S.K. Pottekkatt (1913-1982), short-story writer, playwright, novelist and poet was a unique phenomenon in Malayalam literature.

Adept in the art of story-telling, his plots invariably carry an element of surprise. At the end, the reader is left pondering over the terrible ironies that underlie human relations and the mysteries that lurk behind man's impulses and actions.

His travelogues, as exciting as his short stories, present a queer blend of personal impressions, anecdotes, and interesting information.

Pottekkatt's plays are the by-products of his short stories. They are rich in dramatic situations of tension and suspense.

His poems are simple and direct. To him poetry is the expression of noble sentiments in a lofty style.

Pottekkatt is, however, full in the elements in his novels. A keen observer is men's physiognomy, mannerisms and habits, he always uses the aptest metaphors to describe them.

R. Viswanathan (b. 1942), the author of this monograph, is currently Reader in English a
poet and critic both in Malayalan
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journals, in India and abroad.

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R. VISWANATHAN

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The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From : Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.

MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

POTTEKKATT

R. VISWANATHAN

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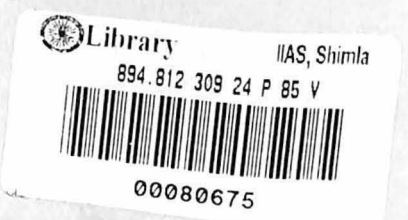

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Contents

1

The Man and His Town

He was very much a man of that town. In the evenings you would often find him on his routine stroll along Pavamani Road or Sweet Meat Street or he would be with his friends at a tea stall recounting to them his varied experiences in the island of Bali. If he did not turn up for a few days at a stretch his friends would always guess right: He was away in Africa or Europe and would return in a few months with a bagful of yarns, jokes and anecdotes.

Stout, sturdy, short and dark, he always managed to put on a spruced-up look with his hair kept well combed and face clean-shaven. An easy smile would curl below his moustache at the sight of friends. His cheek-bones were markedly prominent and looked like strong frames within which the face was enclosed. He walked briskly, and even when he halted it looked as though he had some unspent impulse for mobility still left in him. He was Pottekkatt, a familiar figure to the towns-folk. His friends fondly called him by his initials 'S.K.' Others knew him as their author, as the romantic artist of the breath-taking love story of *Pulliman* (The Spotted Deer). To the common people he was also a social worker, one with strong proletarian sympathies, one who found his way to the Parliament House.

Pottekkatt belonged to that town, and the town belonged to him. The bond was intimate, life-long. He grew up watching it grow.

Calicut, perched on the coast of the Arabian Sea, is a town that once created history. It was the capital of the Zamorins, and its coconut palms greeted and cheered the Portuguese sailor as he first caught sight of his destination. The Arabs had arrived

even earlier. Later, there were rivalries and bloody encounters between the foreign tradesmen. The rest of the story is well-known, and even though the scene gradually shifted to Calcutta, Delhi and other places with the mounting of the colonial drama to its climax, Calicut was still the beginning of it all. Yet strangely enough, very little of the history of Calicut survives in relics, ruins or monuments. There are no imposing palaces, statues or tombs in the town to remind one of its aura of history. But its legends still linger in the air, and though one cannot detect its past in the present, one can still breathe it and absorb it through long associations with it. That of course entails living in the town and becoming a part of it.

Pottekkatt was a child of Calicut, and it aroused in him a passion for history. As a boy he spent hours watching the sea. The waves brought home memories of by-gone times; they spoke of the Arabs, the Portuguese and the great Kunjalis who guarded the Malabar coast. The railway lines reminded him of the British collectors who lived in the town. Almost every family had a stock of legends and stories which came down to it through oral tradition. Pottekkatt grew up assimilating them but he wanted to know more about those foreigners who once traded with his town and changed the course of its destiny. He wanted to be a Gama himself. This historical curiosity was something that he could not easily contain or control. It pulled him out of his town and threw him into ships bound for far-off lands—Africa, Europe and South-East Asia.

Besides a love of history Calicut kindled in him a genuine concern for the working classes. Calicut has been, from very early times, a fabled centre of timber trade. A river frills its southern border. On the banks of the river can still be seen a cluster of saw mills. In the first half of this century, workers employed in the saw-mills formed a considerable section of the town's population. Two factors shaped their attitude to life in general. One was the sudden fluctuations in the fortunes of the rich mill owners. The other was Arab gold, at once a myth and a reality. The myth consisted in a popular belief that one could become rich overnight by acting as a middleman in the selling of smuggled gold. It was a reality as well because there were stories of gold connected with the sudden ascent of some men into a life of affluence and social prominence. These ironic

reversals of fortune in the lives of businessmen had a great impact upon society, especially the working classes. They became sceptical about a planned austere life of frugal habits. They led an easy care-free life spending whatever they earned and saving very little for the future. They were human and broadly accommodating in their views though they lacked intellectual refinement. They quarrelled among themselves and often turned violent but patched up all misunderstandings over a cup of tea or a glass of toddy. Their frolicking ways, violent brawls, nocturnal encounters and drunken orgies fascinated Pottekkatt. He observed them closely and wove legends around them, and this resulted in two of his best novels: *Oru Theruvinte Katha* (A Street's Story) and *Oru Desanthinte Katha* (The Story of a Locale).

Calicut has changed a great deal over the years. During Pottekkatt's boyhood some zones or "desams" of the town had an identity of their own. A countryside atmosphere prevailed in them. The families that lived there knew one another intimately. Even a trifling event spread like wild fire. Almost every man and woman had a pet-name or a nick-name. Hindus and Muslims generally lived in great amity and harmony. The whole community was bound together by some common codes of beliefs and ethics. After the emergence of Kerala as a State, Calicut underwent rapid changes not only in external appearance but in all spheres of life. The zones or 'desams' lost their identity. Many families left the town and new-comers crept in. The old intimacy between neighbours and the sense of oneness felt by all the inhabitants of a 'desam' were lost. Pottekkatt was sensitive to these transitions. He faced them with a sense of regret, a sigh of nostalgia. He felt alienated in the new environment. This sense of the loss of belonging and the regret over the disintegration of his own 'desam' lends a melancholic colouring and tragic poise to the last part of *Oru Desanthinte Katha*.

II

Sankaran Kutty Pottekkatt was born on March 13, 1913. His father, Kunjiraman, was a well-known English teacher. Sankaran Kutty had his early education at Hindu School and Zamorin's High School. He completed the intermediate course of the University of Madras in 1934, as a student of Zamorin's

College. Thereafter for nearly three years he idled unable to secure a suitable job. All the same, he did some substantial reading in classics, both Indian and Western, and this laid the foundation for a career in literature. For a couple of years, i.e., from 1937 to 1939, he served as a teacher at Calicut Gujarathi School. He was seized by a strong desire to participate in the Tripura Congress (1939), and this entailed quitting his school job. After the Conference he went to Bombay and took up a number of jobs one after another. Very soon he developed an aversion to all types of white-collared jobs. He returned to Kerala in 1945 with a firm resolve that he would thenceforth earn a living never as a clerk or as an officer but only as a creative writer. He had already made a mark in literature with some short stories and his first novel, *Natan Premam* (Country Love) in the 1930's. In the 40's he established himself as one of the leading writers of fiction in Malayalam. He combined the zeal for writing with a zest for travel. In 1945, he visited Kashmir, and the following year he undertook a long tour of eighteen months in Africa and Europe. With the publication of *Kappirikalude Nattil* (In the Land of the Negroes) and *Innathe Europe* (Europe Today) he emerged as the foremost writer of travels in Malayalam.

The year 1952 was a turning point in his life. He got married that year and settled down with his wife Jayavalli at Puthiyara in Calicut. The same year he travelled with her in Ceylon, Malayasia and Indonesia. Five years later chance took him again to some parts of Europe—Finland, Czechoslavakia and Russia. Back home, he sought election to Parliament from Tellicherry. He lost in that contest. But he did not give up hope; he contested again in 1962 and was elected.

His was a happy marriage. Jayavalli bore him four children —two sons and two daughters. Her sudden death in 1980 left a big vacuum in his life. He was not the same cheerful man afterwards. His health deteriorated, and though he still had plans to write a few books, including a novel, he could not concentrate his attention on any literary project. In July 1982 he was hospitalised following a paralytic stroke. He died on August 6, 1982.

III

He was a very interesting character like some of his own fictional creations. His principles, actions, habits and his life style itself in general encompassed a number of amusing paradoxes. He was a wanderer through life who found a thrill in drifting from coast to coast, and yet he lived a life of domestic peace and contentment with his wife and children. He was scrupulously methodical in some of his habits. He felt uneasy for the whole day if he did not shave and bathe in the morning. After the shave he always entered the date on the cover of the blade. He filed the reviews of his published stories and novels very systematically after making marginal notes on them. The scripts of his finished works were sent to the editors neatly written in his own most attractive hand. He used a variety of pens filled with different colours of ink for his creative writing. The titles were written with decorative flourishes in two or three colours. It is somewhat strange that this man who did everything so systematically and meticulously should at times act impulsively. While waiting for a Calicut but at Trichur he watched another bus leaving for a place called Krishnan Kotta. The name of the place charmed him, and he boarded that bus seized by an irresistible desire to know what Krishnan Kotta was like.

He would not forgo his morning walk unless he was ill. He preferred by-lanes and gullies to the crowded streets. He would fix a friend's house as his destination every morning. This was a way of retaining contact with them. The themes of a good number of his stories evolved during such morning walks. Pottekkatt had prescribed for himself a hygienic code which he practised with an almost puritan austerity. He carried a bed sheet, a pair of slippers, a comb and some talcum powder in his black bag which was his constant companion. He insisted on using his own bed sheet in hotel rooms. Despite this hygienic rigour he would accompany his fast friends to the filthiest place on earth. Pottekkatt was not a rich man, and still he declined many attractive positions that were offered to him. He was a free-lance writer and even with his moderate income he was able to satisfy his wander-lust and support his family.

IV

Pottekkatt has published nearly sixty books which include ten novels, twenty-four collections of short stories, three anothologies of poems, eighteen travels (now available in three volumes) four plays, a collection of essays, and a couple of books based on personal reminiscences.

He was the recipient of many awards. These include the Madras government awards for the short-story collection *Yavanikakku Pinnil* (Behind the Curtain) and the novel *Vishakanyaka*, the Kerala Sahitya Academy award for *Oru Theruvinte Katha* (A Street's Story) in 1962 and the Kendra Sahitya Academy as well as the Jnana Peedam award for *Oru Desanthinte Katha* (The Story of a Locale) in 1972 and 1981 respectively. The University of Calicut conferred an honorary doctorate upon him in the year 1981.

He served as the office-bearer of many cultural organizations. He was for some time President of Malabar Kendra Kala Samiti[1] as well as Sahitya Pravartaka Sahakarana Sangham,[2] Vice-President of Kerala Sahitya Academy and executive member of Kendra Sahitya Academy.

Pottekkatt has been translated into English, Russian, German, Italian and Czech, besides all major Indian languages. An Italian anthology of "the best short stories of the world" published from Milan in 1971 included his "Brantan Naya" (Mad Dog). A collection of eleven of his short stories translated into Russian had a sensational sale of about hundred thousand copies in two weeks.

Calicut remembers its author fondly and with deep gratitude. A street in the city has been named after him. A park dedicated to his memory was recently opened. The Pottekkatt Memorial Committee holds annual lectures on different aspects of his work. Preparations are also under way for the setting up of a fiction-study centre dedicated to his memory. There can, however, be no better monuments to a great writer than his own works. And posterity cannot honour an author better than by interpreting his work with the seriousness that it warrants. The following pages are meant as a primer to the study of his writings.

2
Those Sudden Twists and Turns— The Short Stories

The period of Pottekkatt's creativity as a short-story writer spans a little over half a century. His first story entitled "Rajaneeti" appeared in print in 1928 and he did not give up writing till the time of his death (1982) though he was far less prolific in the last few years of his life. The years from 1960 to 1980 were years of radical changes in the history of Malayalam fiction. New waves of writers appeared one after the other drawing inspiration from trend-setters in the West such as Kafka, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Hemingway and Faulkner. But Pottekkatt refused to change. He was not tempted by any craze for experimentation. He stuck to his own method with unfaltering confidence. He belonged to an early generation of short-story writers which included among others Uroob, Basheer and Takazhi. They were not lured by new forms or techniques in fiction. They were writers of strong social commitments and ideals, possessing an individualistic vision. This was very true of Pottekkatt too. He did not regard the short story as a medium that merely evoked a mood. Though a lyricist, his stories are not just a lyrical expansion of a chosen moment. Again, he did not ever resort to the methods of the stream-of-consciousness novelists or a purely symbolic or allegorical mode of writing practised by Kafka, Conrad or D. H. Lawrence. To Pottekkatt the short-story had to be a story first. All other elements of that medium were meant to play only a subsidiary role, namely, to intensify the effect of the plot and clarify its meaning.

Pottekkatt was adept in weaving plots of chilling suspense. He knew the art of telling stories. No writer in Malayalam has excelled him in that gift. He did not want to be a Kafka, Joyce or Faulkner. His method was akin to that of Alexander Dumas, Maupassant, Somerset Maugham and O'Henry. A plot that carries an element of surprise, a few suggestive incidents that heighten its dramatic quality, a background or a setting which is most appropriate to the theme and a style that can easily mediate between realism and lyricism—these are some of the striking positive features of a Pottekkatt story. The principal interest of the story lies in the plot, and what essentially characterises the plot is something corresponding to an Aristotelean *peripeteia* (a sudden reversal of the situation) or an O'Henry twist. These sudden twists shock the reader, and in the end he is left brooding over the terrible ironies that underlie human relations and the mysteries that lurk behind man's impulses and actions.

"Kalocha" (Footfalls) is on all counts a typical Pottekkatt story. It centres upon a young doctor and his wife. The doctor receives an urgent message that his old school teacher, a man who had helped him in financial difficulties, is critically ill. He hastens to the railway station, but misses the train, and so returns home after attending on a patient. He is intrigued to find his wife dressed very elegantly to look her best. He suspects that she has a lover and insinuatingly makes her aware of his suspicion. This builds up a tension between them, and both sit silent and brooding for the whole night, she with her head bent low and he pricking up his ears at every sound. A little before dawn footsteps are heard coming closer. The doctor, excited as though he had caught the culprit, opens the door. The postman hands in a telegram: Their only daughter studying at a boarding school in Madras got drowned the previous evening

The climax of the tense night-long silence is fraught with a terrible irony—the bond that the couple created between them no longer exists. The daughter's death signals the death of their love for each other. There are a few suggestive touches in the story that deepen this irony. The doctor's wife drops the tea cup and it breaks, and he leaves home with his thirst unquenched. Later, the cab overturns with the result that he is thrown into a marshy ground, and he gets up to watch the

train puffing away from the railway station. This foreshadows the tragedy that lies in store for him. It was in a train that he fell in love with the irresistible Radha whom he later married. The teacher's daughter who has sent the urgent message had loved him once. With a sense of guilt he remembers the days of his close association with her. Thus there is a growing disenchantment in him with his wife as his thoughts circle round the image of another woman. He is also struck by the discrepancy between the corpulent uncouth Tamilian merchant and his charming wife. At midnight the doctor hears the drunken cabman's sad song, sad because his pretty wife is afflicted with leprosy. All these encounters condition the man's mind and create a great distance between him and his wife. The author does not state whether the doctor's suspicion is grounded upon any previous incidents or some solid proof of his wife's infidelity. An atmosphere of mystery pervades their relationship and the emotional estrangement becomes complete with their daughter's death.

A considerable number of Pottekkatt stories have love as the dominant motif in them. They deal with the betrayal of women and sometimes the capricious nature of man. In some stories, however, fate alone spins the tragic plot. In "Pulliman" (The Spotted Deer) woman is the victim of man's fickleness in love. Devayyan shifts the direction of his carnal passion from the widowed school teacher Parvati to her younger sister Seetamma. The desperate widow nobly contrives a situation in which her lover becomes the instrument of her death. The theme may strike us as a very commonplace one; but the romantic setting and the lyrical rendering of the scenes of love lend to this story a dream-like quality. The incorporation of suggestive episodes at appropriate turns of the plot, the credibility with which the transitions in the emotional life of the characters are traced and the conflict in Parvati between her affection towards her sister and the unquenchable passion for Devayyan - all these endow the story with a haunting power. The widow's new love blooms and withers in the same romantic haunt. Parvati's first encounter with Devayyan was in a bush of roses. Attracted by the flowers and the cooling shades of the plants she was drawn to the bush on her way to school. It was the hunter's day in the village, and Devayyan mistook her for

a deer as she was attired in a dotted green sari. He fired a shot, her finger bled, and he nursed her wound. That was the beginning of love, violent like a gun-shot and yet enchanting like the roses. Later, utterly dejected in love, she finds salvation in dying as his dear deer on the same spot as a chased animal. Quite ironically, the man wins her with one shot but kills her with another.

"Stree" (Woman) unfolds the theme of a woman's terrible treachery. Bhargavi, whose prospects of marriage are dimmed by an attack of tuberculosis, learns that her lover, a college professor, has taken a fancy to her friend and old classmate Sunanda. With a scheming jealousy she plots against her friend. She begs of Sunanda to reciprocate the professor's love and presents a necklace as a wedding gift cleverly wrangling out a promise that the gift will be shown to the professor only after the wedding. A little later, Bhargavi tells the professor that her necklace has been stolen. Further, she speaks a little suspiciously of her friend. The professor manages to enter Sunanda's room in her absence and shockingly discovers the missing necklace in her box. Bhargavi dies, and for over twenty years Sunanda waits eagerly and patiently for a gesture of love from the professor. At the end of her wasted life she sends for him from her death bed and uncovers the secret of the necklace, entrusting it to his care. Sunanda's dying words are as much a revelation to the reader as to the professor. In stories like "Pulliman" and "Stree" the author relates the characters to their immediate surroundings. The characters emerge naturally out of their respective backgrounds. In "Stree" for instance, Pottekkatt lingers at length on the details of Bhargavi's bed room. The chandelier, the artistically designed clock with its gold pendulum resembling a swing, the pictures on the wall and the shining floor are all mentioned. "None would ever suspect" says the author "that it is a patient's room. No medicine bottle or thermometer can be seen there." With his characteristic irony he adds: "More than a patient's bedroom it deserves to be called the exquisite guest room designed for death." In "Pulliman" the tempting landscapes, the mist-hidden blue hills and the moon-light falling on the rivers and lakes become partly instrumental in bringing the lovers closer.

"Vadhu" (The Bride) is neither a story of woman's betrayal nor of man's fickleness. A remorseless fate alone brings about the final catastrophe, and there is an emphasis on the repetitive pattern of events in life. Yet nothing repeats itself without some significant variation, and often the variation is ironic. Gopi, who has a job in Malaya comes to Kerala on a short holiday with the intention of getting married. He goes to see a young woman in a village with his friend, the narrator of the story. The evening walk along the paddy fields stirs up his memories, for the village appears to be very familiar to him. He had worked as a teacher in that village school for a short while. He had secretly entertained in those days a passion for a young woman, a teacher of another school. He had no occasion to talk to her but they would cross almost every evening on their way back from school. One night he was seized by an irresistible impulse to visit her in her house. As he was getting closer to his destination he was taken aback by a glow of lights greeting him from the house. It was the night of the woman's wedding. He has not seen or heard about her since that night. Gopi's reminiscences confound the narrator, for he discovers that he is taking the young man to the same woman who became a widow soon after her marriage. As the two men are within sight of the house they are intrigued by the glow of lights coming from the house as though history was mysteriously repeating itself. But the repetition is ironic, for this time the burning lights announce not a wedding but death. The young widow had hanged herself that day. The bride-seeker is late. Death has already claimed her as his bride.

Pottekkatt's stories are not all tragedies. Some of them are written in a lighter vein. However, even these are characterised by sudden reversals of situations. But the reversals are not a matter of life and death to the characters. Life plays a joke on them, and the reader enjoys it very relaxedly. A good example is *Kuttakkari* (The Guilty One). An austere headmistress sends for the guardians of a boy and a girl at school who have been exchanging love-letters. It turns out that the girl's father was the headmistress's own lover during their college days. As for the boy's father, he was her class-mate at school with whom she had exchanged love letters. The lovers from the past recognize her easily and are very outspoken too about the recognition. The woman can now do nothing but apologise to the men for incon-

veniencing them that morning. The anticlimax is not complete even with this embarrassing confrontation, for the author adds: The next day she did not come to school but sent her resignation.

"Buddhu Padusha" set in Delhi is another story written in a comic strain. As the author and his friend Hamid are conversing relaxedly about Delhi's past sitting atop Purana Killa's *Gopura* they are nonplussed by the appearance of what looks like a Mughal army led by the Emperor. The author wonders whether he is under the effect of a hallucination brought upon by the preoccupation with history. After a brief display of its might the army leaves the haunt. The author's friend now unknots the whole mystery. The "Emperor" who gallopped away is the leader of a gang in Delhi. People call him "Buddhu Padusha." Someone has put a crazy idea into his head that he is a descendant of the last Mughal emperor. Buddhu is waiting for the day when he will be able to re-establish an empire.

In "Harishchandra" the theme of death is very dexterously treated with a touch of humour. The narrator watches a funeral procession and learns from some of his acquaintances that the dead person is the night watchman of the town's crematorium, known to everyone by his nickname "Harishchandra." It is Harishchandra who receives every dead body into the crematorium and makes arrangements for the cremation. But who will now receive Harishchandra? Who will now keep a watch over his burning body? These disturbing thoughts prompt the narrator to join the procession. But Harishchandra's body is not destined to be burned. On their way the corpse-bearers slip into a small stream. The corpse also swims along with them. The strong current carries it aways into the river, and the river may perhaps take it into the eternal sea. It is as though Harishchandra who has burned many bodies would not allow his body to be burned by others. He escapes cleverly into the sea.

Pottekkatt was a meticulous observer of the flora and fauna of the lands that he visited. Plants and flowers haunted his imagination. Their colours shapes and fragrance lingered for years in his memory and he has woven a number of romantic tales around them, and these together constitute a new genre of short-stories. The most striking among them are "Nishagandhi," "Ezhilampala" and "Kattu Champakam." In "Ezhilampala"

the narrator is flummoxed by his old uncle's seemingly groundless last-minute objection to an Ezhilampala being cut down for the completion of a road under construction, To the nephew this sounds all the more strange because the old man had welcomed the idea of the road saying that it would be a boon to the people. The main point of the story lies in an altogether new image of the uncle that emerges in the end—an image which is diametrically opposed to that which is projected by the nephew at the beginning. The old man commits suicide leaving a note to the nephew. It unveils a tragic story of love. In his young days the uncle had fallen in love with a woman of a lower caste. She had reciprocated his love; yet to save his name and family prestige she hanged himself on the Ezhilampala. Deeply touched by her sacrifice he resolved to live on as a bachelor treasuring her love and watching the Ezhilampala daily from his room in the house. He was not the unromantic puritanical conservative man that the villagers thought he was.

Pottekkatt brings to bear upon his creative writing the experiences of his extensive travels in different parts of the world. This marks him off from most other short-story writers in Malayalam whose thematic range is narrowly limited to the life of the people in Kerala. All the stories of the collection *Himavahini* are set in Kashmir. The island of Bali, the streets of Singapore and the jungles of Africa figure as backdrops to some stories. This wide geographical canvas lends an exotic quality to his fictional world at large.

Some of the stories are character sketches. The plot in them becomes important only as a means of character revelation. "Ozhinja Kattil" (The Empty Cot) is for instance about a poor Muslim, Kunjalavi, who loses his business, health and friends as a result of his patriotic deeds. Moidheen, a vendor, is another martyr, portrayed with a sentimental touch in the story "Malaylathinate Chora" (The Blood of Malayalam). As the young man is selling "Narigoring" (i.e. fried masala rice) standing near his cart at a street corner in Kuala Lumpur, he hears the groans of a man writhing in pain a few yards away. He identifies the victim to be a Keralite being tortured by a Policeman and a few ruffians. Unable to stand this cruel spectacle, he attacks them with a stick and frees the man. However, this heroic leap into action impelled by a love of

Malayalam proves fatal to Moidheen's career. It marks the end of his happy days of vending in Kuala Lumpur. He escapes into the jungle with the saved man never to return to the city. "Sikari" (The Hunter) presents an interesting character—Mr. Bush, a Professor of Mathematics who develops a wild passion for hunting lured by the stories of jungle expeditions in Africa. He gives up his teaching career and leaves for Africa. He hires a professional hunter, and one day they encounter an appallingly huge elephant in the jungle, its tusks the biggest that Bush's companion has ever set eyes on. The hunter urges Bush to shoot. But Bush is spell-bound by its symmetry, the graceful rhythmic movements of its ears, trunks and legs—a consummate creation of nature. He refuses to fire and prevents his friend too from harming the animal. The elephant strays away, and Bush gives up hunting for ever, resolving to make a living by collecting and selling ostrich feathers. Very rarely though Pottekkatt lends a mythical stature to his characters as in the story "Kattu Champakam." The story portrays Bhadri, an old woman gone mad, waiting under a wild Champak tree eternally for her lover, a carpenter of great artistic gifts with whom she, a princess, wanted to elope in youth. As promised, she waited for the lover under the tree but her royal suitors killed the lover on his way to the place of assignation. Though many years have elapsed since then Bhadri continues to wait for her man. It is as though she would never die. Lovers worship her as a goddess. There is an almost sentimental idealisation of some characters in Pottekkatt. He belonged to a generation of writers who grew up imbibing the spirit of the cultural Renaissance of India. Bhadri, the embodiment of true romantic love; Bush, the transformed spokesman of non-violence; Moidheen, the spirited defender of Malayalam and Kunjalavi the patriot, are characters who grew out of the ideals that the author's generation upheld.

Satire is not this author's forte, for it calls for indirect modes of expression and veiled remarks. Pottekkatt is generally direct and open in his comments. All the same, the satirical mode is not something that a writer of strong social preoccupations can escape, and it comes out too in a handful of Pottekkatt's stories like "Smarakam" (The Memorial) and "Natankala" (Folk Arts). "Smarakam" treats the trite theme of the poet being exploited by a callous society. Pestered by his

creditors the insolvent poet leaves his town and makes everyone believe that he is dead. The people who once exploited him raise funds to erect a memorial to him. At the foundation-stone laying ceremony the poet appears incognito and shocks everyone by revealing his identity and exposing the hypocrisy of the fund-raisers. *Natankala* parodies the long-winding superficial speeches of culture vultures who monopolisingly preside over seminars and conferences.

Long nature descriptions characterise the beginnings of many Pottekkatt stories. Besides providing a matching backdrop to the themes, the descriptions bear testimony to the author's lyrical sensibility:

> Evening. Calm sea. The sky like a silk carpet spread on Neptune's courtyard. The sun suspended like a lantern amidst the crimson clouds. (Memories)

Some stories however open like essays with casual remarks or general observations:

> It is the Nisaghandhi's (Queen of the Night) fragrance that I am most fond of. Nothing lures me so much as the aroma that its tiny petals give out and no wonder it is called "the Queen of the Night" in English . . . This Queen is a prostitute among flowers. Slumbering for the whole day, she tip-toes her way through darkness after dusk and entices men by embracing them unawares. . . . I wouldn't even allow a Nisagandhi to be planted in my garden. . . . There is a genuine reason for it, a story behind it.

Buddhu Padusha begins like an essay:

> When we reach a place known to us only through books, we often have the impression, as though we were stepping somewhat accidentally into a distant relative's house. We are then under the deluded feeling that we were witnesses to events that took place there in the past. Every ruined pillar, every dilapidated wall, in fact, every nook and corner of that place strikes us as though we once had close associations with it.

Pottekkatt felt most at home in the short story. At an interview, he compared the novel to a house and the short story to a room in it. His stories exemplify this definition even though one feels inclined to add that they are rooms with windows.

3

A Traveller's Thrills

Travels stand out from all other forms of literary exercises in some obvious respects. For one thing, they cannot be the product of fiction or of pure imagination. Their quality depends not merely upon the author's calibre of writing, but to a great measure, upon the range and depth of his experiences. From this vantage point, it is important to make a distinction between two types of writers of travels—those who stumble upon this genre of writing quite accidentally and those who devote themselves to it with a deep passion. Most of the writers of travels in Malayalam belong to the first type. Their works are the by-products of one or two random pilgrimages or official tours that they successfully undertook. T.K. Krishna Menon, N.V. Krishna Varier, Taravathu Ammalu Amma and K.P. Kesava Menon are among those who have written such travel diaries. But Pottekkatt stands distinguished from all of them in this genre of writing. It was not chance that took him to different parts of the world. He was impelled by an in-born desire to see far-off lands and to know about far-off people. He travelled on his own and his freedom was not restricted by official or academic commitments The only exception to this was his visit to the West European countries as a delegate of the Government of India.

Travels are a very demanding form of writing. As Pottekkatt himself once remarked:

> The writing of travels in Malayalam is for me a matter of Sacrifice and social service. I say this not with any vanity but with legitimate pride. One needs no capital investment other than pen and paper to be able to write a novel or a short story.

And a little brain work too. But to write about Helsinki, Cairo or Singapore you should invest a substantial sum of money on travel expenses. Over and above that you have to spend from your pocket for your stay abroad and the visits to places of importance. Further, some money has to be set aside for buying reference books.

Pottekkatt combined the zest for travel with a remarkable talent for writing. He travelled extensively in three continents: Asia, Europe and Africa. In the separate volumes on the three continents, he combines his personal impressions with a fund of interesting and reliable information collected from a number of books on history, geography and sociology. Nevertheless, he does not over-burden his descriptions with dull insipid details to make a show of the thoroughness and precision of his knowledge. He renders his varied experiences grippingly like an exciting short story.

He often captures the essence of a scene with an imaginative touch, giving it as it were, a symbolic meaning. The very opening of the book on Africa is striking in this respect. The first thing that catches his eye as the ship anchors at the port of Mamboza is the appallingly huge figure of a half-naked Negro standing on top of the wharf watching the sea:

I felt as though he represented all the Negro races of Africa. Statue-like he must have stood there and gazed in wonder when those Norwegian navigators landed there in the eleventh century, and Vasco Da Gama's ship appeared at the close of the fifteenth century. Centuries have gone by since then. Still that wonder lingers in his gaze, and it explains too the slow pace of his progress through civilization.

This symbolic perception of history and the imaginative faculty to juxtapose the immediate present and the legendary past in a dramatic manner are equally apparent in his memories of the visit to Jalianwalla Bagh:

Every tuft of grass in that *maidan* has been fed with the blood of man. Every tree has grown out of the soil mixed with blood. Every grain of sand smells death. Some kids are flying kites there . . . unaware of the presence of their forefathers' souls in the hovering breeze . . . Dusk fell . . . the people left one by one. I was all alone in that graveyard . . . in the dimmed

sky, dimmed as though from the smoke of gun powder, a kite cut off from its thread flit like an unhouseled restless soul.

Pottekkatt is interested more in people than in places or monuments of historical importance. He seldom describes a historic haunt bereft of human landscape. He is as much concerned with the presentness of a place as its past glory. On his way to Badrinath he meets a soldier from a nearby military camp of the border. His thoughts now turn from the holiness and sanctity of the Himalayan valleys to the alertness and the power of endurance shown by the soldiers guarding the tense border regions in the wintry chill. During his travel in Italy he is overwhelmed by its great traditions dating back to classical times, its art galleries and historical monuments. But the plight of some sections of the Italians living in abject poverty also engrosses his attention. He observes that the Italians are honest and straightforward. But the struggle for existence has compelled many young women to turn to prostitution and many men to adopt corrupt ways of life.

This traveller from Kerala is a keen observer of the customs, beliefs and superstitions of the people of other lands. Of the Malay he says for instance: "Though the Malay is a Muslim by religion, the Hindu culture lies dormant in him." This is true not only of the common people but also of the royal family, for it is a Brahmin priest who performs the coronation of a new Sultan. These priests called "Naradhirajas" (the Kings of men) are believed to be the descendants of the Brahmins who came out of the mouth of the bull Nandi, Lord Siva's carriage animal. The Sultan is majestically attired in oriental splendour in the likeness of a Hindu God. A dagger rests on his right shoulder and engraved on it are the figures of Lord Siva and Parvati.

The Bali Island appears to have cast a spell on Pottekkatt, for he speaks of their mode of life very admiringly and with a sense of involvement. The islanders generally worship the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The people are divided into four castes, but untouchability is unknown to them. Nearly 80 per cent of the people are Shudras. Though they have many things in common with Indians, especially Keralites, they are free from inhibitions. They have an open attitude towards life and sex. Unmarried men and women mingle freely. Kissing is something alien to the Bali lovers. Instead, they rub their noses tenderly

on each other's face. They get married in the "Rakshasa" style. The bridegroom often accompanied by a band of strong men carries the bride away by force. She should resist this attempt by kicking the men with her legs and pinching their ears. The man takes her to a friend's house where he meets her nightly. The bride's father tells his neighbours that his daughter has suddenly disappeared. Many houses are searched and in the end the girl is traced. The parents now give their consent to the marriage and the whole community recognize the lovers as man and wife. The funeral rites of the Bali people are equally strange. When a person dies his body is preserved in a specially designed room of his house for a few days. All his relations come to his house, hold feasts and make merry till the day of cremation. The islanders believe that the more the relations revel, the more easily will the spirit of the dead attain peace and salvation. A lantern with shades made of coloured paper is hung from a pole overlooking the room where the dead body lies so that the spirit may always find its way back to its place at the end of its restless wanderings.

He finds the Chinese emigrants of Malayasia and Singapore to be even more superstitious than the people of Bali (This was in the early 1950's.) Most Chinese houses, he recalls, have a mirror on the front door. This is to scare away the evil spirits by letting them confront their own images. Shreds of coloured paper with wrong addresses written on them are strewn around the dead body, when it is being taken to the burial ground. This is to misguide the ghost so that it may not haunt the living anymore.

Anecdotes enliven almost every section of these travels. Apart from accentuating the readability of the books, these shed light on the life style of the people with whom the author had close contacts. Corruption in the name of religion is a universal practice, and Pottekkatt describes a very interesting incident, relating to it in the section on Malayasia. There is a Chinese Buddhist temple in Singapore. The idol made of marble is appallingly huge with a pot-belly and smiling face. It was a wealthy Chinese merchant who gifted the idol to the temple. It was designed in China. When it arrived by ship the Governor of Singapore himself accorded it a great reception. The idol was then taken in a procession round the whole city before it was

enshrined in the temple. But the merchant was fooling the governor and the people with the colour and the splendour of the whole occasion. The idol had come filled with opium worth thousands of dollars. This was brought to light much later. The people then knew the secret of the Buddha's smile and his pot-belly.

An equally interesting traveller anecdote figures in the section on London. At the Wakefield Tower museum the author has an interesting encounter with a Negro woman. Dazzled by the glittering jewels exhibited in the museum she begins to feel dizzy and falls into the author's arms. He supports her and helps her to walk down to a restaurant. He treats her to a cup of coffee and she recovers quickly, but she would not like this romantic encounter with a tourist from India to be so brief and to end so abruptly. So she pretends to be helpless and insecure and clings on to him for a little while more. They walk together to the park and have a long chat. Learning that he is travelling on his own she asks him if he is a Maharaja. The author wouldn't like to let himself down. He remembers his frequent visits to "Maharaj Cool Bar" in Calicut, and so he replies that he has connections with a Maharaja. Gathering that his birth place is Puthiyara, she calls him "Prince of Puthiyara." But the prince disappoints her, for he does not oblige her when she asks for some money.

During his stay at Kuala Lumpur he meets a Tamilian couple who have adopted a Chinese girl. The author later gathers that about eight thousand Chinese girls are sold in Malaya every year by their poor parents to foreigners.

Pottekkatt's accounts of his travels are spiced with a sense of humour. The traveller's bewilderments and embarrassments in an altogether new and unfamiliar environment are often the source of such humour. On his way to Kedarnath his fellow-traveller Dorai goes to a shop to buy some ginger. Though the author is at a loss to understand his friend's sudden impulse to eat ginger he waits patiently a few yards away from the shop. To Dorai, born and brought up in Tamil Nadu, Hindi is Greek. So he repeats the Tamil word "inchi" a number of times intoning it differently to the shop keeper, who eventually guesses it to be "keenchi" which in Hindi means scissors. The shop keeper shows scissors of different variety one after the

other, and the confusion is cleared only when the author guessing that something has gone wrong joins his companion and explains everything in Hindi to the embarrassed shopkeeper. A day or two later, while dining at a hotel Dorai shouts at the bearer for "Chor" which means rice in Malayalam and thief in Hindi. The bearer's perplexity can be imagined and he goes red all over his face unable to say anything. During his travel in Finland he and his companions are siezed by a desire to have a "sauna" bath about which they have heard a great deal. The supervisor of a gymnasium who has a special liking for Indians ushers them into an exquisitely designed new building. The host now asks all the Indians to undress. They obey him with some reluctance. He further leads them into a small dark cell made of wood having sophisticated devices for steam circulation. The Finnish host sits in the cell for more than half an hour but the Indians find the heat from the steam unbearable; yet they would not like to wound the sentiments of the exceptionally courteous host. After ten minutes the author comes out with a burning sensation, as though his whole body had been baked. The others follow suit and the supervisor taking pity on them suggests that they cool themselves in the waters of the fountain. One of the author's companions is a very conservative Brahmin from Gujarat fondly called "Modibhai" by others. Right from boyhood he has been in the habit of performing pujas and saying prayers at the break of dawn as well as at dusk. He wouldn't eat or drink anything till the prayer is concluded; but in Finland, the land of the midnight sun, he fails to have any reckonings of time, any idea of dawn or dusk. Hungry, thirsty and sleepy he would wait almost till midnight for the sun to disappear. He resolves to return to India without completing his mission. A friend comes to his rescue. He advises Modibhai to perform his pujas as if he were in India without heeding the sun's appearance and disappearance. Modibhai takes this advice and stays on for the whole period of his official assignment.

Pottekkatt evinces a keen interest in the Indian settlers abroad. He had the good fortune of being hosted by a number of them in almost every country that he visited. Some of them eased the strain of his expeditions by giving him company and sometimes by making vehicles available for his sight-seeing.

Their stories were a great revelation to him. Most of the Indians abroad whom he happened to befriend had to put up with heavy odds in the early years of their settlement. For some, the struggle for survival had not yet ended. Quite a number of them, however, had jobs or their own business. There were among them some interesting characters like Pandit Narendra Dev Shastri whom Pottekkatt met in the island of Bali. Shastri was born and brought up in Uttar Pradesh. He went to Bali to teach the islanders Sanskrit and to help them revive their Hindu traditions. It was a wealthy Indian industrialist who encouraged him to carry out such a mission and provided financial support for his travel and sustenance. Another interesting character who figures in the "Indonesian Diary" is Mr. Kal. The author got acquainted with nim in Jakarta. The name Kal and the well-maintained lawn in the front yard of his house gave the author the wrong impression that he was a European who had settled down in Java. It was a pleasant surprise for Pottekkatt to discover that Kal was Krishnan Ezhuthachan from Kerala. His wife was a half-European who owned a leather tanning factory. Kal was a chemist by profession. He was fond of Malayalam poetry and entertained his Kerala guest by quoting many verses from Kunchan Nambiar and Vallathol. His wife treated the guest to a sumptuous dinner, cooked and served in the typical Kerala style. In the section on Malayasia, Pottekkatt mentions a Muslim from Kerala who was the victim of a strange irony of fate. When all his children were well-settled in life, the venerable old man went to Mecca where he wanted to end his life and be buried. He waited patiently for death for eleven years. In the twelfth year his grand-children who had heard a lot about their Mecca grandpa expressed a desire to see him and to have his blessings. The old man goes to Malaya hoping to return to Mecca after a month or two. But death played a cruel joke on him. He was destined to be buried only in Malaya and not Mecca. An equally amusing character who figures in the book on Africa is Somarajulu, the porter. He was born and brought up in Africa, but his parents were Tamilians who had settled down in Africa. Helping the author and carrying his luggage was a matter of great delight to Somarajulu. He looked worried as though he were vexed with problems of a sinister nature. He was reluctant

to discuss them with a stranger. He had visited India once in his boyhood and was overjoyed to learn that Pottekkatt was from South India. The vexed young man had somehow a wrong notion that the Indian tourist would solve his problems. He appealed to the author to go to an exorcist in India and to procure a "mantric" copper plate which would ward off all evil forces tormenting the wearer. Somarajulu's faith in the talismanic plate is a pointer to what many foreigners think about India.

Pottekkatt is free from prejudices. He feels into whatever he sees, transcending cultural barriers. All the same, he maintains a certain measure of emotional detachment so that he is able to form correct impressions of things around him. He does not look down upon the African but tries to understand the Negro's social and economic problems historically. Again, he does not have a bow-down attitude towards the European. He records his impressions with remarkable disinterestedness. On the day of his arrival in London, he has a very unpleasant experience. He goes to a hotel in Russell Square and asks for a room. Though the display board indicates that "there are a few rooms vacant" the proprietor informs that all the rooms have been rented out. Disappointed, the author leaves the place. He accosts an Englishman carrying heavy luggage walking towards the same hotel. He tells the Englishman that all the rooms in the hotel have been occupied. The stranger pays no attention to the Indian but proceeds to his destination. The Indian waits on the road feeling certain that the other man will soon return so that they can continue that room-hunt together. Even after an hour the Englishman does not return. The author now realises that in many hotels, rooms are available only to the whitemen and not to the like of him. This painful experience does not prejudice the tourist against Londoners. A couple of days later, he takes a long stroll along the streets of London. In different parts of the Head park he finds some animated speakers. A small crowd has gathered around each speaker. One man harangues against the church. A Negro attacks the colour prejudices of the Englishman. Among the audience are some white men. When he says "those British dogs" they cheer him and applaud him. The author registers great admiration for the freedom of expression that the people of England enjoy. He further observes that as

a nation they display a variety of attitudes ranging from the most narrow-minded puritanism to radical liberalism.

Though Pottekkatt's imaginative vision and concern for man enable him to reach out to other cultures and other people with ease he is basically a writer steeped in Kerala's traditions. Kerala accompanies him wherever he goes. As he watches the flames placed on leaves drifting in thousands along the Ganges in Haridwar, he nostalgically recalls the lamps set afloat on the Triveni by the pilgrims bound for Sabarimala.[1] As his bus climbs the Chedhak road connecting Rishikesh and Badrinath he is reminded of the Vaithiri road[2] in Wyanad. In the vicinity of the Victoria Falls in Africa is a cliff that overlooks an abyss. One of the precipitous rocks has a foot print on it and the Africans believe it to be Eve's. As the author watches it, his thoughts wander back to the banks of the Pampa—to the foot prints on a rock which the pilgrims identify as Sri Rama's. Even when he stands entranced by the cascading Victoria falls and their roar, Kerala flutters in his memories like a green parrot. The fallen water rebounds in splashes to a height of ten to fifteen feet. This gives the author the sensation of standing in a Kerala jungle exposing himself to a heavy downpour during the monsoon. The island of Bali has a special fascination for Pottekkatt obviously because it has a great deal in common with his homeland. The landscapes, the people and their life style remind one of Kerala.

Pottekkatt's success as a traveller lay in his readiness to take risks and brave dangers. He was not content with superficial impressions of places and people. He would stay in a country until he established a spiritual tie with it.

He was a man of versatile interests, an assiduous reader of history, a keen observer of societies, a lover of birds and animals and a creative writer. A zoologist in Africa, a historian in Europe, a sociologist in Malayasia, he was a Keralite wherever he went.

4

Brief Encounters with the Stage

There comes a moment in the career of many novelists when they begin to experience a sense of inadequacy with a purely fictional or narrative mode of expression. They are no more content with time rolling as long coiled or sprawling sentences on the printed page; they want the immediate present with a past and a future ever linked to it to manifest itself visually and their characters and scenes to leap out of the page and occupy a defined arena of space. The novelist's temptation for the theatre has been an increasing vogue even in Malayalam literature. Uroob, Basheer and Pottekkatt have all had brief spells of flirtation with drama.

Pottekkatt has written four plays: *Achan* (Father) a full length play, *Theevandi Otunnu* (There Runs the Train) *Althara*, and *Achanum Makanum* (Father and son) a one-acter.

Achan (Father), a play of tragic irony, dramatizes the change that comes upon a hard-hearted man. It combines the motif of vengeance with the theme of the lost son being found at a critical turn in his life. The plot centres on Parameshwaran Nair, a retired police superintendent who has earned a name for callousness and cruelty. He discovers much to his horror and regret that the urchin, whom he had beaten with a wild fury and kicked with his heavy boots for stealing the spicy food from the officer's club, is his missing son. This revelation comes from a dying old man who had kidnapped the son to wreak vengeance on the police superintendent. For, Parameshwaran Nair's physical outrage was responsible for the death of the old man's son though everybody was made to believe that the culprit died in the jail by hanging himself. Excited by the dying man's

revelation the retired superintendent searches for his son among the urchins of the street pavements and finds him lying critically ill, writhing in pain. The boy is rushed to the hospital but the doctors fail to save him. The main thrust of the plot thus lies in a sudden reversal of the situation, in an ironic boomeranging of the protagonist's acts of cruelty upon himself.

The play falls into three acts. The first two having three scenes each and the third six scenes. The scene shifts reinforce the element of suspense. The contrast between the street life of the urchins and the drunken orgy of the leisurely upper class is well made. Parameshwaran Nair's character is convincingly drawn even though the quick changes in his destiny are presented too sentimentally.

Theevandi Odunnu (There Runs the Train) is a radio play cast in an altogether different mould, though it too has the same element of suspense and *peripeteia* (sudden reversal) as *Achan*. There are only three characters in the play: A professor who is in his fifties, his young wife Lalitha and his research scholar, Surendran, who is in love with Lalitha.

The opening scene is set in a train. Lalitha and Surendran are on their way to a village cave where the professor's research laboratory is located. The professor claims to have developed a method of converting other metals into gold. He has given them the right directions to reach the cave. As they travel, Lalitha and Surendran are haunted by guilt for betraying the professor. Yet they cannot think of ending their liaison, and both tend to justify the impulse of love as always natural and, therefore, right. The deep snoring of a Sikh, the only other passenger in the compartment, can be heard intermittently. An old man greets them at the station and escorts them to the cave. As soon as they enter the cave, Lalitha and Surendran are shocked to discover that it was the professor himself who travelled with them disguised as the snoring Sikh and later accompanied them as an old man. The professor is now in full control of the whole situation. He demonstrates the success of his chemical experiments by dipping a silver coin into a solution. It turns golden. Further, he scares the other two by warning them that the oxygen in the cave will last only for half an hour and that for some technical reason only one person can escape through the passage. He leaves the choice

to the woman. She can decide as to who should escape. The light in the cave dims for a short while and when it comes back the woman is missing. She has disappeared stealing the professor's alchemical solution. The professor explains to his scholar that his chemical experiment was all a hoax meant to hoodwink his wife. His true experiment has been on the woman. She has revealed her true nature. When there arose a threat to her life, she escaped deserting both her lover and husband hoping to make gold with the solution that she stole.

Even though the train journey, the suspense in the cave, the choice made between life and death, etc., might create the impression of a serious play, the whole thing is in essence meant only as a good joke on the fair sex. But women critics may find it rather hard to take it so lightly as all that. The last-minute reversal of the situation into an anti-climax is what saves the play. With the disappearance of the woman, there is a sudden easing of tension and suspense. The rivalry between the two men also comes to an end. Both are victims of infatuation and betrayal. The woman thinks that she has fooled the men while they feel that they have found out all about women.

Achanum Makanum (Father and Son), a one-act play, is inspired by the author's patriotic sentiments. It is set in Srinagar, Kashmir, a couple of months after India's emergence into political independence and the separation of Pakistan. Obviously, Srinagar at that time was in a state of anarchy. The Hindu king of Kashmir was unwilling to surrender his power to the newly formed Union of India. Nationalists like Sheikh Abdullah led a rebellion for the liberation of Kashmir from monarchy. The king's army killed thousands of young men who had joined the rebellion. Pakistan was trying to take advantage of this political mess in Kashmir. They incited the Pathans of the border regions to loot towns and villages and thereby create a general panic among the people.

The characters of the play represent the different political attitudes prevailing at that time There is a fanatic Muslim, Kasim Mollah, for instance, who welcomes the Pathans so that the Hindus may be massacred. Murad is another character who is perplexed by the diverse political loyalties around him. He is worried about Kashmir's future. The focal point of the

play is Hussan, a man in his sixties, who is aggrieved over the sudden disappearance of his son Kamaruddin. He is a man of principles and pooh-poohs the narrow communalism of men like Kasim. Imbued with a deep nationalism he lends support to leaders like Sheikh Abdullah and heaves a sigh of relief when a few planes of the Indian Air Force land in Srinagar. Meanwhile, the Pathans enter the city and plunder the streets. They pierce Hussan's eyes with a bayonet and as he lies unconscious on a pavement, his long-missing son Kamaruddin appears on the scene. But the father has gone blind and cannot see his son. His life has been emptied of purpose and meaning. Yet he would like to die after killing one of those plunderers. His son assures him that the wish would soon be fulfilled. Standing a few yards away from the old man Kamaruddin says that he has brought a Pathan plunderer as a captive. The old man fires a shot and the son holds his chest bare to face it. The son dies confessing to the father that he had betrayed Kashmir by indirectly allying with the Pathans. The play bears testimony to the author's first-hand knowledge of the social and political life in Kashmir in the wake of India's political independence. The huts, the fruit stalls and the pavements are presented as backdrops to the scenes, creating a local colour effect. The ending may strike one as too melodramatic. The son's repentance and atonement through death are so hastily worked out that the scene lacks credibility. The play has to be read as a work of the period in which it was written.

Aithara, a radio play, is also characterised by violent action. Love and vengeance spin its plot. Murders follow one after the other almost like a chain reaction. The play comprises three scenes, and each ends with a murder. A young man kills his sister's lover for desperately driving her to suicide. To escape being caught by the police he seeks shelter in a young man's room who happens to be the murdered lover's sister. The murderer returns to the same woman after a few years. She pretends to be in love with him, and in a secret nocturnal encounter kills him and thus avenges her brother's death. The play has the making of a typical Senecan tragedy of revenge. The playwright is heavily dependant upon the flashback technique. In so far as this is a radio play the technique may work fairly well.

Pottekkatt's plays are the by-products of his short stories. The stories abound in dramatic situations of tension and suspense. Writing plays were for Pottekkatt a matter of experimenting with a new medium and seeking a digression from a purely fictional mode of unfolding a theme. Further the plays were written to cater to the taste of an audience who had a fondness for melodramatic turns of situations, sentimental scenes and emotionalism generated by radical idealism.

5
A Touch of the Poet

Poetry was Pottekkatt's first love. It was with a short collection of poems (*Prabhatha Kanthi*) that he made his debut in literature. His most autobiographical novel is not merely the story of a 'Desam' or locale but equally the story of the making of a poet.

Pottekkatt was not content with mere prose renderings of his experiences. There was that ardent zest in him to translate at least a few of his felt moments of frenzy and rapture in life into verse. Yet he was far less prolific as a poet than as a short-story writer. He has published only three collections of poems. *Prabhatha Kanthi*, *Premasilpi* and *Sanchariyude Geethangal*. He attached great sacredness to the poetic medium. Writing a poem was like entering a temple or ascending a peak.

At the age of 24 he won the first prize for poetry at a contest held in Kerala on the eve of the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the Indian National Congress. Recalling it Pottekkatt later said that his first prize was a stroke of luck. A mature poet with a remarkable gift for versification had also participated in the contest. Fortunately for Pottekkatt, he was a little hard of hearing, with the result that he misheard the set theme "charka" as "chakka" (i.e. as jack fruit!). "Jack" lost and "Jill" won!

Pottekkatt's poems are simple and direct. He steers clear of irony, sarcasm and veiled expressions. Satire also does not fascinate him. He is a poet of limited range and variety in themes and techniques. To him poetry is the expression of noble sentiments in lofty style. He evinces a fondness for Sanskrit words, especially, "Samasthapadams" as evidenced

in expressions like "prata-sandya-sugandhi," "manjupushkara-manjusha" "Kairava kugmala sookshma dasandhare", etc. This was nothing peculiar to him but part of a tradition in versification established by poets like Ulloor and Sankara Kurup. Even though his first collection *Prabhatha Kanthi* has poems written in lullaby and "vanchipattu" metres it is the "keka" and "manjari" metres that by far predominate in his poetry. A considerable number of his poems are lyrics. Love, patriotism, natural beauty and great monuments of art are the subjects that receive recurrent treatment in them. His is an essentially romantic sensibility. Even the titles of some of his short-stories bear testimony to this: e.g. "Nisagandhi," Ezhilampala", "Rajamalli", "Himavahini", "Vanakoumudhi", etc. Nature descriptions studded with images of beauty abound in all the three collections. In one poem, for instance, the moon is imaged as the butter churned from the sky's milk by the night-woman after being boiled by the sun's heat. In another lyric, the sky is perceived as a beautiful poem written with the alphabet of stars. Elsewhere, he describes the twilight as entering the sky's temple attired like a devotee in a saffron robe and as dropping a silver coin into the sea's treasury.

He is a poet of invincible optimism:

Sweet is this life to me
Though devoid of laws,
And mixed with the smell of death,
And though itself a futile dream.

In another poem he says:

It is not clouds alone
That make the monsoon sky
But rainbows too!

His second and third collections of poems are essentially a recollection of the moments of rapture that he experienced as a traveller. The snow-clad hills and valleys of Kashmir, the dancing girls of Bali island with offerings for the deities in their hands and the gypsies camping on the banks of the Danube stir his imagination. The pine trees that skirt the Danube are to him

long wicks burning bright and erect. The Taj Mahal is a dream of tender love frozen in the moonlight.

Among the few narratives that he has composed, the most remarkable is *Premasilpi*. It unfolds a historical theme, a legend centering upon Timur, his Queen and an architect. Timur's Queen wishes to have a magnificent palace erected as a fitting monument of her love for him. She commands the most renowned smith of the kingdom to complete the work before the Emperor's return from his conquests. But the young smith Omar is entranced by the queen's beauty. His passion for her becomes uncontrollable and develops into a melancholic obsession. His work slows down. The Begum sends for him and questions him about his slackness. Omar reveals the truth very much to the Begum's perplexity. One evening she allows him to kiss her on the cheek on condition that the palace will be completed soon. Omar keeps his word. Timur returns triumphant and is overjoyed at the sight of the magnificent palace that shines as a monument of love. He spends his first night in the new palace with the queen. He discovers a black patch on her cheek, the inerasable mark left by a passionate kiss. She tells him the truth. The enraged Timur sends for the smith. As Omar and his boy apprentice climb the stairs leading to Timur's bedroom, Omar disappears suddenly and strangely. The boy recounts this miracle to the Emperor. The smith had designed a grave for himself at the base of the palace and made a secret passage to it. Ironically, the palace becomes his tomb and a monument of his love for the Begum. The story is told in a lyrically vibrant style, and the author revels in nature descriptions of scenic beauty. In poems like *Premasilpi*, Pottekkatt brings together his narrative skill and lyrical sensibility. The poet and the novelist in him were inseparable and often mutually complementary, though in the latter half of his career, he felt inclined to exhaust all his creative imagination on fiction.

6

The Bigger Canvas—The Novels

Pottekkatt's career as a novelist falls into three periods. His early novels are conventionally written, and the plot moves forward in a straight line unfolding the tensions that arise from the romantic encounters between a young man and a young woman. Love is the central motif in them. *Natanpremam* (1941), *Prema Shiksha* (1945), *Mootupatam* (1948), etc. belong to this period. In the second phase, he was not content merely with themes of love or the relationship between two or three individuals. Instead, he spreads before us a much wider canvas revealing a whole social panorama. The fictional mode here closely resembles that of a social documentary. He presents a whole community whose members are bound together by common interests and identical problems. There are conflicts too between them which constitute some of the tense situations in the plot. *Visha Kanyaka* (1948) and *Oru Theruvinte Katha* (1960) are the most striking novels of this period. The third and final phase may be said to combine the methods of the earlier two phases. The focus is at once on the protagonist and the community of which he is a member. Scenes and events are made to filter through the central character's consciousness. His story becomes the story of his locale as well. *Oru Desathinte Katha* (1971) is the best example of this genre. The lesser work *Kabeena* (1979) also employs a similar technique.

Natan Premam is a typical novel of the earliest period. It was written in Bombay, and writing it was for its author at that time a matter of turning nostalgically back to Malabar. He conceived of it originally as a film script though later he wrote it as a novel. The cinematographic technique is very much

evident in the structuring of the plot. The scenes shift very dramatically from the hotel rooms and luxuriously furnished houses in the town to the greenery and purity of rural landscapes. These shifts have great visual appeal.

The central figure in the novel is Ravindran, a fabulously rich young man of Calicut. He retires to a pleasant countryside near Mukkam for a change. He takes a fancy to a poor innocent young woman Malu, tempts her with gifts and sugary promises, makes love to her nightly on the river bank and leaves the village after a few days. Shaken by the discovery that she has become pregnant, Malu tries to commit suicide but is pulled back to life at the critical moment by the ready-to-help-all villager Ikoran. She makes a clean breast of everything to her saviour. He agrees to marry her and father her child.

The second part of the novel opens after a lapse of ten years. Ravindran got married twice but has not yet been blessed with a child. His business has prospered but he is unhappy because his married life has been sterile. An Englishman's offer to sell his estate proves instrumental in bringing Ravindran after many years again to the river bank where he once made love to Malu. Here he accidentally meets a boy whom he identifies as a son borne to him by Malu. He claims the boy, but Ikoran and Malu sniff at his claim. A few months later when Ravindran falls critically ill and sends for them, they become more considerate and entrust the boy to his care. As they feel that their life has lost its meaning, they commit suicide. The Englishman erects a monument over their graves.

The novel abounds in melodramatic situations and bears the stamp of the author's immaturity in the handling of his medium. Two of the highlights of the novel are the mythical story of the horn-bill which Malu recounts to Ravindran and a dream that haunts him a few years after his marriage.

Ravindran's dream reveals the acuteness of his longing for fatherhood. In the dream he sees an unending line of small boys marching along the lawn and coming close to his window. As he tries to embrace them they draw back very subtly and hasten to their parents to be hugged by them. One boy, however, stops before him, calls him "Dad" and throws his arms around his neck.

Malu traces the origin of the horn-bill to God's curse that befell a boy. God had entrusted a herd of cows to the care of the boy. One evening he fell asleep by the side of his vessel filled with water. The cows grew thirsty and started bellowing. God heard them and was enraged to see the boy lying fast asleep. He fed the cows, placed the empty vessel on the boy's head and transformed him into a bird. He cursed the bird so that it is destined to roam below the clouds with its thirst ever unquenched. Malu's story attests to the innocence and purity of her mind. Further there is a telling contrast between the simplicity of the country-folk's imagination and the scheming ways of the businessman of the town.

The novel is essentially one of contrast between the town and the countryside. The Ravi-Malu love story has the making of a modern *Sakuntalam*. Ravi, the man from the town is possessive and self-seeking while Malu offers herself to him with full trust.

II

Prema Shiksha also tells a story of love and is characterised by sudden revelations and scenes of violence. All the same, it is psychologically more subtle than *Natan Premam*.

It opens with Kunnhikannan, a shop keeper, sheltering a stranger found lying sick in the pavement of his shop. He takes a liking for the stranger who calls himself Krishnan and makes him his assistant in the shop. Krishnan is well-behaved, polite and generally quiet. The whole town admires him. Impressed by his honesty Kunnhikannan entrusts the shop fully to his care. A few years later the merchant falls critically ill and sends for Krishnan from his death-bed and requests him to marry his only daughter, Manikam. As Krishnan does not want to turn down his saviour's dying appeal he consents to the marriage.

As Fate turns its wheel, events repeat themselves mysteriously. Krishnan finds a young man called Kumaran afflicted with malaria lying near his shop. He takes the man home and on the stranger's recovery employs him in the shop. Kumaran is different from his master in almost every respect. He is a good conversationalist and a talented singer. Frustrated by her husband's emotional aloofness Manikam begins to turn to the

young man with an irresistible passion. She writes letters to him and meets him frequently in hisro om when he is alone. Kumaran tries to put her off with great moral restraint. He has all along sensed something strange in his master's behaviour and one night he spies on Krishnan as the latter is fishing alone in the river. Standing in the river water and casting his net Krishnan takes out a hidden dagger and holds it in the air. The moon-light reveals a big scar on his thigh and this shocks Kumaran, for he connects it with a newspaper report that he had read years before. He is inclined to believe that Krishnan is Kunnjunni Nair who disappeared after murdering his wife and her lover. Kumaran discloses this suspicion to Manikam and reciprocates her love very much to her joy. They decide to report the matter to the police so that the way will be easily cleared for their marriage. A change now comes upon Krishnan as well. One night he comes home a little drunk, reveals his true identity to Manikam and goes to sleep on her lap. The novel ends on a scene of violence followed by a few revelations. Krishnan receives an anonymous warning that the police have found out his true identity. When he gets back home, fear-stricken and enraged, he discovers a letter written by his wife to her lover. In a fit of wild fury he murders her finding her to be guilty not only of marital infidelity but also of treachery. But he is wrong. There is yet another revelation—a long letter that she has written to her husband confessing her moral fall and describing her plan to kill her lover and end her own life. Moved by her confession Krishnan resolves, with a tragic abandon, to present himself before the police and to make Kumaran heir to all his property.

The ending of the novel is too melodramatic, for the novelist seems to be in an impatient hurry to piece together the various strands of the plot. The characters are however much more complex than those in *Natan Premam* and the conflicts in them are delineated very deftly. The hero's hidden identity invests the plot with an element of mystery, and when the identity is revealed it sheds light on his emotionally aloof behaviour in the earlier situations. The fishing scene has a haunting power. Against the background of the river, the rocky cliffs and the falling moon-light there emerges an altogether new image of that usually quiet man as he stands in the glittering waters

revealing the scar of his past and holding the dagger of his crime.

The artificiality and the unchecked emotionalism of the ending may be partly attributed to the novelist's eagerness to project his belief that no man is basically evil. Krishnan is a man of integrity and he becomes violent only when he discovers his wife's illicit connection with his own most trusted friend. Even after two years of marriage Manikkam is sex-starved, for her husband would not let anyone including herself see the scar on his thigh. In utter helplessness, she tries to win another man's love. Kumaran is very dynamic and romantic but he too has a strong conscience. He does not lose his self-control even when Manikkam makes sexual advances towards him. The idea that man's lapses and flaws are pardonable when circumstantially examined is highlighted in the novel almost like a thesis.

III

Mootu Patam centres upon the love between a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl—Appukuttan and Ameena, the girl in his neighbourhood. They have been playmates from early childhood. Besides, Ameena's brother Alikutty and Appukuttan are fast friends. Alikutty leaves for Bombay hoping to earn a better income. A few months later Appukttan also joins him unable to withstand his step-mother's harassment. A communal riot breaks out in the city. Meanwhile Alikutty receives a telegram intimating the sudden death of Appukuttan's father. He takes the message to his friend, and on his way back to his room he is stabbed to death by a Hindu fanatic. Back in his village, Appukuttan sells his lands and offers a portion of the proceeds of the sale to Ameena's mother telling her that it is Alikutty's savings meant to be spent as the dowry for his sister's marriage. Appukuttan has been mellowed by experience and has now come to believe that his marriage with Ameena will be unhappy and miserable in a society of communal rancour and hostilities. He finds a suitable match for her in the lorry driver Ahmed Kutty, his old classmate whom she accepts.

The novel depicts vividly and with an imaginative touch the social life of a village in Kerala with the three children

Appukuttan, Alikutty and Ameena as its focus. The landscapes that change with the seasons, the skylarking that accompanies the harvesting, the religious festivals like Onam and Ramzan that are celebrated in pomp and splendour, the harmony that generally prevails between the Hindus and the Muslims—these are very faithfully rendered. Events are often perceived from the child's point of view in the first part of the novel. Ameena and Appukuttan grow up watching the changes in nature, playing around the barns and listening to the birds. This rhythm of life and the bond with nature are lost when Appukuttan and Alikutty enter the city. The congested rooms where they live, their squalid surroundings and their routine—ridden existence are in sharp contrast to the peace and serenity of their boyhood days in the village. An atmosphere of dismal gloom broods over the latter half of the novel. The author's description of the communal riots is fraught with sarcastic observations. He exposes man's narrow communalism which infects society like a disease. The novelist is more concerned with the vision embodied in the novel than with its form or aesthetic perfection. Even though Appukkuttan's love for Ameena withers before blossoming, he looks forward to an age in which love will transcend the barriers of caste, creed and religion. The novel ends on this note of hope.

IV

Vishakanyaka (1948) marks a change in Pottekkatt's novelistic mode. Here he outgrows the romantic preoccupation with adolescent love. He comes to regard poverty and the peasant's struggle with the soil as the core of Indian social reality.

For a brief spell in the early 1940's Pottekkatt chanced to live in the hilly regions of North Malabar. During that period he came into contact with some of the early settlers from Travancore. Their stories of woe moved him deeply. He studied their problems with a genuine concern and this resulted in the writing of *Vishakanyaka*.

This novel is a fictional documentation of the exodus of a community, an exodus that is reminiscent of Moses' liberation of the Israelites and the settlement of the Pilgrim Fathers in

New England. In the 1930's victimised by some of the hostile policies of the then Travancore Divan and also lured by a deluding myth that the hills and valleys of North Malabar held out great opportunities to the industrious farmer, a large number of Christian families uprooted themselves from Travancore and drifted towards the North. They came in small groups, wave after wave. As it often happens, it is the first generation of settlers who faced the worst challenges. They invested all their wealth in lands. They had to build huts, dig wells and level the till-then-uncultivated lands. Their life was a long struggle with unresponsive soil. Pottekkatt strictly limits his theme to the first generation of immigrants. Naturally therefore, the vision projected in the novel is bleak. Most of the immigrants worked very hard, but the fruits of their toil were eaten by pigs and porcupines. Malaria took a heavy toll of lives in the hilly regions. The survivors lost not only their kith and kin but also the inclination and energy for any new ventures in life. The novel ends with a large number of settlers returning to Travancore depressed and defeated. The land that temptingly beckoned them thus turns out to be venomonous virgin, a "Vishakanyaka." The novel marks a movement from a dawn of new hopes and aspirations to a twilight gloom that thickens into darkness.

Vishakanyaka presents a variety of characters, and the plot moves forward through their interaction. Among those who engage our special attention are Mariam and her husband Mathan, Antony and the teen-aged girl Annie, Kurian and his wife, Varki and Madhavi. Mariam toils in the field from dawn to dusk; but her husband Mathan is an idler. All her dreams wither in the end. An abortion aggravated by malaria brings her life to a sudden end in its prime, and within a day her daughter is also buried by her side. Alone and aimless Mathan leaves for the South. Kurian's wife has illicit connections with Chakkachan who runs a tea-stall. Stung by an insect he returns home one noon and finds his wife lying in sexual embrace with her lover. He flies into a rage, gets drunk and creates a big commotion in the locality. Antony is a devout Christian, a young man of firm moral discipline. The teen-aged Annie entertains a secret passion for him and he too

is drawn to her. But even love does not grow in this wilderness. Annie dies of malaria.

Varki, the affluent young man, who spends his time and money on drinks and cards scrutinizes one evening the lands that stretch endlessly before him through his binoculars. In the distance he spots Madhavi, a voluptuous young woman, bathing naked. At the end of the novel he becomes the innocent victim of her sex-starved plot of vengeance designed against Antony.

Madhavi is a "Viskakanyaka," the embodiment of the tempting landscapes of north Malabar. She burns with lust and calls frequently on Antony inventing lame excuses. One night she gets fully drenched in rain and tries to seek shelter in his hut. She tempts him with her naked body and initiates him into sex. He looks upon the act as a moral fall, a spiritual wreck from which he cannot save himself.

Vishakanyaka had a sensational reception in all critical quarters, which was due to its thematic and technical novelty. For one thing, it is not the conventional type of hero-centred novel; nor is its movement punctuated by a linear plot. It blends the documentary and fictional modes of narration. It progresses through a series of fragmentary sketches. The effect is cumulative, arising out of the many tragedies, individual and familial, movingly rendered. All the immigrants can be collectively perceived as a single self, as man toiling in the land with new-fangled hopes. But the virgin land is a tempting Circe. She robs him of all his wealth and all his strength. In the end he is rendered homeless, penniless and aimless. As Antony, haunted ever by the memory of his fall, sets out for his homeland in the South, the green hills and valleys merge in his mind with the image of the voluptuous seductress who crushed him with lust and wrecked his soul of virgin innocence.

V

In *Oru Theruvinte Katha* (A Street's Story) Pottekkatt repeated his experiment with the documentary mode of fictionalisation. But the panorama that is brought to view is urban, not rural. Again, the characters are not the children of the soil but men and women of different occupations and preoccupations. The street is the locale of action. It has a dual identity—one which

is familiar to all and the other which it assumes in the late hours of the night.

The picture of society that emerges here is not totally dismal or dark. It is essentially a world of perversions, abnormalities and eccentricities that the novel projects.

What Dryden said of Chaucer is true of the characters in *Oru Theruvinte Katha*. "Here is God's plenty." The variety is astounding. Pappan who starts speaking aloud in English when he gets drunk, Rappai, the beggar, who disfigures his body with dyes and mud, Bappu Vaidyar, the mounte-bank, Kanaran the hunchback for whom shaving and cinema are inexplicably inter-related, Appu Nair who as a mahout killed his elephant by feeding it on blade-hidden cashew-fruits and Kunjippathu, the prostitute, who loves the young Abu and the astrologer who attracts a large crowd, are but a few of the street-dwellers portrayed in the novel.

As a foil to these people at the rock bottom of society are depicted those who wallow in luxury. Menon who gets sexually aroused only when he inhales the smell of burned rubber, Sudhakaran, the self-made man who puts money in the pockets of urchins and beggars when they are fast asleep and Radhakrishnan who has no sympathy for the underdog, are some of them.

Two interesting characters who figure very prominently in a number of situations are Omanchi and Krishna Kuruppu. Omanchi is a clerk in a goverement office, a bachelor in his forties who has a weakness for women. His breakfast consists mostly of leafy vegetables. Rose-gardening is a passion with him. On Sundays he enjoys an oil-bath, and it is an elaborate ritual of luxury for him. After massaging his whole body with oil he relaxes on a wooden plank in the rose-garden taking a close look through his binoculars at the women bathing in the distant lake. Omanchi is well disposed towards the street boys. He sees the image of his dead sister in Krishna Kuruppu's daughter Radha. He has a brotherly affection towards her and sends some money to her from his death-bed not knowing that she is dead.

Krishna Kuruppu earns his living selling newspapers. He is good at boosting the sale by drawing the public attention to exciting bits of news. He has a talent for twisting and combining

the headlines in the paper and thereby arousing the curiosity of everyone who hears him.

Pottekkatt was fully in his elements in the pattern and form that he chose for this novel. He was a keen observer of men's physiognomy, mannerisms and habits, and he always found the aptest metaphors to describe them. He speaks, for instance, of Parangodan as the only street-man capable of identifying his friends from the sounds that they produced during sleep. Sando Karuppan snored like "the grunting of a pig." Chandhu snored as though someone were frying banana chips. Of Kunjipperachan, an old villager, the novelist says that his legs are a pair of drumsticks. There are tufts of grey hair on his chest which look like the fluffy pod of a dried arecanut. Another character whom the novelist describes in great detail is Omanchi. His flabby body is like a log of jack-wood having holes and grooves here and there. His loud laughter is like the wild barking of an Alsatian dog.

Men may come and men may go, but the street goes on forever. It is this sense of continuity, of life's uninterrupted flow that the novel evokes in the end. When Radha dies, Krishna Kuruppu feels that his life has been emptied of meaning and purpose. Yet after a few days he resumes his old business of selling newspapers. On the very first day itself there is some exciting news: Malathi Menon was arrested while trying to smuggle jewels worth a prodigious sum of money. She had used artificial breasts to carry the jewels. Krishna Kuruppu knows that he will be able to sell all the papers in ten minutes if he bawls out Malathi's name and her crime. But he remembers that she had once presented Radha a petticoat, a silk ribbon and a few other things. Radha is now in her grave. He feels sorry for Malathi and decides not to mention her name at all. He picks on a few other interesting headlines and the street once again becomes alive with his voice and the spreading light of the morning sun.

Like some of his earlier novels and stories, *Oru Theruvinte Katha* also ends with the novelist's affirmation of the noble qualities inherent in man.

VI

Oru Desathinte Katha (1971) chronicles the changes that come upon a countryside over a span of three decades. Paralleling these changes is the protagonist's growth from infancy to manhood, from innocence to experience. His psyche is the nucleus of this small cosmos. Most of the events in the novel filter through his consciousness. They are therefore important not only in themselves but equally as experiences that broaden and deepen his knowledge of life and the world around him. The whole work is in this sense at once the saga of a suburb and fictionalised autobiography. The pattern is one of intricate interaction between the perceiving subjective self and the objective social reality.

Sreedharan is the central figure. His initiation into the mysteries of love and sex, nature, poetry and social reality is traced very minutely in the novel. When he is a five-year old kid he watches two women in the neighbourhood berating each other in the most obscene language. It is years later that Sreedharan understands the meaning of their words and gestures. Around the age of ten he has the privilege of being chosen as a lover's helper and confidant. Vasu stations Sreedharan near a coconut tree with some equipment for producing a loud explosion as a warning signal and goes inside a hut to make love to Tirumala, a married woman. A stranger who passes that way snatches the hammer from Sreedharan and produces the sound of a bullet-shot with the nail and the explosive powder. The lovers are perplexed and the woman comes out with her dishevelled hair. Vasu treats the boy with great contempt after this incident. The impulse of love sprouts in Sreedharan's mind at a very young age. His imagination feeds on it. He spends the summer holidays in his mother's village and his elder companion Appu's sister Narayani casts an irresistible spell on his fancy. She has a graceful face, her body is of the colour of the petals of pandanus. A victim of polio, she cannot stand or walk. She lies down most of the time on her back and moves about gracefully as if she were swimming. In Sreedharan's imagination her figure blends with the image of the water nymphs of fairy tales.

Narayani once gifts him a garland made of Ilanji-flowers. That night he goes to sleep with the fragrant garland under his pillow. In a dream he sees himself as a prince voyaging on the blue waves. A water-nymph drags him into the bottom of the sea. She makes love to him and throws her golden arms around his neck. A bird's twittering wakes Sreedharan from his dream. When he gets up he discovers that it is the Ilanji garland that gave him the sensation of a nymph's arms twining around his neck. Narayani dies after a year. In his teens Sreedharan is attracted to a girl studying in another school. He writes a love letter to her. Her parents come to know about it and the lover is put to shame. A few months later, he gathers some courage and kisses a girl of the neighbourhood as she is making "chutney." She cowers in fright and the "chutney" from her resisting hand spatters into his eyes. Before the kiss he burned with passion; after it his eyes burn from the hot chillies in the "chutney." An Iyengar's widowed sister Saraswati and Ammukkutty, a student of the training college, are among other young women who kindle a romantic passion in him. His encounters with the Japanese woman Emma in Switzerland mark the climax of his love experiences. In this last instance the woman is the aggressor and it is the man who eludes. He disentangles himself from her tempting love and emerges free in the end.

Though Sreedharan grows up in the suburb of a town, he spends his long holidays in his mother's enchanting village. As he is drawn more and more into the eddies of the town's social life, he is thus simultaneously initiated into the flora and the fauna as well as the legends and superstitions of the country-side. In the town he is admitted into a gang of night roamers. After a sumptuous, "chicken-dinner" they roam the town and indulge in some minor mischiefs such as removing calendars and pictures from one house into another, lengthening the wicks of the street lamps and uprooting plants from gardens. Sreedharan feels equally or even more at home in his mother's village. Appu tells him legends connected with birds and plants and teaches him the art of making bow and arrows, bamboo pistols and a number of such attractive things. As Sreedharan strays in the meadows and climbs the hills, his mind floats in a realm of moonlight fantasies.

These diverse experiences are stages in the evolution of a creative writer. Sreedharan inherits a passion for poetry from his father Krishnan Master, a reputed English teacher of the town and a scholar in Sanskrit. He begins to write poems and short stories in his teens. He does not succeed in his early attempts to have some of them published in magazines. He gets in touch with two editors and soon learns that quality is often not the only criterion for publication. He gets acquainted with a short-story writer and his admiration for the writer soon changes into contempt by a surprising revelation. The writer's technique consists in combining scenes and descriptions culled from different works into a new pattern. As the novel deals only with Sreedharan's early life, one cannot draw any conclusions about his achievements as an artist. The author stresses only the hero's initiation into poetry and also the fact that he brings an imaginative mind to bear upon his perception of objective reality.

"Athiranipadam," the locale of the novel, is not a "desam" of rich men. Most of the characters are from the working classes —toddy-tappers, carpenters, masons, owners of small tea-stalls and those employed in saw mills. There is for instance Kulooz Parangodan who exaggerates almost anything that he describes. Kittan Writer is another type—one who periodically visits some families, entertains them with gossip and cleverly manages to eat his lunch as their guest. Sreedharan's own brother Kunjappu who tells tall tales about his military adventures in Basrah, Andi who is well-known for his skill in drafting false legal documents, Balan who is beaten up by the police for alleged misbehaviour to a young woman, Velu who remembers every event of Athiranippadam—these are but a few specimens of the innumerable characters who lend variety and gaiety to this large little world. Kunjikkelu Melan, the once-richest man of Athiranippadam, is a character who has been impressively drawn. His extravagant ways form part of the legends of the locality. He is said to have delayed the performance of a play by half an hour as a result of his infatuation for an actress whom he commanded to be carried immediately into his bedroom. To make a display of his indifference to money he once lighted his cigarette by burning a hundred-rupee note in his mistress's presence. He suffers a steady financial decline and Sreedharan

as a college boy often sees him lying on the roadside drunk and abandoned by his friends. He borrows money from others and at times asks for drinks on credit.

Oru Desathinte Katha is a work of great range and variety. The author's lyrical sensibility and eye for realism are fully borne out by a number of scenes in the novel. Its success lies in the deft blending of the protagonist's personal experiences and the changing social realities. Sreedharan's story becomes inseparable from the story of his "desam."

VII

Among the lesser works of the novelist which have not been separately considered here, mention may be made of *Karambu*, *Kabeena*, *Kurumulaku* and the incomplete *North Avenue*. Karambu takes the reader to Mombaza in Africa. Against the historic background of Mombaza's old monuments, a stranger narrates to the author the breath-taking love story of Karambu Bheegam. This story takes up more than half of the novel's length. In the end the author has a surprise: the narrator was a thief being searched by the police.

Kurumulaku in a novel that has a socio-political interest. It is set in Wynad; the elections to the State Assembly complicate the relationship between the characters and their classes.

Kabeena is written for children and was published in the International Year of the Child. It centres upon an African girl who comes to Kerala for higher studies. Her reminiscences and cultural encounters with Kerala form the basis of the plot.

VIII

Pottekkatt was a novelist of remarkable development. His early novels were only extended exercises of the short story, a point which becomes evident when one considers *Natan Premam* and *Prema Shiksha* side by side with "Pulliman" and "Sthree." In the latter half of his career, he discovered a new novelistic mode and broadened the range and scope of the medium.

Pottekkatt conceived of man as the victim of circumstances, his behaviour as conditioned by social pressures. Accordingly the milieu assumes great importance in his works. In the early

novels, the social background is subservient to the plot which hinges upon the destinies of two or three individuals. In the later works, the characters are submerged, as it were, by the social panorama. A growing preoccupation with social reality is thus apparent in his perspective over the years. Fruther, there is a gradual movement from a romantic disposition to a realistic vision as one surveys the works chronologically. In *Oru Desathinte Katha*, however, he effects a synthesis of the romantic poise and the realistic mode. It marks the culmination of his achievements in this genre in the sense that through it he discovered himself and also found a form and pattern most suited to that discovery.

7

An Overview

Creative writer, social reformer, political idealist and traveller, Pottekkatt was imbued with an indefatigable dynamism.

Very few Indian writers have travelled so extensively and written so grippingly about their travel experiences as "S.K." He was rightly called "the John Gunther of Kerala." Gunther had a paid secretary and a few assistants to help him in the collection of required data and the organization of material. Pottekkatt however wrote all his travel books single-handed.

He contested twice for a Parliament seat; but he was not a politician in the strict sense, nor had he any intention of becoming one. Nevertheless, he was a man of strong political convictions and marked leftist sympathies. He beheved that it was a writer's responsibility to shape the destiny of his nation even by political involvement in times of crisis. He mingled freely with the poor and the depressed classes in society. He studied their problems and actively participated in some of the movements that were launched for their uplift and well-being.

As a creative writer, he was a pioneer and trend-setter in fiction. He combined a romantic sensibility with a realistic vision. His stories like "Pulliman" and "Ezhilampala" as well as early novels like *Natanpremam* and *Mootupatam* had a sensational impact upon the readers of the time. These were hailed as landmarks in the Romantic era of Malayalam literature. In the novel *Vishakanyaka* he broke fresh ground. It was a departure from the hero-centred conventional novels in Malayalam. By presenting the tragic exodus of a community it brought the form of the novel closer to that of a social documentary. He

repeated his experiment with the documentary mode of presentation more successfully in two other novels: *Oru Theruvinte Katha* and *Oru Desathinte Katha.* These works brought him renown as one of India's major novelists in this century. There was thus a shift in his preoccupation over the years from the individual to the society, a transition in his perspective from romanticism to realism. The social man overshadows the individual man in his later works.

Pottekkatt believed in clarity of expression, and this was a quality that he retained in all his writings. He did not experiment with style; nor did he evince a fondness for the veiled, equivocal or allegorical mode of story-telling. He endeavoured to convey everything with directness and a sense of immediacy. All the same, his style is not devoid of range or variety. He modulates his tone and manner in keeping with the subject. For instance when he describes the natural panorama of Kerala villages his language gathers a poetic intensity. When the scene shifts to a city street, the style alters and assumes a journalistic air. Unlike his contemporaries Uroob and Basheer, "S.K." had no penchant for colloquialisms. It is seldom that he attempts a reproduction of the dialect of a particular region even in a dialogue. Instead the conversation is often rendered in a literary style. "S.K." wanted the message of his characters to be carried straight to the reader.

Pottekkatt was endowed with an idealism rooted in a humanitarian vision. He had an abiding faith in the innate goodness of man. Most of his characters possess some redeeming human qualities. True, he has portrayed sex-maddened human beasts, cold-blooded murderers and treacherous women. But even such characters undergo a mental transformation or show signs of repentance at critical turns in life. In *Natanpremam*, Ravindran, the wealthy young businessman of the town exploits the innocence of a poor country girl. He makes love to her, gets her with child and disappears from the village without any moral qualms. Years later, he is overcome by guilt and he tries to make amends for his acts of betrayal in youth. Omanchi in *Oru Theruvinte Katha* is a womaniser and one who uses others for personal gains. Nevertheless, he sees the image of his dead sister in the teen-aged Radha. He has a brotherly affection towards her and sends some money to her

from his death-bed not knowing that she is dead. Man has the potential to be noble. Yet he sometimes turns evil because circumstances have dried up the fountain of love in him.

Pottekkatt accepted life with all its ironies, paradoxes and absurdities. All the same, he was not a naive optimist. He has written stories of intense gloom and of comic gaiety. His was a balanced vision of life, not entirely bleak nor very luminious. Yet he never failed to admire man for his power of endurance and for his capacity to reform himself.

Gopalettan in *Oru Desathinte Katha* becomes saint-like in the last days of his life. One night he tells Sreedharan: "Even if there is a god. He is in a far-off realm. Even if you speak to him. He may not hear you. But there is something within you which will always speak to you, hear you, guide you and temper you. It is your conscience. Speak to it. Listen to it." These words form the very core of the author's life-vision. Pottekkatt's faith in man was self-sufficient; it was not founded on any theological or spiritual assumptions. He analysed human problems at a mundane level of perceived social reality.

Pottekkatt's literary works exemplify his views on art and life. Though he did not write any critical treatises, he aired his firm notions on literature, time and again, during the many speeches that he made at seminars and conferences on poetry, fiction and other literary forms. The most memorable of all such speeches is perhaps the one that he made on receiving the prestigious Jnanapeedam award. Great literature, he held, is that which fosters the innate goodness in man and embraces the noble ideals of a social order. In the same spirit he argued that the basic objective of all literature ought to be to awaken man to the noble qualities lying dormant in him and to bring the people of the world closer to one another with love, a feeling of equality and cultural understanding.

He felt that there was a growing indifference in India to its own cultural heritage. He was very skeptical about some of the trends in contemporary Malayalam writing: Literature had become cheap, a commodity sold in the market. It attracted the reader by presenting sexual perversions, crime and scenes of rape. He observed that the modern world was blighted with three curses: poverty, atmospheric pollution and population explosion. Correspondingly, poverty of ideas, pollution from

a mania for sexual perversions and mass production of trash writing had brought about a deterioration in literature as well.

The times were out of joint. Some of the changes in society disturbed him. He had become virtually a stranger to his own town. *Oru Desathinte Katha*, his autobiographical work, ends with Sreedharan's sense of alienation from his own 'desam.' On his return from Japan, Sreedharan finds a thoroughly transformed town, hardly recognizable as the place where he grew up. The streets have become crowded, many new buildings have come up and most of the faces are new, unfamiliar. Everything looks artificial, unreal. A teen-aged boy dressed in jeans, who comes to a shop to drink Coca-cola whistling a western tune, is the most telling symbol of the new town and the new age. He has replaced Sreedharan. His story will be the story of the next generation.

One of Pottekkatt's friends recounts an incident which occurred a few months before his death. The two of them were walking along a crowded street in the evening watching unfamiliar faces flit past them. They went to a new restaurant. ordered coffee and had a long chat about the old times. Sitting beside them was a young man. When the bearer brought the bill he seized it and footed it. Pottekkatt thought that he was his friend's acquaintance but soon discovered that the young man was a stranger to both of them. In a tone of deep reflection Pottekkatt observed to his friend: "Our world is dead. We are strangers here." He was embarrassed by such confrontations with anonymous young men. He escaped into death, or as someone remarked, the traveller went on a long day's journey into night.

With Pottekkatt's passing away there ended an eventful era in the history of Malayalam fiction.

He was at once a romanticist and a realist, an artist who loved and guarded his freedom and individuality and yet mingled fondly and openly with men at the grassroots level, one who wandered from land to land with a deep curiosity for the far-off and the exotic and still found his soul's roost in his own Kerala.

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Prema Shiksha (1945)
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Manimalika (1944)
Rajamalli (1945)
Nisagandhi (1945)
Pulliman (1945)
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Jalatharangam (1946)
Vijayanthi (1946)
Pournami (1947)
Padmaagam (1947)
Indraneelam (1947)
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Rangamandapam (1949)
Yavanikakku Pinnil (1952)
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Kanakambaram (1955)
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Ezhilampala (1962)
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C.P. Sivadasan "An Interview with S.K. Pottekkatt" *Malayalam Literary Survey*, V, 3 and 4 (July-December, 1981)

Research in Progress

P. Muralidhar, Reseasch Scholar,
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Explanatory Notes

Malabar Kendra Kala Samiti. An organization devoted to drama. Among its founder members were V.A. Abdulla, Abdul Rahman and Tikkodiyan.

Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham: A Co-operative society of writers established at Kottayam in April 1945 with M.P. Paul as its President and Karoor Neelakanta Pillai as its secretary.

Sabari mala, a famous hill-top temple of Lord Ayappa in Travancore which attracts millions of pilgrims every year.

Vythiri Road, a road with hair-pin curves across the hilly regions in Wynad, North Malabar.