**Paniker, K. Ayyappa (1930-2006)**

K. Satchidanandan

K. Ayyappa Paniker – poet, translator, critic, editor and academic – was a pioneering practitioner and interpreter of the modernist impulse in Malayalam literature. His poetry in Malayalam has been collected in five chronologically organized volumes, and his collected essays run into three volumes. Besides these, he published several collections of translations of poetry and fiction, conversations, monographs in English and works edited in English and Malayalam. In 1967, Paniker founded *Kerala Kavita*, a path-breaking journal exclusively devoted to poetry and poetics, and introduced the new Malayalam poetry to a wider readership by translating poems and editing anthologies. He was awarded several literary prizes, including the prestigious Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters, India) award, Kabeer Samman and Saraswatisamman.

**Timeline**

Kurukshetram

1967 Kudumba Saraswati Samman

Puranam 1974-5 *Gotrayanam* 2004 Death

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1957 Founds 1968 *Cartoon Kavitakal* 1985 Padmashree 2006

*Keralakavita*

As a poet, Paniker remained an innovator till the end of his life. His significant poetic career began with ‘Kurukshetram’(1960), which summed up the dilemmas of the modern human condition in a monologue of momentous hesitations. The transient and the timeless, the phenomenon and the idea, meet eye to eye in this poem in the equivocations of a disinherited mind. The poem recalls the Hamlet-like anguish of Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata as he saw his own kin, even his guru, arrayed against him in war, and foregrounds an awareness of the futility of the philosophical and ideological systems man has built up over centuries. The poem was immediately noticed for its visionary energy and radical content, its interrogative stance and its rejection of the status quo. What attracted attention was also the poem’s innovations in form, the way it took liberties with meters, stretching and mixing them, its use of surrealist images such as ‘the corpses that sleep in the cradle waiting to be awakened’ and ‘the marketplace where men bargain and sell themselves’ and its deployment of irony and black humour as means of looking at life and linking up the cosmic with the mundane.

‘Kuukshetram’ was followed by several important long poems and sequences like ‘Mrityupooja’ (Hymn to Death, 1967), ‘Kudumbapuranam’, (The Family Saga, 1968), ‘Pakalukal, Ratrikal’ (Days, Nights, 1969), ‘Passage to America’ (1969-70), ‘Cartoon Kavitakal’ (Cartoon Poems, 1974-75), ‘Ivide Jeevitam’ (Here, Life, 1975-76) ‘Gotrayanam’ (The Tribe’s Journey, 1985-89) and ‘Pathumanippookkal’ (Ten o’clock Flowers, 2005) as well as hundreds of short poems of varied kinds and genres. Paniker introduced new poetic forms such as the sequence poem, cartoon poem and the performance poem, and adopted several voices, masks and styles in his writing, and enlivened his poetry with humour, paradox and irony. His work shows a tense relationship with the tradition that he knew deeply. He freed the art of poetry from many taboos and restraints, setting the stage for the next generation to take over.

As a critic, he introduced his own conceptual accounts of the ‘text’ and the ‘inter-text,’ used concepts from Sanskrit and Tamil poetics to interpret contemporary works and brought his modern vision to bear upon the old and the new classics in Malayalam. His translations of poetry and fiction from India and other parts of the world, as well as his ambitious compilation of Medieval Indian literature, added to the authenticity of his modern scholarship and sensibility.

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