo-Dutch research projects. For 30 years, he has been the Executive Editor of an encyclopaedia project on performing arts. He completed his MA and PhD at the Department of Sociology, University of Mumbai, and is the author/editor of over ten books, including *Rajahs and Prajas: A Princely State, Then and Now* (1976); *Slums and Urbanization* (1991, 2nd edn); and *Indian Sociology Through Ghurye: A Dictionary* (2011).

'Kaaroor Neelakanta Pillai was one of the finest short story writers in Malayalam with a style and craft that has remained unique till date. The characters in all stories had been drawn from the local milieu which gave them a flavour typical of the locale in which they were set . . . Devadas Pillai's work captures the essence of Kaaroor through around 100 of his short stories and conveys him well to the English reader.'

– M. K. Das, former Editor, *The Indian Express*, Kerala edition

'The author has very well succeeded in bringing Karoor's several short stories to life by providing the direct and immediate societal context of the several main principal persons and others. He shows how narratives can be transformed into sociological micro-essays. Such essays are widely understood and transcend cultural boundaries. His language is precise and clear, and his words are carefully chosen.'

– Hans Schenk, senior sociologist and author,
formerly at Amsterdam University

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A Study of Kaaroor's Stories

S. Devadas Pillai

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Devadas Pillai, S., 1935– author.
Title: Sociology through literature : a study of Kaaroor's stories / S. Devadas Pillai.
Other titles: Kaaroor's stories
Description: New York : Routledge, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2019020448 (print) | ISBN 9780367144180 (hardback) | ISBN 9780429288050 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Nīlakaṇṭhapiḷḷa, Kārūr—Criticism and interpretation. | Working class in literature. | Middle class in literature. | Literature and society—India. | Malayalam fiction—20th century—History and criticism.
Classification: LCC PL4718.9.N528 D48 2019 (print) | LCC PL4718.9.N528 (ebook) | DDC 894.8/12371—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019020448
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019980990

ISBN: 978-0-367-14418-0 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-429-28805-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

To Anandrao Dholekar (1895–1969), one among the earliest pioneers (1920s) in radio and disc-recording in Bombay-Mumbai, and a highly respected director of Marathi radio plays in his later years. To him and the great city I owe much.

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FOREWORD

Fiction by Indian authors, written in a host of regional languages, reflects the cultural diversity of our country, which often seems to be in danger of extinction in the face of rampant homogeneity that we encounter in virtually every walk of life. Fortunately, over the past few decades, there has been an increasing awareness and curiosity about literature in regional languages. This has thankfully resulted in translations of short stories and books from regional languages into English for wider readership across India and overseas.

We were pleasantly surprised to read Dr. Devadas Pillai's present work, which is a transcreation of Malayalam author Kaaroor Neelakanta Pillai's short stories for an English-reading audience. We must confess that we were unaware of Kaaroor's work until Pillai acquainted us with it. Needless to say, we were enriched by this experience, as several windows opened to allow us to have many a peek into Kerala's culture and lifestyle.

Kaaroor's themes and plots, as it appears from Pillai's transcreation, seem deceptively simple or even mundane in some cases. But the unpredictable twists in the narrative that are quite clearly the work of a master storyteller are there for everyone to experience.

Not only has Pillai brought alive Kaaroor's nuanced narratives for the non-Malayalam speaking readers, but his scholarship as a sociologist guides the latter through the nuances of an unfamiliar terrain. Having organized the stories in neatly divided themes with a clear indexing pattern, he retells the stories or paraphrases them, never for a moment forgetting to intersperse the plots with notes that engage the readers with the wider socio-cultural framework that Kaaroor was portraying. Indeed, that is what motivated him to undertake such an incredibly difficult task, for, without such editorial comments to steer the course, many of the colours and shades from the original writing and its backdrop would have been lost on the readers.

This book does not stop at transcreating the original author's work.

In fact, at critical moments, Dr. Pillai has reproduced dialogues between characters from the original stories like 'Safety Pin,' 'Meenakshi of Madurai,' and 'Wooden Dolls,' which give the readers an idea of the many human relationships that created spaces for such conversations. This works as a powerful tool in depicting the milieu and the matriarchal Nayar society that Kaaroor was reflecting upon in his stories.

But let us not go much further into detail and rob you of the first-hand experience that we are sure you will gain from what has obviously been a labour of love for Dr. Pillai.

We thank him for having undertaken this long journey to bring us closer to Kaaroor's universe of multi-hued emotions – of love, hatred, greed, politics, spiritual pursuits, erotic display, and much more. We wish him and the publishers the very best for the success of this book.

Shubha Mudgal and Aneesh Pradhan

PREFACE

Sociology through literature was among my pet topics in the days when I was within the eye-range of greats like GS Ghurye, KM Kapadia, and AR Desai of the Department of Sociology, Bombay University, from the mid-1950s to early 1970s. All of them encouraged studies of literature from the sociological angle.

Though almost all the leading names from Thakazhi onwards fascinated me, my friend, the late Dr Klaas van der Veen of Amsterdam University, going through my early jottings on Malayalam literature, found some of Kaaroor Neelakanta Pillai's stories very interesting. And that led to this study, which in a small way also answers my desire to get regional literature into the global mainstream.

In my efforts to present Kaaroor to the enlightened common English reader, I have used a method which may be called 'annotated transcreation' which, simply put, tells a tale with sociological add-ons, sans tough technical terms. Perhaps I have been inspired by Malayali Harikatha storytellers like the late Kedamangalam Sadanandan, a stalwart, before arriving at this method.

I am grateful to Ms Shubha Mudgal and Dr Aneesh Pradhan for writing a foreword which confirmed that my methodology has worked. If it didn't, they would have told me so.

This manuscript was peer-reviewed by my former colleague Dr Hans Schenk of Amsterdam University and Sri MK Das, former Editor of *The Indian Express/New Indian Express*, Kerala edition. Their suggestions have certainly added a fresh glow to my script.

I am thankful to my old friend and college-mate Sri I. Chinnappan Menon, of Irinjalakuda, Thrissur District, Kerala, who went through an earlier version of my script very carefully and offered suggestions, and to Dr Kiren Menon, veterinary surgeon, of the same town, for giving me authentic data on mahouts, temple-based tuskers, and the modern use of tranquilizers on rogue jumbos.

At the home base, Dr Rajani Pillai and Dr Veena Pillai went through earlier versions of my script and maintained files over a long period time, which helped me to focus on other academic assignments from time to time. Sri Venugopal and Ms Leena Pillai have been helpful at different stages while finalizing this script.

I am grateful to Dr Shashank Sinha and his staff of Taylor and Francis for their involvement in my work.

SDP
Mumbai
7 May 2019

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INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON THE 'BIG SIX'

Kaaroor Neelakanta Pillai was one of the Big Six front-runners in the 'progressive' literary movement in Kerala. The Six are: Thakazhi, Dev, Varkey, SK Pottekkat, Basheer, and Kaaroor who gave a place to till-then neglected Chatthu, Pappu, Koaran, Suhra, Maria, Tiruma, and Chiruta, along with Menons and Pillais.

Brief notes on the Big Six follow:

The mid-1930s saw new trends in the Indian literary scene. In 1936, a Progressive Writers' Association was set up in Lucknow, headed by the Hindi author Premchand. Soon, some young Malayali writers set up an 'organization for humanist literature' in 1937. In 1944, the same group formed a Progressive Literary Group.[1] Thus by the middle of the 1940s the division between 'old' and 'new' progressive writers became almost clear.

The 'old' here refers to novels and short stories based on British sources familiar to the literati during the colonial times. Universities had full courses in English literature leading to BA and MA degrees. When someone said 'Menon is a Literature MA' it meant English literature, nothing else, and it carried much weight. Some professors who taught English courses were even known with prefixes like 'Shakespeare Sankaran Nair' indicating his grip on the Bard of Avon.

The first Malayalam novel *Kundalatha* (1887) by Appu Nedungadi is an adaptation[2] of Shakespeare's play *Cymbeline*, which was very certainly one of the three Shakespearean plays prescribed for the four-year BA degree course then. [I had it in my BA course, along with poetic pieces from Milton, Browning and Wordsworth. – sdp.]

In 1889 came O. Chandu Menon's novel *Indulekha*, based on a British novel, *Henrietta Temple* (1837) by Lord Beaconsfield. Menon was planning to translate *Henrietta* but later thought of an adaptation for a novel on a Nayar family.[3]

Menon's next work, *Sarada* (1892), again, on a Nayar family, has events that slip away from realism, considering its period, but made good leisure-time reading. Both Nedungadi and Chandu Menon looked upon the British nuclear (patriarchal) family as models and that gave them a very critical view of the mother-based Nayar family. The impact of colonial British culture on 'English-educated' Indians was so strong that they could not see any virtue in the Nayar matriarchal culture.

Chandu Menon, who began as a low-profile desk worker, rose to the position of a legal officer presumably through his contacts with William Logan whom he helped in preparing the *Malabar Manual*. Logan probably guided him to *Henrietta Temple*.

The popularity of both these novels brought out many pot-boilers, barring one or two like *Paternal Uncle's Daughter* (1931), by Bhavatratan Nambootiripad focusing on some issues of his own Nambootiri society.

The works cited earlier came from the Malabar region, then part of the Madras Presidency ruled directly by the British and *not* Travancore and Cochin states under Maharajahs.

In Travancore, the first landmark was a historical novel on a royal personage *Marthanda Varma* (1892) by CV Raman Pillai, followed by some other titles of the same genre paying tribute to the ruling royal lineage. CV's models included the novel *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott.

In Cochin state, a popular novel of the time was Rama Varma Appan Thampuran's *Bhaskara Menon* (1904), inspired by the works of Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar Wallace.

The first Malayalam short story (*c.*1881) is generally credited to Vengayil Kunjiraman Nayanar (1861–1914), of Malabar, followed by five or six others, including Oduvil Kunjikrishna Menon, whose story 'Kalyani-kutty' (the name of the heroine) was a noted piece.

Then came Murkoth Kumaran's story 'Sister-in-law's Ornaments'[4] in which a woman's greed for gold ornaments badly hits the fortunes of a joint family. Here greed as a theme gets a place, perhaps for the first time. Murkoth was from Malabar. Some other stories depicted certain customary ceremonies of the Nayars which, due to show of affluence, slowly pauperized many families. All these 'short' stories were like novelettes depicting romantic tales laced with escapist stuff for leisurely reading.

In Travancore, EV Krishna Pillai (1894–1938), a lawyer, made a mark in short stories and farces which carried his brand of humour, wit, and satire. Malayalam fiction prose then basically meant 'EV' and 'CV' for the 'educated' reader. Some of EV's stories with titles like 'The Arrest of Kaimal,' 'Arrogant Policeman,' and 'Bribe for the Superintendent' were certainly daring efforts in the Maharajah's regime with ruthless Diwans who became de facto rulers.

But leisure-time reading calls for variety and that did exist. For instance, in the 1950s when the Big Six and others were cutting a path for realism,

C. Madhavan Pillai's romantic-escapist novels with his easy-flowing style became quite popular. Many other authors too, some of them 'forgettables,' entered the scene.

In late 1920s journalist and litterateur 'Kesari' Balakrishna Pillai (1889–1960) began to create a landmark with his three consecutive weeklies in Trivandrum, which carried fiery criticism of the Diwan's misrule. He had to quit the first weekly *Samadarsi* (1922–26) under pressure from its owners who feared strong official backlash.

The Diwan then amended rules in such a manner that eventually Balakrishna Pillai had to close down his own second venture *Prabodhakan* (1930) and also the third one *Kesari* (1930–35). His office was raided, and his small, manually operated printing press confiscated.

Along with his dissenting political notes, in both the weeklies, he published notes on French writers who gave birth to realism – a point that remains undisputed. British author Walter Allen says:[5]

> 'In France this was the period after the Revolution and Napoleon. Glory had departed, and the descent was the descent into vulgarity, into everything that could be epitomized in the word bourgeois. Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert were great Romantics, who instead of turning away from the world in disgust, turned towards it in disgust and fought it with its own weapons. In them, realism as an aesthetic creed was born.'

Besides translations of Maupassant's stories, Balakrishna Pillai serialized two novels of the French master – *A Life* and *Good Friend* – in *Prabodhakan* and *Kesari*. He also introduced authors like Stendhal, Prosper Merimee, and Luigi Pirandello to Malayali readers. It is said he was the first to write on Bertrand Russell in Malayalam. And when he translated (1936) Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts,* it became a landmark in the Malayalam literary scene.[6]

In his *Kesari* days, Balakrishna Pillai met a small group of budding writers and thinkers once a week in his office and encouraged them to talk, write, and discuss literature. He advised them to read on advances in behavioural sciences, sexology, and related topics.

Writer Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912–1999) then doing a lawyer's course in Trivandrum, attended Kesari's weekly sessions regularly. What Thakazhi wrote then was often shockingly bold even to some members of the 'Kesari group'. When copies of his short novel *Reward for Sacrifice* (1934) were given to members of the group, one of them in a subsequent session tore it into pieces and flung it on young Thakazhi, calling it utterly obscene. Realism in Malayalam literature was born with this event in Kesari's office.[7] Thakazhi is certainly the first Malayalam realist, Maupassant his model, and 'Kesari' Balakrishna Pillai his guru. EV Krishna Pillai too was in close touch with 'Kesari.'

When his press and weeklies were confiscated, Balakrishna Pillai became almost a pauper and finally left the city – 'inheriting' the prefix 'Kesari' to his name – and settled down in his wife's maternal home in North Paravur, Ernakulam District, where her mother and brother were living.

He never wrote a word on political affairs thereafter, and focused on literature, encouraging young writers to be bold and realistic. He wrote lengthy forewords and book reviews, which were all learned essays opening the doors to world literature brimming with realism and naturalism.

But his income from occasional writings was very limited and his health was sinking while the small forsaken by-lane, near Peruvaram temple, in North Paravur town, leading to his house began to receive literary luminaries and many aspiring writers. [Paravur is my hometown, and I am blessed to have been 'coached' by him for about ten years. He is my first guru. – sdp.]

Today Kesari is called a visionary and is revered as the grandfather-figure of 'modern' Malayalam literature, with roads, lanes, and public halls named after him, a statue in Trivandrum, and a PhD thesis on him. His house in North Paravur is now being turned into a museum. This is stated here to show that in India stalwarts and pioneers have often to pass away in near-penury but are celebrated post-demise.

Prolific Thakazhi continued to write bold stories on marital tangles and the suppressed erotic life of men and women. His noted pieces on other topics include 'The Flood' (noted for its technique, on a dog trapped in the attic during the flood) and 'Tahsildar's Father' (on the neglect of the aged). Later he turned to Pulaya farmers of his region (*Two Measures*, 1948) and those at the social periphery (*The Beggars, Scavenger's Son*, 1947). His *Prawns* (1956; 'Chemmeen,') on a Hindu-Muslim love-theme centered on fisher folk of his region has had many European versions. At the local level, 'Chemmeen' became an immortal Malayalam film (with Salil Chaudhuri's fine music).

Thakazhi's eminence peaked with *Kayar* (*Coir*, 1978), with a Jnanpith crown, which tries to document some aspects of the social history of Travancore till the 1950s. Its basic material was drawn from many old legal documents that Thakazhi went through as a lawyer for decades on behalf of clients who filed suits on landed property matters.

P. Kesavadev (1905–1983), who dropped his last name 'Pillai' due to the influence of Arya Samaj, was actively involved in problems of the working class, and had a hot streak of protest in him running through most of his works. He chose the title *Protest* for his auto-biography – which has flashes of social history of the Nayars. Dev was jailed for his political protest during the Maharajah's regime.

Along with some of his short stories, his short novel *From the Gutter* (1942) gave him a pedestal. It features a rickshaw puller who adopts a baby abandoned in a gutter and brings her up well. In *Actress* (1951), the indignities a girl had to face when she joined a professional drama unit is the theme while

in *Neighbours* (1963), the focus is on the steep fall of a once well-off Nayar joint family and the rise of other groups like the Ezhavas. This work shows Dev's sharper sense of social history acquired in his senior years.

Though swayed by Marxism at the start, he became its fiery opponent when the 'Calcutta Thesis' (1948), presented by Bombay's BT Ranadive, advocated violence to overthrow the presiding social system. The Communist Party of India (CPI) gradually split on this issue and the CPM (Marxist) was born which toed the extremist line.

In many parts of Kerala, extremists took to political violence and murders. The rich were intimidated, looted, and even knifed in some regions. In Edapally, near Kochi city, a police station was set on fire. The police then became very brutal, and custodial deaths were often heard of.

Dev who had earlier written on Marx and Lenin in his *Fire and Flame*, with Karl Marx as the *Fire* and Lenin as the *Flame*, was disgusted with Stalin's rule, which he said was a variety of Nambootiri Brahmin feudalism. He protested with stories like 'Don't kill, Brother! Don't kill.' His caustic sarcasm bubbles up in the play *Rains There, Umbrellas Here* (1956) in which Comrade Sankaran, now Sankara-novich, says:

'Comrades, when it rains in Russia, the working class
in other parts of the world have to open their umbrellas.
It is a historical necessity!'

In the same play, Thomas becomes Thoma-sky, Narayani is Narayani-yovna, and Madhavan is Madhava-sky. Brilliant lampooning indeed, which continued in his short political plays like '*I'll Become a Communist Just Now*' – a strong threat flung by someone in a serious dispute with someone else. This implied that when you become a Communist, you can be violent and do anything illegal and unlawful. Dev's anti-Communist stand became valid when the violent Naxalite movement took shape in the mid-1960s.

The early stories of Ponkunnam Varkey (1910–2004) are on the hill-side farmer, certain failings of the Catholic clergy (which include financial greed), and political protest.

In 'That Banana Massacre,' when a certain virulent epidemic hit banana farms in the hills, the Diwan sent squads to eradicate them all, and farmers became paupers almost overnight. Pesticides and farmer relief measures were out of question then. And as the squad was heroically doing its job, a farmer woman yelled:

'My father too has some disease, why don't you cut him also?'

Another very touching piece is 'The Lonely Plough' narrating the bond between farmer Ouseph and his dear bull named Kannan whom he had to sell to meet his daughter's marriage expenses.

His stories on sexual aberration and worldly greed among Catholic priests provoked predictable reactions from his Church, and he suffered very severely by being almost isolated by his brethren. His characters like Fr Fotkot (in 'Nonsense') and Fr Tieler (in 'Anthony, You Too a Priest?') are memorable.

Today (2019) he stands vindicated as the Pope very recently had to issue a stern note on 'priestly sexual abuse and its cover-up' in many parts of the world.[8] Varkey was *never* against his Church or religion: he merely opposed 'Church religion' as dictated by the clergy.

Varkey condemned imposed celibacy, be it on the clergy or ordinary men and women, as it generated hypocrisy. Story titles in this group include 'From the Darkness,' 'Tuition,' 'Blows in the Dark,' and 'Stud Bull.'

His days in jail for his protest against the princely misrule, presided over by an autocratic Diwan, spurred the creation of some pieces on torture techniques to extract a confession.

When he found that the first Congress government too merely carried forward the earlier culture of misrule, he opposed it bitterly through narratives like 'Sunday Slippers' and 'Torture Van,' his term for a police van.

Varkey developed an open style of protest, often wrote like a propagandist, and never bothered much about refined techniques in story-writing. He was in demand as a speaker in gatherings of young men and women. He wrote some plays too. Varkey's clergy stories inspired Ponjikkara Rafi and to some extent Perunna KV Thomas to write on the same lines.

Vaikom Mohammad Basheer (1908–94) added a paragraph to realism with his famous novel *Childhood Sweetheart* (1944), a tragic love story, the first Malayalam work to have Muslim characters. He became severely controversial when his *Voices* (1947) featured late-night life in a metropolis where even male prostitutes roamed about. And Kesari who wrote a foreword to it was accused of promoting 'gutter realism' by the 'old' school.

Basheer later took to a serio-comic style with topics like triple talaq (in *Law and Justice*), 'The Laughing Wooden Doll' (featuring a much-married Mammu Haji), and serio-comic characters like Mookken (in 'World Famous Nose'), 'Foolish Mustafa,' 'Gambler's Daughter' (1951), 'Spider Mammoonj,' and 'Bandicoot Avaraan (Abraham)' doing crazy things like Laurel and Hardy. But there is a serious under-current of social purpose in all of them.

A Muslim woman has a one-line claim to her aristocratic lineage (now in straits!) when she says *My Grandpa Had an Elephant*! (1951; a novelette). In *Pathumma's Goat* (1959), there is nudging poverty behind those 'decent' curtains in her large family. His 'Walls' (1989), a prison story, is a critics' favourite. Today he stands tall for his almost unique style, humour, and social orientation.

SK Pottekkat (1913–82), surprisingly, is the only one among the 'Big Six' from Malabar, a region which earlier produced novels and short stories.

Pottekkat, who stands apart in style and content from the other five, was fond of travelling, wrote prose like a poet, visited many countries like a Malayali ambassador, and reported back through his travelogue series that re-defined this genre in Malayalam literature. Unlike earlier travel writers who often stood at the centre of their narratives, Sankaran Kutty Pottekkat slipped into the periphery like a movie cameraman and did his job.

His pen thirsted for romantic episodes with a plot carrying one or two twists and turns. In *Dotted Deer*, a woman who loved a deer-hunter manipulates a situation to get him killed by his own bullet when she finds him drifting towards her sister. In 'Victory,' the woman liquidates her unfaithful lover.

In 'Night Queen,' a teenager with an obsession for a girl sits under a garden tree, with flowers spraying fragrance at night-time, to watch her in her room till her lights go off. He visits that spot regularly at night but is shocked to learn one day that someone found a cobra's pit under its roots. That was where he was dreaming – sitting almost over the hood of a cobra!

Pottekkat often made well-etched characters like Onakkan a mail 'runner' and Ukkunni Nair with a 'black' tongue. Once 'Runner' Onakkan, unable to stand his loss of role when a bus began to carry mail bags, charged against the vehicle – the machine which made him jobless – and that was his end. (Kaaroor too has referred to a Runner.)

Ukkunni Nair, fond of wagging and silently proud of his black tongue's powers of prediction, becomes a victim of his own words.

In 'The Time Piece,' the butler of an eccentric European manager of a coir factory in Malabar tells buxom Maata, a worker, to smuggle out the manager's time-piece, a curio then, by shoving it between her flourishing breasts. A cloth piece over her blouse hid the bulge till the security gate when suddenly the alarm struck! Maata covered her face in shame and fear, she was dragged to the boss, and the rumours 'confirmed' she would be arrested.

But the quirky 'white man' gave a stern look, took back the time-piece, let her go, soon married her, and led a happy life for ten years till she died of small pox. Unable to contain his grief, and having no children, he left the place after donating his entire property to Maata's mother. This piece is quite significant as it represents European entrepreneurs marrying poor Malayali women who later became village elites by inheriting small bungalows and farms in Malabar.

Pottekat's *Village Romance* is an ordinary love story raised to poetic heights that match the lush greenery of Malabar while *The Veil* has a Hindu-Muslim affair in the tense Indo-Pakistan Partition days of 1947.

His novel *Venomous Maid* (1948) is on the hordes of Christian migrants who 'invaded' Malabar from Travancore, perhaps the biggest wave of migration in South India. Some of them prospered by buying cheap acres on mountain slopes, owned by Nayar and Nambootiri families, while many perished with malaria.

As Pottekat puts it, the migrants were scared of three P's – Panni (pigs), Pulleh (grass), and Pani (malaria). Wild pigs destroyed their crops at night while a species of virulent grass on the slopes refused to be weeded out totally. Here the 'venomous maid' is the earth itself, which 'let loose' malaria mosquitoes which killed most of those who defaced her looks and body.

Running parallel is the story of 'venomous' Madhavi trying to seduce simpleton Anthony, even using black magic. There are many others in this brilliant work, which would have been qualified for the nation's highest award, the Jnanpith (which did not exist then).

Pottekkat's *Tale of a Street* and its bigger 'version' *Tales of Athiranippadam* (a Jnanpith awardee) – both packed with memories of his early life in his village which has now 'modernized' with all its positive and negative aspects – boosted his stature further. [An English version of *Athiranippadam* by Sreedevi K. Nair and Radhika P. Menon is available.]

During Kaaroor's birth centenary (1998), an admirer S. Harikrishnan named him 'Head Master of the Short Story.'[9] The reference is to Kaaroor's lifetime career as a school teacher, his contribution to the genre of 'Sir stories,' his cautious use of language like a teacher, and his overall desire to be away from controversies. He retired from his post in Feb 1953.

Born on 22 Feb 1898 in the Siva temple town of Ettumanur in Kottayam Dist, Kaaroor passed away on 30 Sept 1975, at the age of 77, in Kottayam town where he lived for many decades.

Kaaroor wrote on things he saw or experienced or that were brought to his notice during his days in Alappuzha, Muvattupuzha, Kottayam, and some other places where he lived as a teacher-on-transfer. Many of his early pieces were routine stuff, some were just pot-boilers. Perhaps this is so with some other 'biggies' as well.

Most of his romantic and mildly erotic pieces came out after he retired as he probably didn't want his students to read his inner thoughts. This defines part of his in-drawn personality.

But there was also a silent dissenter within him. He was among those who led a teachers' strike demanding pay rise. The Maharajah's government instantly dismissed him, but he was reinstated after a year on appeal and re-appeals.

During this break, he took to the coir business in Alappuzha but left it as he found it ridden with corrupt ways. His coir days produced 'Husk and Husband' – a silent tribute to poor women who struggled and contributed to the coir heritage of Kerala – and 'Tough Ropes,' a classic.

Leaving coir, he took to cardamom farming in the eastern hills, and that created 'A Cardamom Story' and 'Not So Spicy.'

In 'Viceroy is Coming!' and 'Shelter for Beggars' there is crude poverty and lively raw street dialogue. He was probably the first to write on a Pulaya farmer (in 'That Day's Wages,' 1945; not discussed in this study).

His 'Bhrasht,' 'Poovan Banana,' and 'Missing Ring' (all three on widowed Nambootiri women), 'A Handful of Earth' and 'Ten Acres' have a high degree of social content while 'Wooden Dolls,' 'Stone Cutters,' 'A Martyr is Born,' 'Tough Ropes,' and 'Nights of Carlos' bring out a world-class storyteller with remarkable grip on the techniques of short story writing – like 'concentration,' 'economy of expression' (sometimes too much of it), and 'deep resonance' ('dhwani' in Sanskrit). He wrote at least 15 world-class stories and many more first-rate pieces, but they are in Malayalam, which means they didn't get the exposure they deserved.[10]

Notes

1 M. Achuthan, *The Short Story – Yesterday, Today* (Kottayam, Kerala, 1978 ed.), p. 131.
2 K. M. Tharakan, *A History of the Malayalam Novel* (Thrissur, Kerala, 1978), pp. 18–19. [Note: In 1864, a missionary, Mrs Collins of the Christian Mission Society (CMS) wrote an English novel *Slayer Slain* on a Pulaya, an 'untouchable,' who becomes a Syrian Christian but when he finds his caste status unchanged the CMS group 'shows him the way' for peace. Though translated into Malayalam, and considered by some as the first Malayalam novel, I feel it does not become a Malayalam novel: it is an English novel *on* a Malayali theme (and has a sectarian flag over it). This aside, one is reminded of Pearl Buck's celebrated *Good Earth* which is an English novel set in China, and not a Chinese novel – sdp.]
3 K. M. Tharakan, *ibid*, p. 23.
4 M. Achuthan, (*see* Note 1), p. 66.
5 Walter Allen, *The English Novel*: *A Short Critical History* (Pelican: Harmondsworth, 1958 ed.), p. 140
6 C. Achutha Menon, 'Malayalam Drama: A Brief Survey of Its Origin and Development', in *Malayalam Literary Survey*, vol. 3:1 (Jan–Mar 1979), p. 11; Ayyappa. Paniker, *A Short History of Malayalam Literature* (Trivandrum, Kerala, 1978 reprint)
7 Stated in Thakazhi's preface to *Thakazhi's Early Novels* (Mal: Kottayam, Kerala, 1977). (Reprints of Thakazhi's three early small novels.) *Note:* Trivandrum is now Thiruvananthapuram.
8 Report in *The Times of India*, Mumbai, of 20 Aug 2018. Recent headlines: 'Kerala priest gets 20 years in jail for raping and impregnating minor girl'; 'Pope defrocks former US cardinal over sexual abuse,' both in *Times of India*, Mumbai, 17 Feb 2019.
9 S. Harikrishnan, 'Headmaster of the Short Story', in *Malayala Manorama* (daily), (Kottayam, Kerala, 22 Feb 1998).
10 Kaaroor, along with MP Paul and some others, set-up a co-operative society owned by writers in March 1945, in Kottayam, for publishing books, till then a monopolistic activity of the private sector. Daniel C. Kizhakkemuri ('DC'), noted columnist, merged his National Book Stall with the co-op a little later, and the combine flourished. The writers' co-op, which continues to play its role, is certainly a big contribution of Kaaroor and his immediate supporters. [Kaaroor, in his younger days, had promoted co-ops in his home town.]

2

ROMANTIC OVERTONES

In common literary parlance, what are known as 'love stories' are placed here. Love stories finally are episodes of searching for a mate. Kaaroor was never serious about love stories, but some from the few he wrote in this genre bring in some other facets of social life as well.

Hidden attraction rules the story 'Safety Pin.' A young school teacher has regular lunch in a house near his school. One of his friends made this arrangement. Raaman and two other children from this family are in his school.

The teacher is served lunch day after day by Thankamma, but there is hardly any talk between them. There is that traditional barrier between a young man and a young woman, that too between a 'Sir' and an 'ordinary' woman. But the curtain between them intensified mutual attraction. A holiday during the week was unwelcome. He would dream of touching her hands when she served food with an endearing smile.

Sometimes the senior woman – Raaman's mother – would chat with him and he comes to know gradually that Thankamma is her elder sister's daughter. She died three weeks after baby Thankamma's birth and in the almost natural course the baby grew up here in this house.

All such talks brought Sir close to the family. He began to take extra care of his dress and looks, and often fantasized his relationship with Thankamma. He has compulsive youth stirring him up, but he was careful not to hurt the image of a respected Sir (or Saar colloquially).

One day when the senior woman wasn't there he musters courage to ask:

'Where is your aunt?'
'She's gone to attend a wedding feast.'
He feels bad that she missed a wedding event because of him.
'You should have told me that I shouldn't come in for lunch today.'
'I can never say that you shouldn't come in.'
'So you like me coming here?'
'That's why I stayed back.'

'But how long can you stay back?'
'Saar, if you come in daily, I'll be here daily.'
'How could that be? Some day you'll get married and go away.'
'No, that won't happen.'

She pretends to smile while trying to control her tear drops. Sir feels guilty of causing those tear drops, and thinks they are valuable indicators. And he stays on to continue the talk for a while more. She washes her face and pours out – that four years ago she got married to an elderly person!

Now Sir feels miserable – is she a widow? No. She says he comes in usually in the evenings.

During the daytime, he is often in his tarawaad, his (matrilineal) root family, where he probably has married sisters. Some days he might prefer to stay on there. She tells Sir that he had met 'him' once briefly.

He recollects that scene. There was someone sitting on the verandah, who asked him if he was the 'Saar' who came in for lunch daily. After meeting Sir, he took his umbrella and walked away. Thankamma's aunt followed him till the gate to see him off. He had brought with him some gold ornaments for Thankamma, but she didn't want to meet him, so she went into hiding in the attic. She didn't want any gift from him, so took them back along with his umbrella.

She continues: His parental sources decided that he should not remain unmarried, that he should have someone with him in his senior years. They also wanted his share of property to be inherited by someone.

Thankamma understands the scenario of her husband's family. In the same vein, Sir now understands that her longing glances meant:

'Saar, why didn't you meet me earlier?'

He wants to comfort her, to wean her away from her vacuous state. But that is wishful thinking, he feels.

On some other day, when he came in for lunch, Thankamma said she liked the long 'safety pin' that he used on his shirt pleat. It was a 'rolled-gold' pin, a neck-tie pin, locally called 'safety pin.' Many women in Kerala used such pins on the shoulder to fix their sarees to their blouse. Some still do and call it 'broach' (whatever that means).

'Will you buy such a pin for me? I will of course pay.'

He was thrilled she asked for such a pin, not expensive, when on the other side she was indifferent to the costly gifts from her husband. Impulsively, he told her he would gift the pin he was wearing. No, she said, it looked nice

on him. For a moment, he thought of forcing her to accept that pin but was scared of scandals.

After a month or so, Sir had to leave the school. Now, transferred to another place, he is thinking of those days. He should have lovingly forced her to accept his pin. She would have preserved it, adored it, disregarding the breath of scandal. Now there is no pin, only pin-pricks.

An unseen point here is this: joint family sentiments took care of Thankamma, but how long will they maintain her? She has to be 'entrusted' to somebody – as the folks say – before she goes the 'wrong way.' And, her status being what it was, she could not have protested when a senior man was brought in as her mate. A social scientist would see this aspect of the joint family that took care of a motherless baby for years and even arranged for her marriage. It is another story that she might have been treated as an unpaid servant of the family.

'Meenakshi of Madurai' is a first-person account, so we may call him Gopala Pillai. His mother has been planning a visit to Madurai, the city known for its grand 17th-century temple with arresting sculptural pieces, dedicated to goddess Meenakshi, a version of goddess Parvati.

Now Pillai is taking his mother and sister to Madurai. His matron-like mother gives her daughter a series of last-minute instructions before finally locking the house. And Pillai is sure they are going to miss the train, and it happened. Now they are waiting for the next train.

This is Amma's first train journey. The train has entered the platform, but just then she is worried whether they would get drinking water in the compartment. So why not drink some water 'from a *Brahmin* tea stall'?

Son Pillai gets annoyed, but Amma wonders – won't the train wait when someone wants to drink water?

This is what happens when 'you don't get out of the house' (on some journey), says son. Amma retorts:

'So, you think I am the sort of person going about
aimlessly? You know everything, no? So, if someone
asks me something, I will say ask my son who knows everything.'

Amma is now in the compartment, surveying the scene, crowded with many ill-clad poor women at the entrance. There is a lot of noise, and luggage here and there. She doesn't like the atmosphere.

'With all your (worldly) knowledge, you could not find
any other better train for this journey? I am going to get down at the next stop.'

Son tells her we cannot get a train with passengers whom we like, so during a journey we have to tolerate many things.