



## Exploring Narrative Dexterity in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Malayalam Novels

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**Abstract:** Modern Malayalam prose began to take shape in the 20th century, alongside the development of other Indian literatures. The introduction of printing technology led to the emergence of the novel as a new literary genre, contributing to the growth of prose literature. Influenced by Western literature, many young writers began to gain prominence during this time. One of the most notable figures is Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, who was a pioneering novelist and the first to receive international recognition in the Malayalam literary scene. This paper will examine the narrative dexterity evident in Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's Malayalam novels.

**Keywords:** Thakazhi, Kuttanad, Realistic prose, Progressive Writers' Movement, Modern Malayalam novel.

### Introduction:

In a series of three lectures delivered on February 2, 3, and 4, 1963, at Annamalai University, the eminent Bengali linguist and national professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji (2019: 63-64) articulated his perspectives on *Dravidian origins and on modern Dravidian literature*, stating: "Tamil, Telugu and Kannada are the three great languages which are the main repositories of the Dravidian contribution to Indian literature Malayalam literature is also very valuable and important. But linguistically Malayalam and Tamil belong to the same circle, and, as it is well-known, modern Malayalam like modern Tamil goes back to oldest Sangam Tamil as its source-form. Tamil literature is rather conservative, as the language also is with regard to its vocabulary. Tamil literature (in its Sangam texts) has preserved a good deal of compositions in the primitive, pure or unmixed Tamil as a whole, whereas Malayalam literature, as much as the language itself, has been profoundly modified by Sanskrit." Malayalam is one of the classical languages from the Dravidian language family, originating from a western coastal dialect of early Middle Tamil. According to T. Madhava Menon (Ed. 2002: 463), Malayalam is one of the few Dravidian languages with its own script and is believed to have achieved the status of an independent literary language only around 900 AD. The separation of Malayalam from *proto-Tamil/Malayalam* appears to have begun around the 6th century AD. It is very similar to *Proto-Tamil/Malayalam* in phonology, morphology, and

syntax. The word *Malayalam* is usually interpreted as deriving from *Mala*, Meaning Mountain, and *alam*, meaning sea—a term originally used to describe both the territory and the language.

It seems to be identical with the *malainatu* (Menon. 2002: 463) of early references in ancient Tamil literature. Literary output in Malayalam started only around the 12th century; until then, Tamil was the language of prestige, used in inscriptions. Sanskrit gradually replaced Tamil as the language of scholarship. The earliest work recognized to be in Malayalam is *Bhasa Kautiliyam* ((Menon. 2002: 476), a prose translation with extensive interpretation of Chanakya's famous treatise, the *Arthashastra*.

The modern phase of the Malayalam novel likely resulted from the influence of the polymath and researcher A. Balakrishna Pillai, who introduced the wealth of non-English European literature and thought to the Malayali reader, which until then had been overshadowed by English. Following the success of early novels by Chandu Menon and Raman Pillai, many young writers adopted this new literary genre, influenced by European realism and the ideology of communist movements in Kerala. (Menon Ed. 2002: 499)

Prominent novelists of this era included Kesava Dev, Vaikkam Muhammad Basheer, Ponkunnam Varkey, Uroob, Muttattu Varkey, M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Ponjikkara Rafi, Vilasini, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, Lalitambika Antarjanam, Valsasa, Vivekanandan, O.V. Vijayan, and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai. Among them, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai was the most influential, highlighting aspects of life previously overlooked in Malayalam literature. Through his novels, he introduced new themes, methods, narrative styles, and idioms. The impact of this innovative style can be seen in the works of contemporary writers, but his approach made his novels uniquely individual and distinctive.

### Early Life:

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, known as Thakazhi was born on 17<sup>th</sup> April 1912 in Tagari village located in the Alleppey district of Kerala. He belonged to the 'Nair' community, and his parents were Sankara Kurup and Parvathy Amma. Thakazhi had an elder sister, and he had no other siblings. His father was a trained 'Kathakali' dancer, and his younger uncle, Guru Kunchu Kurup, was a renowned Kathakali exponent (George Ed. 2012:1). In the introduction to the Bengali translation of Thakazhi's most famous novel, Chemmeen, Narayan Menon writes:

“যে বাড়িতে শিবশঙ্করের জন্ম, সে বাড়িতে শিল্পচর্চা তথা শাস্ত্রচর্চা ছিল পুরুষানুক্রমিক। দেশজ প্রথমতো বাড়ির কর্তা প্রতি সন্ধ্যায় প্রদীপ জ্বালিয়ে রামায়ণ মহাভারত থেকে পাঠ করে শোনাতেন, বালক তাকাষি মন্ত্রমুগ্ধের মতো শুনত এইসব মহাকাব্যের কাহিনি।” (Pillai, 2018: 1)

“yē bārite śibaśankarera janma, se bārite śilpacarcā tathā śāstracarcā chila puruṣānukramika. deśaja prathāmato bāṛira kartā prati sandhyāya pradīpa jvāliye rāmāyaṇa mahābhārata theke pāṭha kare śonātena, bālaka tākāṣi mantramugdhera mato śunata eisaba mahākābyera kāhini.” (At dusk, following the tradition in Kerala households, the head of the family would sit by the oil lamp and read from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the great epics of Hinduism. Thakazhi would listen to his father's stories, captivated and spellbound.)

His childhood stories significantly influenced his narrative style, idioms, and vocabulary. Consequently, Malayalam literature gained an epic novel such as *Kayar* (*The Coir*).

### Debut in Malayalam Literature:

Thakazhi completed his early education at a local village primary school before enrolling in an English-medium high school located in Ambalapuzha, approximately five miles away. For his higher education, he was required to attend an institution in either Karuvatta or Vaikom. Thakazhi authored two autobiographical works, *Ente Vakkil Jeevitam* (My Lawyer's Life) and *Ente Balyakala Katha* (My Childhood Stories) (George Ed. 2012:2). Academically, he was not a distinguished student, displaying a preference for storytelling

over formal classroom instruction since childhood. This interest dominated his student life. He found encouragement from a teacher who fostered his writing ambitions. Although his literary journey began with poetry, Thakazhi wrote his first short story, *Sadhukkal (The Poor)* (George Ed. 2012:2), while still in school, mentored by Kainikkara Kumara Pillai, a notable figure in Malayalam literature who was a teacher, actor, short story writer, essayist, and playwright. Narayan Menon (1962: 16) writes: “Thakazhi had started writing poetry early in life. Kumara Pillai sensed that the boy’s talent lay in the field of prose and turned him from poetry to prose.”

Following the conclusion of his secondary education, he relocated to Trivandrum, the former capital of Travancore. He enrolled in law college, but his academic tenure was marked by considerable difficulty. It was during this period that he established a connection with Akathoot Balakrishna Pillai, an influential intellectual and literary critic who edited *Kesari*, a prominent weekly publication focused on political and literary discourse. This association exposed Thakazhi to the works of modern European writers, including Chekhov, Maupassant, Tolstoy, Gorky, Hugo, and Zola (George Ed. 2012:2). Consequently, he emerged as a leading progressive intellectual within the Kerala literary community.

### **Impact of Kuttanad:**

Thakazhi, a famous storyteller, hailed from the village of Thakazhi in Kuttanad. Kuttanad, located slightly below sea level (Ganesh. 2020: 115), is renowned as the rice bowl of Kerala. It is muddy and sloppy terrain, which is ideal for rice cultivation. During the monsoon season, paddy fields are flooded, and excess water is drained through irrigation during planting and harvesting. As a result, the houses and temples in this area have been submerged in floodwater every year since ancient times.

The region of Kuttanad has had a significant impact on the literary works of Thakazhi. According to T. Madhava Menon (2002: 499), Thakazhi adopted the dialect of his characters when narrating their stories. *Randitengazhi* (meaning “two measures”) offers a poignant and vivid portrayal of the lives and circumstances of agricultural laborers in Kuttanad, a waterlogged rice-growing region in the Alappuzha district. However, the prevailing trend in Communist literature in Kerala at the time, especially evident in dramas, often glorified “poverty” and upheld the notion that “the poor man is never bad, and the rich man is never good.” This perspective is quite prominent in Thakazhi’s work.

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai demonstrated a sustained interest in depicting the lives and struggles of marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits who worked as agricultural laborers in the Kuttanad region of Kerala. His narratives fused the harsh realities of their existence with their quotidian experiences. This focus represented a significant shift from prevailing literary conventions, which typically marginalized the experiences of Dalits and backward classes.

Common thematic elements in Thakazhi’s oeuvre include the pursuit of power and wealth, as well as the intricate relationship between individuals and the land. The agrarian lifestyle of Kuttanad occupies a central position in his writing. Thakazhi (1988: 110) articulated his literary objectives, stating: “I wanted to depict the life of farmers of Kuttanad. I told you how I was born when my mother was threshing paddy on the threshing floor. I was very familiar with the lives of the farmers there. Not only the farmers, but the agricultural labourers, the pulayas and parayas.”

Kuttanad is characterized by a unique way of life, with its own set of traditions, values, and practices. Agriculture serves as the primary occupation and has, in recent times, become a source of wealth. This economic shift has led to a change in the lifestyle and fundamental values associated with agriculture, potentially signaling the beginning of the decline of rural life in the region.

The author's literature is predominantly set in Kuttanad, with some works also located in Ambalappuzha, Alappuzha, and Thiruvananthapuram. The narratives typically center on the local rural area, utilizing fields, rivers, backwaters, and coconut plantations as a backdrop for social gatherings of common people. The surrounding environmental conditions and native culture provide the primary context of the writings, often elevating these elements to the status of protagonists. Furthermore, the literature is regarded as a cultural symbol of the country, integrating local rural legends and myths. The specific spatial context within the works lends a sense of rationality to the narratives.

### **Realistic prose:**

During the 1920s and 1930s, the influential thinkers and writers of Kerala were primarily affiliated with the 'Kesari Club' (George Ed. 2012:3). The company of Balakrishnan was instrumental in shaping Thakazhi into a realistic prose writer. The literary theory of realism was introduced to India from the West, having originated there in the preceding century. According to Peter Childs and Roger Fowler (2006: 198), "In literary history, realism is usually associated with the effort of the Novel in the nineteenth century, particularly in France, to establish itself as a major literary genre. The realism of Balzac and the Goncourt brothers was essentially an assertion that, far from being escapist and unreal, the novel was uniquely capable of revealing the truth of contemporary life in society".

Thakazhi diverged from his contemporaries, who typically perceived literary inspiration as originating from specific locales, familiar occurrences, or intertextual references. Instead, Thakazhi posited that his literary creations primarily derived from a conceptual "thought," an abstract "idea," or a "social observation," underscoring a robust intellectual and empirical basis for his work. He stressed that his literature did not merely serve as a passive mirror of observed reality but rather constituted a profound inquiry into the pervasive systemic social issues encountered throughout his extensive literary career. His capacity for deep, analytical observation remains particularly noteworthy; he (1988: 111) theorized: "This morning I had to answer a very pertinent question-so far as I am concerned it is important that I have dealt with class-struggle in my earlier works and after the popularity of Chemmeen and getting money from it-this was an insinuation, I know I have changed. And I do not deal with such subjects even though class-struggle is going on and there is much cargo to deliver. My answer was my approach to life is on certain Marxist principles. I may not fully agree with Marxism. I do not say that is the last word on life. But my approach is thoro-ughly on materialistic standpoints. In all my novels, even in Kayar also, you will find the same thing. Man's love for land, his thirst for it, society as a hero, and there is no other hero or heroines."

This engagement with the raw elements of human struggle suggests that, for Thakazhi, the creative process—through which ideas and concepts take shape in the mind—resulted in works with greater intellectual influence and analytical depth rather than just emotional resonance.

### **Progressive Writers' Movement:**

During the early twentieth century, the Progressive Writers' Movement (Prasad. 2013: 34-35) gained momentum across India, significantly influencing Malayalam literature. As a result, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai emerged as a leading figure in the movement. Critic K.M. George (2012: 3) noted this development, stating: "The thirties and forties of the twentieth century were particularly alive and fruitful in all the developed languages of India. Malayalam also came to the forefront and Thakazhi was in the vortex of the movement."

The Progressive Writers' Movement unified various linguistic traditions. This led to the emergence of a new Indian literary theory, which challenged traditional ideologies. The

focus of new Indian literature shifted from aristocratic society to the lives of common people. The All-India Progressive Writers' Association published its manifesto (Ahmed. 184) in February 1941, which stated the following: "We want a new literature of India to make as its subject the basic problems of our life. These problems are those of hunger, poverty, social backwardness and slavery. We oppose all those traces which are taking us towards helplessness, lassitude and superstition. We accept as means of change and progress all those forces which bring out our critical faculties and which test custom and institutions on the touchstone of reason."

Creative writing is inherently responsive to shifts in human experience, prompting departures from established literary styles whenever new movements emerge due to various underlying historical, social, and political factors. Innovative works often integrate diverse, complex, and sometimes obscure influences, leading to clashes with prevailing literary trends. This conflict, however, generates energy that ultimately allows these new tendencies to gradually enter mainstream literature. The authors driving these movements frequently challenge social and economic inequality, outdated systems such as feudalism, religious extremism, and political injustice. As Omchery N. N. Pillai once asserted: "এই বিরোধী প্রতিক্রিয়ার পরিণামস্বরূপ মলয়ালম সাহিত্যে শুধু নতুন যুগই সৃষ্টি হ'ল না, সৃষ্টি হ'ল এক শক্তিশালী লেখকগোষ্ঠী—যাঁরা আপন আপন অনুভূতি সংযমী ও শিল্পসুখমাময় ভাষায় সহজেই ব্যক্ত করতে পারেন। তক্শী শিবশঙ্কর পিল্লে, পি. কেশবদেব, পোংকুন্নম বর্কী তথা বৈকুম্ মুহম্মদ বশীর এই নবোদ্ভূত বিদ্রোহী লেখককুলের পুরোধা-পুরুষ।" (Palit.1995: 2)

"Ē'i birōdhī pratikriyāra pariṇāmasbarūpa malaṃyālama sāhityē śudhu natuna yuga'i sṛṣṭi ha'la nā, sṛṣṭi ha'la ēka śaktiśālī lēkhakagōṣṭhī—yāmra āpana āpana anubhūti sanyamī ō śilpasuṣamāmaṃyā bhāṣāya sahaṃjē'i byakta karatē pārēna. Takṣī śibaśaṅkara pillē, pi. Kēśabadēra, pōṅkunnama barkī tathā baikkama muham'mada baṣīra ē'i nabōdbhūta bidrōhī lēkhakakulēra purōdhā-puruṣa." (The aftermath of this resistance led not only to the dawn of a new era in Malayalam literature but also to the emergence of a formidable cohort of authors adept at expressing profound emotions through restrained and artful prose. Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillay, P. Kesavadev, Ponkunnam Varkey, and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer are regarded as the pioneering figures of this nascent literary movement.)

A review of the prevailing social conditions indicated a clear need for writers capable of introducing new perspectives and ideals. Belief systems often perpetuated by social hierarchies and traditional structures primarily served the interests of dominant groups. Therefore, a movement focused on the empowerment of marginalized and disadvantaged populations was essential to challenge the established paradigm.

### National recognition:

Thakazhi, upon the completion of his legal studies in advocacy, established a law practice within his native region. For approximately two decades, he practiced law in the areas of Ambalapuzha and Alappuzha, a period during which he gained firsthand insight into the considerable hardships faced by the common populace. While his legal profession provided him with professional advantages, his primary focus and intellectual interest were consistently directed toward his literary pursuits.

His professional legal obligations significantly constrained his available time for writing, which was largely confined to weekends. Nevertheless, he sustained a prolific literary career spanning around sixty-five years, ultimately authoring thirty-five novels and more than six hundred short stories. Thakazhi's literary methodology was rooted in realism, and his narratives intentionally avoided sensationalism or embellishment. Instead, his body of work concentrated on the struggles of ordinary laborers, detailing their fight for daily

survival, necessities, and the grievances that stemmed from their state of deprivation. The critic Ayyappa Paniker (1999: 151) commended: “Thakazhi is the sort of writer who evolves and matures slowly; his art is not of the lighting variety, coming with a flash, a minute’s dazzle, and is seen no more.”

The author’s narratives meticulously documented human frailties and societal maladies, encompassing avarice, aggression, partisanship, sexual desire, the misuse of authority, and the systemic oppression and mistreatment of disadvantaged groups. His complete literary output, composed in his native Malayalam language, facilitated significant recognition among the regional readership. He consequently emerged as a notable figure in Malayalam literature, with his acclaim transcending Kerala’s state lines to achieve a national footprint. K. M. George (2012: 5) observes: “Before 1940 he was acknowledged as one of the leading fictionists in his language. But with the passing of years, he came to be acknowledged as an Indian novelist ranking with Prem Chand, Yaspal, Mulkraj Anand, Tarashankar, and Sivarama Karanth.”

Thakazhi authored over one hundred short stories and a significant number of novels. A few of his novels have been translated into various Indian languages, and several have been translated into foreign languages, including English. The Sahitya Akademi has initiated the translation of his novels into multiple Indian languages, while some established English and Hindi publishing houses have achieved commercial success through their investment in these ventures.

### **Modern Malayalam novel:**

The modern Malayalam novel originated in the late nineteenth century, with Chandu Menon widely regarded as the foundational figure of modern Malayalam literature. His seminal work, *Indulekha*, is considered a pivotal breakthrough. Subsequently, a younger cohort of writers adopted the novel as a preferred literary genre, shifting the focus from historical narratives to the struggles encountered by the middle class. Thakazhi was a prominent writer within this generation. Narayan Menon (1962: 15) underscored the vitality of youth and their contributions to the literary sphere and stated: “The younger writers of today are a new force. This is the voice of youth seeing life in the raw, asserting first the right to political independence, and after having won that, keeping up the fight for social justice. Of these Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai is the most moving and the most eloquent.”

Between 1930 and 1945, a new direction emerged in Malayalam literature. Zakaria P. Thandi (1980: 286) says: “Between 1930 and 1945 a new wave of writers appeared on the horizon of Malayalam literature, spearheading the so-called Progressive Movement. They were inspired by the vitality and diversity of European writers like de Maupassant, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Chekhov, Ibsen, and others.”

Writers of the younger generation derived inspiration from prominent European literary figures as well as from contemporary socio-political movements, including the class struggle, the Home Rule movement, Socialism, Marxism, and Nationalism. They predominantly employed the short story as their primary literary medium, leading to a paucity of novels written during this era.

Following the conclusion of the Second World War, however, authors such as Thakazhi, Kesavadev, and Basheer began to produce social or socialist novels. Mirroring the Romantic movement, the primary thematic focus of their literature became the struggle of marginalized populations. They adopted a simple Malayalam prose style, contrasting sharply with that of previous writers. Their work not only constituted a protest against the perceived misrule of capitalism but also served to challenge prevailing taboos related to racial morality.

**Pratiphalam and Patitapankajam:**

Thakazhi's debut novel, *Tyagattinu Pratiphalam (Reward for Sacrifice)*, was published in 1934 during his law studies in Trivandrum (Paniker. 1999: 152). The work, which sold out within weeks of publication, addresses social injustice prevalent in contemporary Kerala.

His next novel, *Patitapankajam (Fallen Lotus)*, published a year later, tells the story of a virtuous prostitute who, at the age of twelve, is forced into the sex trade due to societal pressures (Paniker. 1999: 152). Thakazhi's writings frequently concentrate on the plight of women who fall victim to prevailing societal norms. His literary contributions elucidate various facets of their struggles. Shifts in economic conditions, social dynamics, and the evolution of human relationships have significantly influenced the narratives within his novels. Despite enduring multifaceted exploitation, many characters in his literature exhibit resilience, finding the strength to persevere in adversity. Regrettably, some instances present characters with no alternative but capitulation. Consequently, female self-sacrifice emerges as a recurrent theme across many of his works.

**Thottiyude Makan:**

The novel, *Thottiyude Makan (The Scavenger's Son)*, published in 1946, chronicles the multigenerational experiences of the oppressed Totti community. The narrative explores their struggle for self-identity, drawing inspiration from the author Thakazhi's personal observations. Thakazhi developed a profound empathy for the marginalized scavenger community working within the Alleppey municipality. In reference to the novel, Thakazhi (1988: 110) remarked: "It deals with the lives of scavengers of Alleppey town. As a Vakil, as a lawyer, in the Ambalapuzha Court, I was familiar with the life of those people. Every day they would quarrel, get fully drunk and sometimes kill also and would come up with a criminal case. I was defending many of them."

The narrative opens by depicting the final days of Ishukkumuttu, father of Chudalamuttu, and concludes with the death of Chudalamuttu's son, Mohan, who is fatally shot by law enforcement. Regarding this structure, Zacharias P. Thundy (1980: 286) comments: "Thottiyude Makan (1947) deals with the miserable life of the wretched, untouchable professions of the scavenger. The penniless Chudalamuthu has to bury his father Isukkumuthu in the "night-soil spot" where the body was eaten by dogs. The novel goes on to talk about the revolt of the proletariat and their victory."

Cultural expressions, such as novels, can often serve as powerful catalysts for social transformation. In the historical context of Alleppey, a specific novel is argued to have reflected and contributed to a significant shift in the existing social order. This change, depicted as having gained unstoppable momentum, is presented as having quickly influenced the city's populace. Within the narrative, the character of Chudalamuthu is interpreted as embodying the concept of individual identity, while his son, Mohan, is seen to represent a sense of collective identity. The dynamic between the individual's aspirations and the group's shared experiences is a recurring theme in human history, and this novel is presented as a record of a movement towards solidarity among those who were historically marginalized or exploited.

**Thalayodu:**

In 1947, a subsequent novel by the author, titled *Thalayodu (From the Head)*, was published (Thundy. 1980: 286). The novel serves as a tribute to the numerous impoverished individuals of Vayalar who perished in a violent communist uprising against the capitalist and monarchical government of Travancore. It depicts the stark realities of the genocide, sexual assault, and resistance that transpired during the movement.

### **Rantitangazhi:**

The novel *Rantitangazhi* (Two Measures), published in 1948, was composed within the historical context of the Kerala peasant movement (Thundy. 1980: 287). Mirroring the themes of *Thottiyude Makan*, this work also portrays salient aspects of the class struggle. In both narratives, the depiction of social reality supersedes purely fictional elements. Thakazhi, originating from a farming family, possessed a profound connection to the land. Reflecting on his own life, Thakazhi (1988: 105) noted: "When I was born, my mother was threshing paddy in the threshing floor, and there the pain started. And immediately she ran up to the house and gave birth to me. That is the story which I have heard from my elder sister and my aunts. I claim it to be honour that my birth is connected with the threshing floor of a farmer and the harvest."

Emerging from a peasant lineage, he possessed a thorough understanding of the feudal agrarian structure prevalent in Kuttanad, along with the everyday realities of common cultivators and landless labourers. Within this system, a feudal landlord often perceived his agricultural workers as an extension of his own household, yet concurrently maintained significant social stratification. Simultaneously, widespread and severe exploitation and oppression were commonplace. These systemic injustices—including prolonged oppression, humiliation, and the deprivation of women—eventually provoked collective protest from the common peasants and landless farm labourers. Thakazhi directly observed this accumulation of anger and the ensuing struggle firsthand. Consequently, the novel stands as a singular testament to the resistance against the landowning class. This perspective is corroborated by K. N. Ganesh (2020:115), who has also asserted this fact: "I chose to write on *Randidangazhi* here because the novel is directly linked with the growth of the agricultural labourers' movement in Kuttanad, which had its origins in the early 1940s, during World War II. The author himself had direct links with the agricultural labourers' movement as a lawyer and as an activist. The novel was published in 1948, soon after the Punnapra–Vayalar uprising, the reverberations of which can clearly be discerned in the novel."

In October 1946, the working populace of Punnapra-Vayalar initiated a significant uprising against the contemporary Travancore government. Led by the Communist Party, this rebellion was forcefully suppressed by the government's armed forces. While the precise casualty count is challenging to ascertain, estimations suggest that more than a thousand individuals perished. Survivors subsequently engaged in organizing communist movements across various regions of Kerala. The novel, framed within this historical context, imparts a message of resistance that has simultaneously generated controversy. In an interview with Surendran, Thakazhi (1999: 167) articulated this message: "*R. Surendran*: I have read somewhere that at the time of carrying the translation of *Randidangazhi* it was a problem for the Sahitya Akademi. There were reports about some differences of opinion about the portion of the novel dealing with the outrages perpetuated by the Congress party. What is the truth about that? *Thakazhi*: It is an interesting question. Some of the scholars in Hindi said that the novel contains class struggle and Communism. They asked me to rewrite the last chapter. Ramdhari Singh Dinkar was also among them. I said that not a single word of the novel could be altered. Jawharlal Nehru was the President of the Akademi then. He read the work and asked what was wrong with that. He said, 'This might be a classic in that language. Do we know the picture of tomorrow's India? It is nonsense to ask to rewrite it.' With that everything subsided. His authority was unquestionable."

The multiplicity of voices is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy; however, historical precedents consistently illustrate the abuse of power by authorities, leading to significant loss of civilian life. This recurrent tragedy is well-documented in historical records and demands a re-examination of past narratives. In this vein, one can almost

perceive Thakazhi, writing from his remote village in Kerala, chronicling the heroic accounts of the Punnapra-Vayalar uprisings. His novel, through this act of retelling, functions as a powerful testament to the enduring human spirit of resistance and sacrifice.

### **Chemmeen:**

Thakazhi's seminal work, *Chemmeen (The Shrimps)*, was first published in 1955 (Thundy. 1980: 285). While Pillai was recognized as a prominent realist, this novel represented his initial foray beyond strict realism. It recounts the romantic tragedy of a young couple—a Muslim man and the daughter of a Hindu fisherman. This interfaith relationship presented narrative complexities that also captivated a wide readership, leading to seven editions within three years and the prestigious Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1957. The novel achieved international prominence following its 1962 English translation by V. K. Narayana Menon, funded by UNESCO, marking it as the first Malayalam novel translated into English in the post-colonial era. It has since been translated into numerous other languages, including Russian, German, Italian, and French, as well as Indian languages such as Hindi, Gujarati, and Bengali. A 1965 film adaptation, directed by Ramu Kariat, secured the President's Gold Medal for Best Feature Film (George. 2012: 7).

The novel provides a detailed account of the day-to-day existence within a coastal Kerala fishing village, illustrating the inhabitants' challenges in securing a livelihood, as well as their aspirations, dreams, and disputes. Like other communities, the characters in this setting relied on mutual support yet exhibited common human frailties, including avarice, aggression, internal divisions, and self-interest. Superstition and unquestioning belief served as psychological coping mechanisms. Consequently, the Arabian Sea was perceived ambivalently—both as an object of dread and a benevolent maternal figure. Having sustained their families for many generations, the Arabian Sea ultimately transcends its physical presence to become a character within the narrative. Thakazhi (1988: 110) masterfully encapsulates this sentiment:

“I do not think people of the plains as in U.P. are able to understand the magnitude of the idea of Kadamma, the Sea-Goddess, the mother-goddess. But they may have other things which we lack. Kerala has a peculiarity. There is nothing like a wide mwadows in Kerala but in Tamil Nadu you find expensive meadows. Likewise, we have the sea, the concept of Kadamma, and from that concept was born the story of Chemmeen.”

Social coexistence inherently involves adherence to specific norms and established regulations, a principle that is equally applicable to a fishing community. Nevertheless, the transgression of these boundaries is a historical constant across all societies; the violation of rules is an enduring aspect of human interaction. The author observed instances of socially proscribed love affairs, larceny, homicide, and sexual promiscuity. The author, who attended a school within a fishing village in Alappuzha (Alleppey), dedicated significant periods of his professional career to the locality. He meticulously documented the community's quotidian conflicts, participating in numerous legal disputes on their behalf. This deep immersion afforded him a profound understanding of the events and individuals that would later populate his novel. In an interview with R. Surendran, he (1999: 166) articulated:

“R. Surendran: You have written once that you heard the cry “Karuthammo” on the beach. And you have also said that when there are things to say, characters come up naturally. Isn't it a contradiction?

Thakazhi: Of course. I heard that cry. When I started writing Chemmeen that girl came up. If I hadn't heard that cry, her name would have been something else.”

### **Enippadikal:**

*Enippadikal* (Rungs of the Ladder), a 1964 novel by Thakazhi, diverges from his typical themes to concentrate on the political and social dynamics of the Travancore state between 1920 and 1950 (George. 2012: 7). The narrative centres on Kesava Pillai, an individual who ascends the governmental hierarchy through corrupt practices, beginning his career as a low-level clerk.

Pillai's ascent involves a complex personal life. He develops a romantic connection with a colleague, Thankamma. Despite this, an arranged marriage proceeds, after which he leaves his wife in their hometown and returns to Trivandrum. Upon his return, the discovery that Thankamma's uncle is the government's Chief Secretary prompts Pillai to employ duplicity. He secretly maintains contact with Thankamma, who has since become a nun, meeting her at various public locations.

Pillai ultimately achieves the pinnacle of his ambition, becoming the Chief Secretary of Kerala, and subsequently brings his wife to the capital. His tenure is short-lived; however, the formation of a new cabinet exposes his corruption, leading to his forced voluntary retirement. Ayyappa Paniker's (1999: 154) commentary on the novel details its central themes, stating:

"From the point of narrative art, this novel marks a mod-point between Chemmeen and Kayar. His canvas was getting wider; the concerns were the fate of the state as well as that of individuals in it. In the central figure of Kesava Pillai, we find the diverse elements of the story combined. Having forsaken the ideals and dreams of his youth, and diligently pursuing the sole objective of status and power, Kesava Pillai ruins his body and soul in the relentless turning of the wheel of life."

### **Kayar:**

Thakazhi's seminal novel *Kayar* (*The Coir*), published in 1978 (Panikkar. 2012: 12), is an expansive work spanning approximately one thousand pages, structured into nine parts and 139 chapters. The narrative covers a period exceeding 150 years, detailing the lives of four generations residing in the Kuttanad region. The novel provides a vivid depiction of Kuttanad's societal evolution and the changing dynamic between its inhabitants and their environment, exploring the economic and emotional bonds connecting people to their land. It also underscores the rise of a new awareness, distinct from traditional perspectives.

The novel *Kayar* (*Rope*) serves as a chronicle of Kuttanad's history, portraying it as a microcosm reflecting the wider political context of Kerala. The text highlights the fundamental inevitability of change throughout the universe and endeavours to capture the impact of historical transformations on rural existence. These changes encompass social, political, economic, religious, and cultural dimensions, with political influence notably shaping social customs, cultural tenets, and economic frameworks. The novel thus prompted discussion regarding the complex societal dynamics of Kuttanad. P. Kalaivelmani (2018: 142) remarked:

"The novel *Kayar*'s skeleton is paradigm shift. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai framed the novel by the documents that he receives from Alapuzha municipal. Thakazhi also explains the important change that occurs due to the land reform. The matriarchal setup of the society is gradually transformed into the patriarchal society. The female hegemonic feudal setup is grabbed by the male members of the family. Women also have lost their sexual liberty. Gradual transformation occurs in the society"

Before the novel's publication, the author indicated a desire to compose a lengthy novel. The novel's structure is, notably, neither linear nor continuous. His formative years were influenced by Western literary traditions while he was in the company of Balakrishnan Pillai. It was through the composition of this novel that he first extricated himself from

Western influence. He expressed concern that his literature was overshadowed by Western counterparts and aspired to shape his work in an Indian form, adopting past indigenous storytelling styles. He admired the facility with which each stanza of the Mahabharata, approximately one hundred and twenty-five thousand verses long, could be recited, with embedded life lessons in poetry and human lives described through a sequence of narratives. Consequently, he aimed to create literature that was distinctly Indian and separate from Western literature. As Thakazhi (1988: 108) states:

“My biggest novel is Kayar. No Tolstoy, no Dostoevsky, no Galsworthy or no Marcel Proust could help me in writing it. It deals with the evolution of Kerala life in the past 150 years and how people lived during these years. The evolution through human stories -that is what I wanted to write. It is not the western writers, but the memories of the past and finally Mahabharata that came to my rescue. I do not claim that my work is such a big thing as Mahabharata. I am only referring to the form, how human life is dealt with in it. Mahabharata has its own form and that is what helped me.”

T. Madhava Menon (2002: 500) observes that the work lacks a singular ‘hero’ despite featuring multiple heroic characters. Menon suggests the work illustrates various theories without definitively proving any. The text examines the interplay between individual characters’ motivations and the economic infrastructure’s determinism, which subsequently interacts with politics to produce sociological determinism. This mirrors the interaction between the materialistic infrastructure and evolving social relations and political forces, highlighting their influence on individual lives. This complexity positions the work as a modern “Marxist” classic and a profound human document. Menon concludes that each character, sympathetically depicted and driven by individual urges, is ultimately limited by global determinism.

### **Conclusion:**

Thakazhi’s oeuvre demonstrates that the novel constitutes a unique and aesthetically significant mode of expression within Malayalam literature. Early Malayalam novels often prioritized engaging narratives over verisimilar portrayals; however, Thakazhi utilized this burgeoning genre as a crucial platform for exploring the profound and often mystical dimensions of lived experience. Across his extensive literary career, he authored approximately 35 novels, employing a minimalist approach that strategically reduced excessive narration, dialogue, and authorial intrusion. This refined methodology enhanced the genre’s impact, contributing to its subsequent national and international recognition. Drawing inspiration directly from quotidian existence, Thakazhi rendered the complexities of human life in a simple, accessible linguistic style. Fundamentally, the primary objective of his work was to thoroughly acquaint the readership with the diverse challenges and adversities inherent in the human condition.

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