

Love and Marriage Across Communal Barriers: A Note on Hindu-Muslim Relationship in Three Malayalam Novels

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If marriages were made in heaven, the humans would not have much work to do in this world. But fortunately or unfortunately marriages continue to be a matter of grave concern not only for individuals before, during, and/or after matrimony, but also for social and religious groups. Marriages do create problems, but many look upon them as capable of solving problems too. To the poet's saying about the course of true love, we might add that there are forces that do not allow the smooth running of the course of true love. Yet those who believe in love as a panacea for all personal and social ills recommend it as a sure means of achieving social and religious integration across caste and communal barriers. In a poem written against the backdrop of the 1921 Moplah Rebellion in Malabar, the Malayalam poet Kumaran Asan presents a futuristic Brahmin-Chandala or Nambudiri-Pulaya marriage. To him this was *advaita* in practice, although in that poem this vision of unity is not extended to the Muslims. In Malayalam fiction, however, the theme of love and marriage between Hindus and Muslims keeps recurring, although portrayals of the successful working of inter-communal marriages are very rare.

This article tries to focus on three novels in Malayalam in which this theme of Hindu-Muslim relationship is presented either as the pivotal or as a minor concern. In all the three cases love flourishes, but marriage is forestalled by unfavourable circumstances. Whether the boy is Hindu or Muslim, there is something to impede the progress and fulfilment of love. Love in the sense of romantic attachment during childhood or adolescence blossoms, but marriage is not the fruit it yields. Sometimes love is only on one side, at other times it is fully reciprocated. Love may be pre-marital or extra-marital but the social structure or fate or psychological difficulties intervenes to frustrate the romantic dream. The communal barrier may not be the sole cause of this frustration. In a society like ours, there will be no dearth of reasons for failure. The three novels selected for discussion, *Martanda Varma* (1891) by C.V. Raman Pillai, *Chemmeen* (1956) by Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, and *Ummachu* (1955) by P.C. Kuttikrishnan, illustrate three types of disruption or failure of connection.

Martanda Varma is a historical novel based on events that relate to the early eighteenth century. The struggles of the young prince and heir-

apparent Martanda Varma to come to power against the opposition of his cousins Pappu Tampi and Raman Tampi aided by eight feudal chiefs form the plot of the novel. A young lieutenant of the Prince is hacked down by the ruthless mercenaries of the Tampis in Chapter 1, but he is saved by the timely arrival on the scene of Hakim and his people. The young man, Anantapadmanabhan, is taken to the Muslim camp and nursed back to life and health by the medical care he receives from Hakim and by the love and affection of his family, especially the young girl Zuleikha. Anantapadmanabhan is fully recovered, but for political reasons lives in disguise as Shamsudin instead of returning home. His father Tirumukhathu Pillai believes the story circulated by the Tampis that he has been killed by the agents of Martanda Varma. But his fiancée Parukutti still cherishes the hope that he will return to marry her. Hence, she resists all attempts to get her married to Pappu Tampi. Anantapadmanabhan assumes many guises and engages himself in activities to save the Prince from dangerous situations. He is not aware that Zuleikha is deeply in love with him. Beiram Khan, a convert to Islam, is also at the camp of the Pathans. Earlier he had married Subhadra, the daughter of Tirumakhatu Pillai by his first wife and hence Anantapadmanabhan's step-sister, but her identity comes to light only at the end of the novel. Although she is the niece of Kudaman Pillai, one of the eight feudal chiefs opposed to the young prince, she is sympathetic to the prince and in an attempt to help him save his life gets killed at the hands of her own uncle. Only at the moment of death does she discover that her husband who got estranged from her through the machinations of Pappu Tampi and his agents is still alive but married to the Muslim woman Fatima. Her dying words addressed to Beiram Khan are: "Don't deceive that poor woman [Fatima] too." Zuleikha quietly withdraws her claims on Anantapadmanabhan and chooses to remain single when she comes to understand that he was already attached to Parukutti. Chapter 16 of the novel is a beautiful account of the Muslim family household, one of the earliest and most authentic descriptions of Muslim life in Malayalam fiction. It may be said of the two Hindu-Muslim couples in the story, one does not enjoy the fruits of matrimony while the other is saved at a critical moment either by providential intervention or perhaps by the novelist, as it were. There is a close resemblance between Zuleikha-Shamsudin (alias Anantapadmanabhan) and Ayesha-Jagat Singh in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Durgeshanandini*. But in *Martanda Varma*, Hindu-Muslim relationship is not reduced to the biological attraction between a man and a woman of two different religions. The parental affection that Hakim feels for Shamsudin and the fraternal attachment of Nurudin for him are also portrayed with extreme sensitivity. Old Hakim, equally concerned about Shamsudin and Zuleikha, speaks his thought aloud:

When I look up Shamsudin, my anger melts like the morning mists before sunrise. But something has taken the cheer out of that boy's life.

Some secret worry is eating into his heart like a cancer. I am sure, he will fall ill. Biram, you must play the spy for me. See if Shamsudin is with Zuleikha, and if he is, see what they are talking about. If not, tell some plausible story to her for her peace of mind. (Bhaskara Menon's translation, 1936)

Zuleikha's acceptance of single blessedness for the rest of her life, though perhaps idealised a bit, is not ununderstandable; it is the novelist's aim to present Muslim characters in a favourable light.

The second novel I wish to discuss here is Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen*. Here the woman is Hindu. Karuthamma is of the fisherman stock. The man, Pareekutty, is Muslim. It is once again a story of childhood affection maturing into adult love. Despite the financial indebtedness to Pareekutty, the girl's father considers religion and caste to be more important and marries off Karuthamma to Palani, a young fisherman. Even after marriage Karuthamma and Pareekutty continue to be attached to each other. In the night of her husband Palani's tragedy in the outer sea Karuthamma and Pareekutty meet and their bodies are washed ashore the next day. Against the backdrop of the fisherfolk's superstition that the life of a fisherman who goes out into the sea depends on the chastity of his wife at home, the woman and her two men die at the fatal hands of the sea. In addition to caste/religion Thakazhi highlights the role of economic matters as responsible for the gruesomeness of the tragedy; but ultimately fate seems to have a final say in all such matters. It is the psychological union that spelt the doom of the lovers at the end; their spiritual or psychological attachment had continued long after the woman's marriage.

The third novel is P.C. Kuttikrishnan's *Ummachu* (translated into English and published under the title *The Beloved*). Here too the woman is Muslim, Ummachu, but her true lover is the Hindu Chappunni Nair. It is again a case of physical attachment transcended by a kind of selfless brotherly affection. The idealisation of the character of Chappunni Nair is one of the basic requisites of the story. It was already a precondition of the novel. The innocent games of the young playmates turn into activities of adults as they grow up and even when Ummachu loses her husband, Chappunni has to continue to play the role of a friend and repress his real feelings for her. Love matures into friendship. This too is a kind of idealisation, yet the basis for the experiences narrated is a genuine concern for social realities. One doesn't have to be particularly conservative to rule out the possibility of a matrimonial alliance between members of different religious communities. It is the order of the day and both Ummachu and Chappunni seem to accept the option of friendship bypassing love and marriage. P.C. Kuttikrishnan, the author, does not quite stop with that. He moves on to the next generation. Ummachu's son Abdu and Chappunni Nair's daughter Chinnammu are not prepared to surrender themselves to the prejudices of the two communities. They make bold to unite in wedding

and decide to face the music. And there is some music, of course. Chappunni Nair himself is upset; Ummachu is apologetic. But the novel does not end in that tone of despair. The turn of the course of events on the last page is brought about by the cry of a child, the child of Abdu and Chinnammu. The scandal-mongers had lost in the affair. Chappunni Nair could hear the cry of the infant when he went to see Ummachu on some errand. The voice of the narrator undergoes a change in modulation to herald this new turn.

He [Chappunni Nair] went out of the room. But that new-born infant was still crying. That great perfect call of life was pulling him like a magnet in a strange and mysterious direction. But the Moopil Nair in him would not be moved. He came to the porch. Suddenly an image of Lakshmi with the infant Chinnammu in her lap appeared before his mind's eye. In all his past there was no more heart-warming event than this picture in his home of the mother and daughter. Was that moment returning again? Was Chinnammu also sitting legs extended to the floor, and the little infant lying in the timeless comfort of the mother's lap? That father stood lost in thought. Yet he took a step forward. Again that cry came loud, demanding, insistent, and in his ears like the crying of a sea-shell, that cry echoed back and forth in his soul.

In *Martanda Varma* and *Chemmeen* Hindu-Muslim lovers are unable to reach perfect fulfilment, but the union of the inner spirits is emphasised beyond any doubt. In the former, one of the pairs bears witness to a one-sided love; but Zuleikha opts for singleness. The other pair makes a success of marriage, despite the underlying sense of grief. Both Subhadra and Zuleikha are losers in the world's eye; they exemplify the transcendental quality of real love. In *Chemmeen* the lovers sacrifice their lives along with the death of the woman's husband. In all these cases, the tragedy of the lovers is not entirely the direct consequence of their being Hindu and Muslim. Shamsudin-Anantapadmanabhan was attached to Pareekutty, hence he could not accept Zuleikha. The latter being a Muslim is not the only reason for her failure. In *Chemmeen* Karuthamma could not marry Pareekutty at least partially because of his being a Muslim, but the multiple tragedy is occasioned by a complex of factors. In *Ummachu* the parental pair could not achieve matrimony because of communal difference, but they accepted the injunctions of the society. But the next generation being more secular in their views refuses to surrender their feelings to social taboos. They defy them and get married. Their parents could not easily accept this violation of the norms imposed by society. But the instinctive urges of humans reveal the tendency to bring them around.

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COMPARATIVE LITERATURE THEORY AND PRACTICE

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