

Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture - 06A
The Rise of Novel in Regional Languages: Indulekha

So welcome to a new session of Indian fiction in English. Today, we are looking at the Novel, Indulekha, within the context of ‘The rise of novel in regional languages in India.’ So, Indulekha is a Malayalam novel. It was written by O. Chandu Menon, in the year 1889.

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Indulekha (1889)

- O. Chandu Menon (1847-1899) – sub-judge of Calicut, a member of Malabar Marriage Commission (1891)
- *Indulekha* – Menon’s first work in 1889
- *Sarada* – second novel - incomplete
- *Indulekha* - translated into English in 1890 by W. Dumergue, a civil servant in Malabar
- Set a trend for Malayalam novels with female protagonists
- Appreciated by literary critics for realistic treatment of plot and characterization – the ‘first finest novel’ in Malayalam
- Appu Nedungadi’s *Kundalata* (1888) is the first Malayalam novel

Now, Chandu Menon was a sub-judge of Calicut, and he was also a member of the Malabar Marriage Commission, instituted in 1891 by the British Government of Madras Presidency in order to look into the changes that could be brought about in the matrilineal structure that was matrilineal system that was practiced by the Nair community the form of marriage called ‘sambandham’ and their inheritance system. Now, Indulekha is Menon’s first novel.

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O. Chandu Menon



Cover page of Translation by Anitha Devasia (2005)
depicts Raja Ravi Varma's painting

And it is also considered to be the first finest novel written in the language. Now, he has also written another novel called Sarada, however he could not complete it, so he wrote these two works. Now Indulekha was translated into English in 1890 by W. Dumergue. He was a British civil servant. This was a very popular novel and was widely read. It was very successful that within three months of its publication, the second edition was brought out.

And it also set a trend for Malayalam novels with female protagonists. It was not only appreciated by readers; it was considered by (()) (01:39) also to be the first finest novel in Malayalam. Because chronologically speaking, Indulekha was only the second novel it was Kundalata written by Appu Nedungadi that was the first Malayalam novel. However, by the literary merits, such as realistic treatment of plot, the characterization the brilliance of characterization by Menon, Indulekha is still considered to be the first Novel written in the language.

There is an interesting anecdote behind the writing of the Novel Indulekha. Menon was a very avid reader of English novels. He loved reading English novels. He would often narrate these novels for his wife and his friends. So, it occurred to him that why not translate one of these novels into Malayalam. And he initially set out to translate Benjamin Disraeli's, Henrietta Temple into Malayalam.

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Context

- Menon initially set out to translate Benjamin Disraeli's *Henrietta Temple*
- Difficulty arising from cultural differences – not relatable
- Decided to write an original work in Malayalam set in the region
- Set in the late 19th century Kerala - realistic portrayal of the contemporary Kerala society (particularly the Nair community) – the period of 'colonial modernity' of Kerala
- The first 'social novel', 'realist novel'

He felt that if this novel was translated into Malayalam would not be relatable to Malayalee readers. Therefore, he dropped this idea and therefore decided to write an original work in Malayalam which would be set in the region and that is how Indulekha was written and this novel is set in the late 19th century, Kerala. One of the most decisive phase, in the history of Kerala, it was the period of colonial modernity.

And it is realistically captures this particular time period, and particularly the Nair community. Therefore, this work is also considered to be first social novel as well as the first realist novel written in the language.

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Key points

- Captures the life within the matrilineal family
- About the matrilineal system of Nair community – *taravadu* (joint family), *karanavar* (the head of the joint family) *sambandham*
- Anticipates the shift from matrilineal joint family to patrilineal, nuclear family structure
- Rupture in the taravadu
- Point of view of the English **educated** man who questions the 'uncivilized' traditional practices
- Espouses the cause of female education

No while talking about the novel, we will have to look into some of the key aspects regarding the novel. First of all, the novel is set in the matrilineal Nair family and it captures the life inside the familial space. Now, to talk about the matrilineal structure; matrilineal is the kinship system in which you trace the decent of the family through the female line. So they lived as joint families which were called Taravadu.

Each Taravadu is headed by the eldest male member called the karanavar. And they practiced a form of marriage called sambandham in which there is no legal validity to the relationship between the husband and the wife and it is not even considered as a ritual marriage. So, there is no obligation for the husband towards his wife and children they remain within the woman's taravadu and the father figure is not even present.

He is just a visiting member and they could absolve this sambandham relation as and when they pleased. So the importance of this sambandham practice within the context of matrilineal is that, the property remains consolidated within the joint family. So it is this particular situation or this particular family structure and its functioning that is captured in Indulekha along with which the novel also anticipates the shift from this matrilineal joint family to a patrilineal nuclear family structure.

Because, as I mentioned, this is a period of colonial modernity, a phase in which a series of reformed moments were taking place. There were community reform moments in various caste groups. So, in the context of Nair community, the educated younger male members they started raising their voice of decent against the Authoritarian figure of the karanavar and this created rupture in the Taravadu.

The entire novel is presented in the point of view of the English educated man who questions the seemingly uncivilized traditional practices from his perspective. And more significantly, this novel espouses the cause of female education.

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Summary

- Indulekha – English educated Nair girl, well mannered, extremely good looking (“gem of a woman”) – in the model of female protagonists of English novels
- Indulekha’s charm is not merely because she is “educated, open minded, witty and beautiful, it is also because *she is a rebel!*” (Tharu)
- belong to the aristocratic Chambazhiyot Poovally taravad
- Panchu Menon (the *karanvar*) – Indulekha’s grandfather
- Madhavan – grand nephew of Panchu Menon,
 - educated, well versed in English and Sanskrit, law graduate, good looking
- The novel opens with a crisis
- Panchu Menon has a fall out with Madhavan, brings another sambandham for Indulekha with Suri Nambuthiripad

- Nambuthiripad is an octogenarian, libertine and dimwit. Indulekha declines him. He marries a young girl from the family
- Misunderstandings and confusions
- Madhavan embarks on a tour of the country
- Confusions are cleared, Madhavan and Indulekha reunite and they move to Madras

Now, let us have a quick look at the summary of the novel. We will be looking only at the major story line and I will only mention some of the major or significant characters instead of going to a detailed summary of the novel. Now the protagonist of the novel is Indulekha. She is 18-year-old. She belongs to a very aristocratic Nair Taravadu called the Chambazhiyot Poovally taravad. And she is an English educated girl.

Indulekha’s father belonged to a Royal family. He was the king of the Kilimanjaor house. But when she was very young he passed away. So the educational matters of Indulekha were looked after by one of her uncle’s. And he was very insistent that Indulekha was given English education and he also made it a point that she was brought up just like a refined English lady. So, she was not only given English education, she was also trained in skills like embroidery, painting, playing musical instruments like veena, violin, piano etc.

So, Indulekha is modeled as an English lady. Now, Indulekha is the granddaughter of the Karanvar of this family who is Panchu Menon. Panchu Menon is a very steady, short tempered, old man and everybody in the family is afraid of him nobody even dares to speak right in front of him. And Indulekha is in love with Madhavan. Madhavan is Panchu Menon’s grand nephew.

He is also English educated. He excelled in all his studies. He is well versed in English and Sanskrit. He is also a law graduate, and extremely good looking. So everybody in the family

knows that Indulekha and Madhavan love each other. However, as the novel opens, there is a crisis. Madhavan and Panchu menon has a fall out. Madhavan goes against the decisions of Panchu Menon.

He denies education to one of his nephews who belongs to lower line of the family. So Madhavan questions this decision and he decides to give education to this particular cousin of him. So this creates a fall apart a fall out between Panchu Menon and Madhavan and as a result, he decides against the union of Indulekha and Madhavan. Meanwhile, Madhavan completes his examination. He passes his law examination and he moves to Madras for a job.

It is in this brief moment, that when Madhavan is away from this Taravadu that Panchu Menon brings another proposal for Indulekha with a very wealthy Nambuthiri man called Suri Nambhuthiripad. However, Suri Nambuthiripad is an Octogenarian and is a libertine. He has sambandham with several women of the Nair families in that region and he has come to know about the beauty of the Indulekha, and is all set to win her mind.

However, Indulekha, because she is educated, she is smart and intelligent is able to decline this proposal with Suri, politely because, once they both get an opportunity to conversation, and during this conversation, Indulekha is able to ridicule this Nambuthiripad and he is absolutely humiliated. So, he realizes that he will not be able to win Indulekha. But, to save his face and grace, he decides to marry a much younger member of the family called KalyaniKutty, who is just 13 years old.

So, nobody even asks her opinion. She is forced into a sambandham with this Nambuthiripad. However, he spreads a rumor that he in fact married Indulekha. So, meanwhile Madhavan comes back to Malabar. However, he also comes to know about the rumor, but he does not wait to clarify the truth of the matter he goes back to Madras. And upon the advice from his senior officer, he embarks for a tour of the country. And people back in Taravadu, they are a little worried and go in search of Madhavan.

Meanwhile, Madhavan goes to Bombay, then he has a short stay in Calcutta, he makes friends with two men of Bhadrak community over there and he had a little misfortune during a train journey where he was robbed of his materials. Finally, he gets all his things back with the help of his friends. And, his father, and one of Indulekha's uncles they meet him in Bombay they clarify all these confusions and misunderstandings and brings him back.

And thus, all the confusions are cleared. Madhavan and Indulekha they reunite and eventually it is reported towards the end of the novel by the author himself that they have a happy family in Madras and they have two kids and they live happily ever after. So this is a very pleasing love story at the outset, but the significance of Indulekha is not because it was the first not merely because it was the first novel in Malayalam; it was also on the grounds of realistic depiction of that contemporary society.

In realism and reality, Meenakshi Mukherjee talks about three strands of novels. Out of which, the first one is the novel of purpose, which was written with an intent of social reform or for missionary activities.

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Significance of *Indulekha*

- Meenakshi Mukherjee – *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1985) – three strands of novel.
- Indulekha – 3rd strand - to render contemporary society realistically in fiction
- Two objectives of *Indulekha*:
 - introduction of a new literary form (as a realistic narrative)
BUT, characterisation either idealistic (Indulekha and Madhavan) or caricaturist (Suri Nambuthiripad)
 - to show the necessity of English education, specially for women
- Chandu Menon:
 - "my object is to write a novel after the English fashion, and it is evident that no ordinary Malayalie lady can fill the role of the heroine in such a story. My Indulekha is not, therefore, an ordinary Malayalie lady."
 - "My narrative of love and courtship of Madhavan is intended to show the young ladies of Malabar how happy they can be if they can have the freedom to choose their partners"
 - (Preface to *Indulekha's* English translation)

The second strand is the one where there is a commingle of historical and the supernatural and the third strand of novel is the one which is written to render the contemporary society realistically. So, Indulekha is categorized by Mukherjee in this third strand of novel. And based

on the preface written by Chandu Menon towards for this novel, she points out the two objectives of Indulekha.

So Menon states, “My objective is to write a novel, after the English fashion. It is evident that no ordinary Malayalee lady can fill the role of the heroin in such a story. My Indulekha, is not therefore an ordinary Malayalee lady.” And he also continues, to state this that “My narrative of love and courtship of Madhavan is intended to show the young ladies of Malabar how happy they can be if they have the freedom to choose their partners.”

So, from this preface, Meenakshi Mukherjee points out these two objectives. First one is the introduction of a new literary form into Malayalam because a realistic narrative form was not there, it was mostly poetic and highly sanskritized forms of writings that were available till then. So this novel was one of the first successful attempts of introducing a new literary form of western style. And this novel succeeds in it.

And the second objective is to show the necessity of the English education especially for women. Talking about the importance of education given in the novel the entire, all the characters in this novel are presented based on their attitude and their response towards the system of English education that is introduced in the land.

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Education

- the power of education – imbibing a new system of values and self-confidence

Suri Nambuthiripad: “Indulekha is like the English in her manners... How insolent she is! Her speech and manner are not proper. She talked to me as she would to an equal.”

Govindan (about Kalyanikkutty): “She doesn’t know any English. Everyone says that she is good-natured.”

- Indulekha – self-confident, strong personality
- Kalyanikkutty – muted figure, no opinions, likened to a sacrificial animal
- Madhavan, Indulekha and others who support English education are –presented as sensible and rational
- Those who are traditional and those who denounce English education are depicted as dimwits and comical.

Now the novelist also has a clear intention of emphasizing the need for women to be educated in English. The power of education is such that, one imbibes the whole new system of values, and self confidence. For instance, take the case of conversation between Indulekha and Suri Nambuthiripad. She is very intelligent. Because of her intelligence and smartness, that she is able to decline the proposal of sambandham from this Octogenarian.

And after this conversation, this is what Suri Nambuthiripad talks about, or opines about Indulekha. “Indulekha, is like the English in her manners. How insolent she is! Her speech and manner are not proper. She talked to me, as she would to an equal.” Now, just opposed to this, with the comment made about Kalkyanikutty, the 13-year-old girl, with whom Suri Nambuthiripad has the Sambandham.

This is the remark by another character in the novel, “She does not know any English. Everyone says she is good natured.” So there is a clear contrast that is made between one who is educated and one who is not. See how bold, confident and a strong personality that Indulekha is. On the other hand, the author presents Kalyanikutty as a muted figure. She is even likened to a sacrificial animal in the novel.

So, Madhavan, Indulekha and all other characters who favour or who are in support of English education are presented as sensible and rational characters in the novel. On the other hand, characters like Panchu Menon, Suri Nambuthiripad and the sambandham partner of Indulekha’s mother, Keshavan Nambuthiri these characters, those who denounced English education are depicted as dimwits and comical.

So, go back to the point of realistic narrative technique that was introduced through the form of novel into the language. So, narrative technique is realistic. Yes, but the characterization was not realistic it was either idealistic, say in the case of characterization of Indulekha or Madhavan; or on the hand it was very caricaturist as in the case of Suri Nambuthiripad. And this kind of clear categorization of characters is done on the basis of their opinion about English education.

On the one hand, there are people who support English education and the benefits that it brings in. On the other hand, people who are not able to understand the value of education consider that English education makes the younger generation arrogant, rude, and they do not even know how to behave with their elders. And therefore, they are depicted as dimwits and comical.

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Voice of dissent

- Educated Nair man – Madhavan – questions *sambandham* – accuses Nair women as arrogant.
- Indulekha's defense of *sambandham* and Nair women"
 - “It is when women are not free and are raised like caged animals that they are likely to become adulterous”
 - “this freedom [to choose husbands]... is remarkably commendable – this freedom is missing even in Europe.”
- Indulekha and Madhavan are presented as representatives of the modern educated Malayalee.
- Attempt to strike a balance between tradition and modernity
- For instance their physical appearance which is true to their tradition and their outlook which is modern and shaped by Western values – individualism, morality

Now this power of education results in the voice of dissent being heard in the Taravadu. For example, take the case of Madhavan. He is the educated Nair man, and he questions the practice of *sambandham* and he even accuses Nair women as arrogant. In this context, at this point, Madhavan stands as the one who is English educated and one who has imbibed the western sense of morality. So, it is from that point, that he questions the practice of *sambandham*.

On the other hand, consider the case of Indulekha, she defends the practice of *sambandham* and Nair women. So, she says, “It is when women are not free, and are raised like caged animals, that they are likely to become adulterous; and that this freedom that is the freedom to choose husband is remarkably commendable. This freedom is missing even in Europe.”

So, here we have to make one clarification clear, that Chandu Menon, the author is not against the practice of *sambandham*. In fact, what he tries to put forth in this novel is that, women should have the freedom to choose the husband. So even when the practice of *sambandham* gave women to have freedom to have multiple partners in their lifetime. It was mostly the Taravadu which decided to whom the woman should get married.

Here, he has a strong opinion against it. He says, one should choose the partners, based on their emotion of love and not because you are obliged to follow the rules or the decisions made by the Taravadu or the Karanavar. So here, he is not against the practice of sambandham and that is why this argument or this discussion between Madhavan and Indulekha becomes significant in the novel.

Also, both these characters, Indulekha and Madhavan they are presented as representatives of modern educated Malayalee and as the author himself states in his preface, that, she is not an ordinary lady and no ordinary lady could have filled this role, she is fashioned like an English lady or the protagonist of the English novels.

So, there is no realism here, there is idealistic representation and what he incenses that these characters should remain as models for Malayalee readers, so that they can also reform themselves into and fashion themselves into modern educated selves.

Even while doing this, he is also attempting to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. For instance, take the case of the physical appearance of Indulekha and Madhavan. They are very much true to their tradition. Physically she is very much traditional in her appearance but the outlook is very much modern and is shaped by western values of individualism and morality. This is applicable in the case of Madhavan too.

He is also traditional in his attire. You find him wearing clothes like an English gentleman during the tour of the country. Otherwise he is also in his appearance very much like a traditional Nair man. But, even his approach and outlook towards the world is very much shaped by western values. Another major aspect that we need to look into in the context of this novel is that absence of the nation.

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the idea of the nation (or the absence of it)

- Madhavan's journey upon advice from his senior officer Mr. Gilham
- His brief stay in Calcutta and friendship with Gobind Sen and Chittraprasad Sen (bhadralok)
- Calcutta as the wealthy colonial city
- Description of Bombay port and the motley of people he sees there.
- Madhavan robbed during a train journey by a Muslim impostor who pretends to be the sub-judge of Allahabad
- The 18th chapter – disrupting the flow of the narrative – a lengthy conversation between Madhavan, his father and his cousin
- Religion, science, Congress and the English government, the superiority of English language

Or if at all, there is the presence of nation, the minimalist representation of it. Now this is one significant aspect that we have to understand in the context of regional novels. Unlike English novels where nation comes as major preoccupation, it was of minor significance in regional novels. It was mostly issues related to caste or matters of regional importance that were given more importance in writing novels in the regional languages.

Or might be the emphasis is more on matters of social reform or missionary activities or even the realistic portrayal of the contemporary society and not an idealistic vision of a modern Indian nation. It is when Madhavan embarks on a journey from the senior officer that we get to see India, or the colonial India during the time period. There is a brief stay that he has in Calcutta, from which we get to see the Bhadrakalok men of Calcutta.

Even the representation of Calcutta is such as a wealthy colonial city and there is a description of Bombay Port and the motley of people he sees there. A kind of like a cosmopolitan image, of Bombay is represented and there is also an incident when he is robbed during a train journey by a Muslim impostor who pretends to be a Sub-Judge of Allahabad.

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And the author here reminds us that this incident happens outside of the British Raj, or outside of the British colonial India. So, throughout the novel the author's ideology and his standpoint is very clear, that he is a strong supporter of English education as well as of the English ruling

India. This opinion of his comes across, or comes out in the chapter, which is very controversial too, which is the eighteenth chapter.

Because, according to the opinions of the literary critics, this is the single chapter that is considered to be a serious blemish in an otherwise perfect novel. It disrupts the flow of the narrative. This chapter is titled, 'A conversation' and is just a conversation that Madhavan has with his father and Indulekha's uncle who goes in search of him. So this conversation takes place in Bombay that is outside of the matrilineal familial space.

And this conversation has got nothing to do with the plot development at all. They talk about a wide ranging topics such as religion, science, rationality, the different stands of philosophical thoughts and branches that exist in India, the international congress, the English government and the superiority of the English language. And in this chapter, we get to know the opinions of Madhavan, the reformed modern educated Nair man.

And he states that, he is in favour of the English rule, because it was English government and English administration that brought about some sort of unity in the land. And it is through this British administration that modernity the, the nations were steered towards modernity and he is also in high favour of English language and espouses the merits of the English language. So, this is how, nation, if at all it makes the presence in the novel takes place, and has got nothing much to do with the contemporary Malayalee society that is being represented in the novel.

To sum up, Indulekha's significance is not only because it was the first novel or the first finest novel written in the language, it is also because it introduced a new literary form.

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- A new literary form – and topical issues
- Grappling with modernity(?)
- Malabar Marriage Bill (1896)
- Reform in Nair community
- Decline of *taravad* and matrilineal system –
- No reference to castes other than the Nairs and the Nambuthiris

The novel, into the language. And that it has discussed topical issues. Therefore, it is not only in Malayalam literary cannon, that this novel gains significance, in the larger context of Indian writing or Indian literature too, Indulekha is considered to be a significant work because it captures a time period, the late 19th and early 20th century time period which was very decisive throughout the country by means of social reform and steering towards modernity of the country as such.

And we find that through the various characters all are trying to grapple with this newly introduced modernity and its ideals. On one hand you have characters like Indulekha and Madhavan who have already imbibed and inhabited this modernity and on the other hand there are also characters who are trying to understand and relate their condition with the newly introduced values and belief system.

And this novel kind of anticipates the Malabar marriage bill which was soon to introduce changes in the form of sambandham, because as you see towards the novel climaxes, there is a change from there is a shift from matrilineal to patrilineal nuclear family structure. Because, you find the lead characters Madhavan and Indulekha moving out of this matrilineal family space and they move towards the urban space, an urban modern space and they settle there.

So, the story concludes, the novel concludes in anticipating the change from the traditional to a modern social structure. And, it also anticipates the reform that were to take place in Nair

community in the coming decades. And it, also tells us about how the decline of Taravadu and matrilineal system were brought in by the colonial modernity and the changes that brought in its vague.

One minor issue that we have to address regarding the novel; is the absence of references to any other caste other than the Nair and the Nambuthiri communities in Malabar. There are no references to any other lower castes, no serious references to Christians or Muslims of the region and in that sense, yes, even though we admit that it is a realistic novel and a social document, it is an incomplete realistic portrayal of the society.

So that is also to be kept in mind, significance of Indulekha as a one of the earliest attempts at writing a realist novel and introducing the western form into the regional languages, so thank you.