

## **‘Smile of Discontent’: Re-negotiating the Postcolonial Identity in Colonial Kerala**

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### **I Introduction**

*Laughter has always been seen as arising out of some kind of incompatibility or some incongruity... The concrete manifestations of laughter arising from such a constellation range from subversive laughter, carnivalesque exhilarations, wry smiles, self-deprecation, gallows humour, or black humour to more conciliatory and healing humour, or to the wild and eerie laughter of the otherwise silenced “madwoman in the attic.” All these reflect a struggle for agency, an imbalance of power, and a need, a desire, for release. [Reichle and Stein 09]*

*[Laughter] is always caught up in the kinds of distinctions between centre and margins every society employs to establish and stabilise its identity: in one society, the predominant form of laughter can be that which aims from the site of the ideological or power centre at what is to be marginalised or excluded altogether; in another, the most significant form of laughter can arise from the margins, challenging and subverting the established orthodoxies, authorities and hierarchies. (Pfister vi-vii)*

Humour as a term denoting a situation which evokes laughter is quite familiar to everyone. However, what complicates the issue is when we attempt to make a definition of what constitutes humour. This is because humour can never be considered as a homogenous term, as something which makes all humanity to laugh at one go. Humour is culture specific and what may appear humourous to a group can be quite unsettling for the one at the receiving end of laughter. Hence it could be said that there is a larger cultural and political dynamics at work in the origin as well as reception of humour. One of the major reasons for this disparity happens to be the imbalance in the power equation within any society. Any discussion on the multiple manifestations of power can hardly neglect a reference to the colonial period. The Postcolonial societies have come up with difference discursive strategies to contest the Empire. The two quotations cited above brings in the main thrust of this paper: laughter as a mechanism to subvert the power imbalances, particularly in colonial Kerala.

The title of this paper owes allegiance to the work *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender and Nineteenth Century British Fiction* (1999) by Eileen Gillooly which looks into the question of how humour was considered as an unobtrusive and prudent way of critiquing the restrictions imposed on female agency and identity by writers of nineteenth century British fiction. My argument is that this aspect of humour as a weapon was not quite unknown even to the writers of our regional literature in Malayalam. The phenomenon of laughing back at the Empire was very much in the air in Kerala as early as the nineteenth century. Seeing laughter in the postcolonial scene as merely an act of ‘laughing back’ at the Empire would be too simplistic and reductive. My attempt has been to explore the multiple dimensions of laughter which could be directed at the coloniser as well as the colonised, thereby prodding the intellect and transforming the less privileged into active subjects in the shaping of the postcolonial identity.

Before going into a detailing of the text under analysis, the major theoretical concepts that have been employed for this reading have to be mentioned. The Bakhtinian notion of the carnival as a literary phenomenon engendering free thinking and liberation has been brought in. The carnival, a manifestation of medieval folk culture emphasizes the potential of humour to subvert the oppressive boundaries erected by the official culture. This aspect of the folk tradition suffered a gradual erasure from the social scene with the dawn of renaissance and the eventual replacement of feudalism with capitalism. In this context, Bakhtin revised his notion, terming it as the ‘carnavalesque’ to refer to the spirit of the carnival transferred to the world of literature during this period. The Postcolonial literary scene continues to exist as a major trajectory of literature which has made optimum use of laughter as a strategic weapon to voice the disrespect towards the Empire. The postcolonial sensibility transformed the passive subjects of the colonies from their stage of innocence into one of awakened conscience. This progression towards a new conscience made use of the literary forms like parody, pastiche etc. to dismantle the colonial discourses. Here, the term ‘postcolonial’ has been used as an ideological and historical awareness rather than going by the conventional historical perspective of the postcolonial as emerging after the end of the colonial empires. Humour acted as an aesthetic technique to make possible a subversive laughter to turn the table against the colonisers. The following quote aptly briefs the political intention behind the postcolonial aesthetic: “Beginning with “erasure” and culminating in “reclamation” or assertion, the postcolonial aesthetic

involves a renewed quest for native roots and distinct self identity" (Digole 129). Thus subversion through laughter existed as an aesthetic practice creatively used to bringing in the agency of the postcolonial 'other'. The humouristic narrative mode, along with its obvious laughing at the power structure also accomplished the task of dismantling the homogenous definition of the term modernity. Rather than regarding modernity as a universal concept with its origin in the West and introduced by the Empire into the indigenous space, the possibilities of many types of modernities emerging from the regional contexts have been exploited in this paper. The term "Regional Modernities" have been referred to direct attention towards the regional specificities of the developmental performances and bodies of writings in the postcolonial native spatio-temporal world.

The problematics of canon building has also to be looked into. The process of canon formation has to be viewed as a political venture. For, the text chosen for this study falls outside the accepted [colonial] literary canon of the period. While literature could act both as a conduit of colonial power as well as a critical tool towards national formation, the texts belonging to the latter category were conveniently deprived of a place in the canon. Any canon defines the ways and attitudes of seeing the world. "The canon is shaped by and shaping of the locations in which it is distributed" (Mullaney 34). This paper aims at a reconfiguration of the established canon of nineteenth century Malayalam literature to open up the possibilities of the canon to reflect upon the postcolonial experience. This could not be seen in the simplistic way of writing back a text into a canon but a process of disrupting the existing discursive field dictated by the colonial sensibility.

The work chosen for a close analysis is *Parangodi Parinayam* (1892) by Kizhakkeppattu Ramankutty Menon which is a text far ahead of its times. So far, this particular work has been sidelined in Malayalam literature, attributing only a reductionist reading to it as a satire of *Indulekha* (1889). The following sections of this paper highlight the specific instances from the former text to contradict the popular reading of this text and to see how the ideas of postcoloniality, subversive humour and regional modernities are reflected in the text, marking it as a seminal text questioning the colonial sensibility as early as the nineteenth century. The following words of Césaire is highly suggestive of the impact of the Empire: "Societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religion smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed and the extraordinary possibilities wiped out" (Césaire 21-22). We shall see now many of the issues mentioned in the above quote is dealt within *Parangodi Parinayam*.

The three main characters of the text are Parangodikutty, the English educated heroine, Parangodan Marar, the English educated hero and Pangassa Menon, a man situated in the traditional space and voicing the postcolonial sensibility gaining momentum during the period. The text employs humour as a counter-gaze to colonialism. While the gaze of the colonial panopticon as a political tool explained the native socio-cultural scene in derogatory terms, the possibility of resistance through an oppositional gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency.

Humour takes centre stage in the text beginning with the very titles of the chapters. The most conspicuous examples of such titles are: Chapter 1: Going to the Pond and Catching Sight of a Water snake; Chapter 3: Beating a Drum; Chapter 5: On the nephew becoming a lawyer and the daughter attaining puberty; Chapter 6: How the gun was dried in the sun and the rope of fun broken and Chapter 10: A Conversation or the Eighteenth Chapter. With *Indulekha* becoming popular as the first full-fledged novel in Malayalam, there emerged in the regional literary repertoire a series of novels written in the same vein to garner publicity. A few examples of such works are *Indumathiswayam-varam* (1890) by Ammaman Raja, *Meenakshi* (1890) by C. Chathunair, *Lakshmikesavam* (1892) by Kommattil Padumenon and *Sukumari* (1897) by Joseph Mooliyil. Through the title of his last chapter, the writer is making a dig at the imprudent imitations of a popular work and exhibiting how ridiculous it might turn out to be.

The accomplishments acquired by women as a part of their education in the nineteenth century included the learning of playing musical instruments and sewing. With reference to the scene in Victorian England, it has been said:

Unlike painting or writing, which some middle-class women were taking up as professions, needlework and teaching were seen as "natural" professions for women, and so would have been appropriate for those from the middle- and upper-classes. Whereas only some women had the education to be a governess, virtually all women had the necessary experience for needlework. (Harris < [www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org)>)

The Victorian women had professional ambitions behind the learning of such skills since many of them worked as governesses and also because their style of dressing demanded advanced stitching skills. On the contrary, the women in the regional context took the effort to learn the skill as a part of the colonial education with no professional or sartorial benefits. Parangodikutty's skill in sewing doesn't serve any commendable purpose other than embroidering Parangodan's name on the cap gifted to him: "[Parangodikutty] was also adept at needlework. When our Parangodan Marar became a lawyer, she had stitched a most singular cap for him and sent it to him as a gift. All around it was embroidered 'Parangodan' in English letters with glittering thread which at first glance seemed to be creepers spreading around" ([www.samyukta.info](http://www.samyukta.info)). However, the writer also

adds that only the 'English friends' of Parangodan appreciate this craftsmanship. This naivety in blindly adopting the colonial system of education is made fun of by Pangassa Menon:

And then, you say Parangodikutty's needlework is outstanding. Why, are we going to make a living as dressmakers? If so we would need Parangodikutty, but that is not the case. There is a reason for English women learning to sew. Their style of dress demands a lot of stitching, which poor people cannot afford; their earnings will all have to be spent on dressmakers. So if the woman of the house does the needlework a lot of money can be saved. So for the English it is necessary that their women are taught stitching and sewing. Our women wear only dhothi and towel. How much stitching does one need to know for that? (www.samyukta.info)

The English educated brown 'sahibs' were highly contemptuous of the native religious beliefs and practices. While religion provided a strong anchor for the Europeans, the natives were being uprooted from their spiritual moorings. The writer makes fun of the senseless questioning of the religious practices by the pseudo-intellectuals. Such youngsters finally ended up as an indeterminate group with confused thought process. Pangassa Menon remarks: "They begin to think in the vein, 'What temple', 'What rituals', 'I don't need the salvation attained by bowing before a piece of rock and going without food.' They develop the ability to question a lot of things like 'Who is God? Has anybody seen Him? All such nonsense can be sold to the poor fools who live in villages. We cultured people who have studied English and become urbanized will not be taken in by it" (www.samyukta.info).

The advancement of English education among the nairs towards the end of the nineteenth century was a turning point in the history of the matrilineal system in the community. These youngsters were mentally conditioned to see situations as binaries, good / bad. Viewed through Victorian morality, most of the practices associated with the matrilineal system seemed to be wrong. Hence the English educated members of the community clamoured for a total erasure of this socio-cultural system which actually had been granting a defining identity to the women of the community: "Where does the head of the family dictate terms? Even among the barbarians of America, do the sisters have any right to family property? Our matrilineal family system is all wrong; it has to be changed to the patrilineal with all the members having an equal share" (www.samyukta.info). The arrogance with which the youngsters with westernized sensibility looked down upon the essence of the native way of life is criticised with a great sense of humour:

The ornaments used in Kerala will be mocked at even by the aborigines of Africa. I am ashamed to admit that I am a Malayalee when the Europeans make fun of our women's dress. I feel mortified when I speak Malayalam. Are the vegetables of Kerala as tasty as those of England? How foolish it is to eat off a banana leaf, why cannot we use knife and fork? Is the climate of Kerala as pleasant as that of England? When we see the idiocy and innocence of the people we feel they belong to the period of Adam and Eve. (www.samyukta.info)

One of the most deplorable aspects of the colonised sensibility was its refusal to enjoy, respect or even accommodate the native art forms which were the priceless treasures of the regional culture. The natives were gradually being dispossessed of their cultural moorings. Ammalu was enraged by the way Parangodikutty looked and acted. But to be polite she hid her feelings and asked amicably, "hey, why did we not see you downstairs? Is it that you dislike music and dancing?". To that question, the latter replied, "Are you referring to the shouting and hooting that I heard from below? I doubted whether it could be the devil dance of the African Negroes" (www.samyukta.info).

While we mourn the loss of many of these traditional art forms now, the writer of this novel was far ahead of his times in predicting the consequences of unrestrained colonization of the native sensibility. So far we have been looking into the utilization of humour in the text to express the postcolonial sensibility of a non-English educated native, Pangassa Menon. It is quite interesting to note that this character is equally capable of questioning the flaws in the native culture. He is capable of looking inwards, thereby exemplifying the fact that rational thinking is not related to any particular language, English in this context. According to Anthony Giddens, this should be considered as a case of reflective modernity.

...singing whatever foul words that come to their tongue, lugging cocks for sacrificing before the goddess, wearing a woollen half shirt is mainly the people of northern Kerala who attend the Kodungalloor Bharani. It is better not to describe the way they prepare to go to the festival four days before its commencement, shamelessly and with a pointed cap popularly called pazhanithoppi. 'Our women step down to the poolside with no shame or hesitation and begin rubbing oil all over their body, resting their legs on the upper step and using powdered bark for soap, scrub at certain organs to clean off the oil and dirt, intermittently eyeing the men standing around in a coy manner.' (www.samyukta.info)

A revisiting of the humour in the text makes us aware of its following features: (1) Pangassa Menon's humour is, in a sense, a counter-gaze of colonialism: the vision of the observer who is both within and without the colony (2) As always, the joke is multi-edged but inclusive. On the one hand it asserts the value of learning

and expertise, while on the other pointing out its ridiculousness and basis in mimicry (3) Irony informs much of the text's comedy, making it not only a critique of particular colonial institutions, but also a broader critique of modernity.

The humour in this nineteenth century Malayalam novel is imbued with immense scope for multiple readings. Decades before Bakhtin formulated the theories, here we have a polyphonic, dialogic and carnivalesque text. First and foremost, this could be seen as a powerful instance of the empire laughing back. Humour acts as key strategy of postcolonial resistance. Pangassa Menon is actually trying to add meaning to the regional milieu with the intention of renegotiating a new hybrid identity. This text which has so far been neglected from the mainstream literary canons is in essence a resource to study the waves of regional modernity that were being formed not after but parallel to the discourse of colonial modernity. Demonstrating the presence of subversive sensibility within the colonial discourse, it successfully problematizes the homogenization of modernity.

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