**Modernism, Malayalam Literature**

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Although it is difficult to trace the beginnings of modernism in Malayalam literature to a single author or text, there is general agreement about its high points: the publication of ‘Kuruksetram’ (Kuruksetra, the scene of the battle of Mahabharata: composed 1951-57; published 1960) by K. Ayyappa Paniker (1930-2006) in poetry and *Khasakkinte Itihasam* (The Legends of Khasak, 1969) by O. V. Vijayan (1930-2005) in fiction. Some earlier works of these authors, for instance Paniker’s ‘Oru Surrealistinte Premaganam’ (The Love song of a Surrealist, 1952) and Vijayan’s ‘Moonnu Yudhdhangal’ (Three Wars, 1957) have been seen retrospectively as displaying features of modernism. Early signs of literary modernism may also be found in the fiction of Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, especially *Shabdangal* (Voices, 1947) with its non-linear narration and bleak attitude to life, and Chagmpuzha Krishna Pillai’s posthumously published Baudelairean poem *Padunna Pishachu* (The Devil that Sings, 1949), with its surreal images and obsessive preoccupation with evil. Poets such as N. V. Krishna Variyar, M. Govindan and G. Kumarapillai and the playwright C. J. Thomas are regarded as transitional figures whose work presages modernism. However, it was Paniker’s ‘Kurukshetram’ that marked a decisive departure in poetry by freely mixing meters, breaking linear structure and expressing in fresh, sometimes surreal, images the dilemma of contemporary life.

In poetry and fiction in Malayalam, modernism involved a break from the romanticists’ nostalgia for lost pasts and the preoccupation of ‘progressive’ writers with social issues. Many of the new writers were born in villages and had moved into the cities – some to metropolises outside Kerala like Bombay and Delhi - felt that contemporary urban reality was too complex to be expressed in old forms. They were impacted by modernist writing from Europe and America: the French symbolists and T. S. Eliot in poetry, Kafka, Sartre and Camus in fiction, and Pirandello and Beckett in drama. This, however, did not result in mimicry or pastiche; the new writings were deeply rooted in the reality of post-1947 India, with its many layers of colonial and pre-colonial history. The tone of despair in these writings came from the pangs of the Partition of India, the perceived moral degeneration in politics, anxieties created by colonial education, the fear of the loss of identity, and the paradoxes of a halting industrialization in the country. It found its larger contexts in an unquiet world torn by wars and conflicts, as well as in new discoveries about the complexities of the nature of the universe and the human mind. By about 1970, Malayalam had a corpus of poetry and fiction that strove to capture the multi-layeredness of Indian life with its uneasy co-existence of different time-worlds in startling images, unusual narratives and syncopated rhythms. Transgressions of set mores and norms, a remapping of Indian mythology in new contexts of society and language, innovative combinations of elements from the folk and classical traditions or from indigenous and exotic repertoires, and a self-conscious employment of patterns and rhythms of everyday speech – these became hallmarks of the new writings. These polyphonic texts alienated some readers, but modernism soon found its constituency among those who looked for thematic novelty and stylistic freshness in literature. Here was a new avant-garde who appeared not to be explicitly political, but who were nuanced critics of what they witnessed around them. Unhappy with prevailing modes of writing, modernist writers considered literary patricide as an essential gesture of creativity: lyricism in poetry and realism in fiction were the first victims of their revolt. Modernist writing accommodated political conservatives, liberals and radicals; they were all linked together by the quest for a new idiom and by a critical attitude towards the authoritarian tendencies of the nascent state.

The most prominent modernist writers who emerged in the 1960s and 70s included, in addition to Paniker and Vijayan, Kamala Das (Madhavikkutty, 1934-2009), V. K. N (1932-2004), Kakanadan (1935-2011), M. Mukundan (b. 1942), Punathil Kunhabdulla (b.1940), Sethu (b.1942), M. P. Narayana Pillai (1939-1998), Paul Zacharia (b. 1945), N. S. Madhavan (b. 1948), Sara Joseph (b. 1946) and M. Sukumaran (1943) in fiction; R. Ramachandran (1923- 2005), N. N. Kakkaad (1927-1987), Madhavan Ayyappath (b. 1934), Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan (1935-2008), Attoor Ravivarma (b. 1930), K. Satchidanandan (b. 1946), D. Vinayachandran (1946-2013), K. G. Sankara Pillai (b. 1947), A. Ayyappan (1949-2011), Maythil Radhakrishnan (b. 1944) and Balachandran Chullikad (b. 1957) in poetry; and G. Shankara Pillai (1930-1990), Kavalam Narayana Paniker (b. 1928) and R. Narendra Prasad (1946-2003) in drama. These writers were different from one another in fundamental ways, and their differences became increasingly pronounced over time. While most of them continued to invent new forms and experiment with new structures and idioms, some – like the novelist Punathil Kunhabdulla and the poet M. N. Paloor – returned to traditional modes of composition over time.

Many of the modernist writers, especially poets like Ayyappa Paniker, Kadammaitta Ramakrishnan, Attoor Ravivarma, Madhavan Ayyappath and Satchidanandan have also been active translators. Their translations contributed to the growth of a new sensibility and the creation of fresh idioms in poetry. Little magazines like *Navasahiti*, *Gopuram, Sameeksha, Keralakavita, Anveshanam, Jwala, Yugarashmi, Aksharam, Niyogam* and *Sankramanam* played a decisive role in the growth of new writing in Malayalam, along with the literary criticism of K. P. Appan, Narendra Prasad, Ayyappa Paniker, K. Satchidanandan, B. Rajeevan, Udaya Kumar, V. C. Sreejan and others.

At present, there are at least two generations of writers in Malayalam who have succeeded the Modernists. The ‘high’ Modernism of the sixties found new dimensions in later writing. The seventies saw a radicalization of its politics and a historicization of its themes, as in writers like M. Sukumaran and K. G. Sankara Paillai; women-writers, many of them committed feminists, also drew upon the modernist break-through when it came to questions of style. Kamala Das and Sara Joseph have been succeeded by a younger generation of women fiction writers such as Gracy, Chandramati, C.S. Chandrika, K. R. Meera, Sitara, Dhanya Raj and Lathalakxmi. There is also a crop of fine women poets: Savithri Rajeevan, Vijayalaxmi, Anita Thampi and V. M. Girija are prominent examples. Dalit writers like C. Ayyappan (fiction) and S. Joseph (poetry) also use modernist strategies.

The present, multi-directional, literary scene in Malayalam has largely abandoned the self-involvement of early modernism to pursue a politics of difference and a non-atavistic retrieval of the past. Suspicious of dominant ideas of progress and development and of universalist ideologies in general, the new writers display a pre-occupation with ontological questions: these tendencies may have their roots in Modernist sources.

**Timeline:**

1947 Vaikom Muhammad Basheer’s *Sabdangal*.

1949 Changampuzha Krishna Pillai’s *Padunna Pisachu*.

1960 Ayyappa Paniker’s *Kurukshetram*.

1966 *Puthumudrakal*, the first anthology of Malayalam modernist poetry

1968 *Keralakavita* starts publication.

1969 O. V. Vijayan’s *Khasakkinte Ithihasam*, M. Mukundan’s *Delhi*.

1970 Anand’s *Alkkoottam*.

1972 Publication of *Harishree*, anthology of modernist poetry

1974 Ayyappa Paniker's Collected Poems

1980 Collected Poems of Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan

1990 *Nervazhikal*, anthology of modernist poetry

1995 Attoor Ravivarma's Collected Poems

2003 N. S. Madhavan’s novel *Lanthan Batheriyile Luthiniyakal*

2006 Poems of K Satchidanandan, 1965-2005.

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