

THE RISE AND GROWTH OF CHILDREN'S POETRY IN MALAYALAM LITERATURE

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It is a quintessential human nature to compare, contrast and weigh the value of anything in the world. Perhaps it is our need to put order into an otherwise chaotic life that drives us to categorize everything. Our culture, tradition, art and literature are not exempted from this grading process. Thus it is quite natural that children's literature got relegated to the peripheries of mainstream literature. This marginalization is universal and Malayalam literature too avoided it as trivial and childish. But now a days Children's literature is gaining popularity in academic circles with many a scholars opening up new areas of researches in the field. Thus it would be meaningful to trace the trajectory of poems for children in Malayalam literature.

A child's acquaintance with poetry starts from the womb itself. This grows into much stronger relation as he/she is tucked into sleep with sweet lullabies by mother. Thus poetry is the first literature presented to a child. Offering comfort and happiness in rhythm and sounds these verses prepare the developing minds to receive longer forms of literature. But still there are debates regarding the characteristics of verses that can be categorized as children's poems. Sheila aEgoff in *Thursday's Child* questions "Is poetry for children a separate territory, or is poetry always simply itself, existing like folklore as shared ground, held in common by both children and adults? If children's poetry is restricted to that written intentionally for children, does it include adult works chosen and adopted by children as their own? Does children's poetry require a simplification of style and subject matter because of childhood's limitation of experience? Or are such assumptions the result of artificial and patronizing adult attitude?" The critic goes on to discuss the matter further saying it is perpetually growing imagination and intuitive responses to emotion that enable children to take delight in poetry.

It is undisputable that children are capable of appreciating much mature works. But it does not mean that they have to sacrifice their unique innocence, vibrant curiosity and wonder at the big world at the altar of maturity. Poetry is the part of a child's growing up. The rhythmical rocking and the soothing lullabies help the child be one with the rhythm of the Universe. As the child grows up he /she greet music with claps, swaying of hand, head and body movements. Thus there is a natural affinity between child and music. In every given languages in the world there are myriads of songs and poems formed exclusively for children. These songs and poems prepare child to imbibe language, values and culture particular to that individual society of which he/she is a part.

Folk songs and tales are emanating point of children's literature in any language around the world. Man must have imbibed the music and rhythm of the Nature and transported into poetry. The orally transmitted songs, ballads and stories have captivated children down the ages. These songs and ballads stimulate children, enchant them and they unconsciously connect with their roots. There are numerous folk songs in Malayalam which are loved and enjoyed by

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

children of all generations. The innocence, purity and sweetness of lullabies of bygone years are par excellence. Transliteration of a popular song will be helpful here:

Chanchadunneechanchad

Kuzhanjadunneekuzhanjadu

Chanchochanchochanchakkammaramvetty

Chaturathilpidiyittathinmelninnunnichanchad

The rhythm of these lines is quite in tune with swaying of his body. There would be hardly any mother who has not sung the evergreen lullaby “omanathinkalkidavonallakomalathamarapoovo”. Malayalam poetry for children is rich with nonsensical songs which aim at familiarizing children with language. A finest example would be Keerikeerikinnamtha /Kinnathilittkilukkitha/Kallummullumpokitha/Kallaypalamkadathitha.

The first ever pure childrens literature in the language was KunchanNambiar’s (1705-1770) *PanchatantramKilippattu*. The work encapsulates the essence of the source book with an aim to instill values like honesty, Kindness,love, justice etcetera among younger generation.Lines like “Andhanayullavandeepamkarathinga/lenthinadannalvazhiyarinjeedumo?”(Would a lamp in blind’s hand illumine his path) got permanent place in the hearts of millions of children through generations.

The golden days of Malayalam poetry is undoubtedly the later parts of nineteenth and earlier parts of twentieth centuries. These fifty years are the golden days of children’s literature too. English education penetrated the soil of Indian subcontinent during these years which in turn led to the diffusion of vernacular schools. These are the foundation stones for the development of children’s literature in Malayalam.

In Kerala the attempts to improve and develop reading sensibility of children began way back in 1867 with the formation of Textbook Committee by Sri. Keralavarma Valiyakoithamburan.As the president of the committee he took initiatives to device books for children. He knew the importance of a scientific approach to the task at hand hence categorized the books according to the age group and intelligence level of children. Thus slowly people began to give attention to this genre of literature and as a result few books were produced exclusively for children like *Balabhooshanam* by VaikathPachuMuthath etc. Inculcating values has always been the primary aim of any work for children .The earliest known publications for children in Malayalam *Anchadi* by an anonymous writer supposedly written in 1675 is an interesting work that points general rules of behavior every child should remember.

The finest poems in the genre were produced during the time of Kerala Varma ValiyaKoyithamburan who relentlessly worked to lay foundations for augmenting the reading sensibility of children. In the forward to *Padhyapadavali* (1910) he says the reasons for preparing such a textbook. According to Kerala Varma Valiyakoithamburan all the existing schools of thiruvathamkur emphasized the importance reading poems in the school level. But the problem was the shortage of poems, especially for the lower primary children and this motivated him to come up with textbooks especially designed for poems. Several eminent literary figures contributed to the textbook including Ashan, Ulloor, Vallthol, AR. Rajaraja Varma, KC Kesavapilla, Panthalam Keralavarma, Kundoor Narayana Menon, etc.

Mahakavi (great poet) Kumaran Ashan was one of the triumvirate poets of Kerala along with Ulloor S.ParameswraIyer and Vallathol Narayana Menon. Ashan (1879-1924)had shown special interest in writing poems for children. *Balaramayanam*, an incomplete work by Ashan is

An International Multidisciplinary Research e-Journal

an attempt to instill the essence of the epic in the young readers mind. In *Pushpavadi*(1922) Ashan wrote 16 poems exclusively for children. The subject of these poems is the impressions left by nature on the poet's mind. The poet in *Pookalam*(spring) tries to depict the sublimity of the spring season. The nature and all the creatures in it welcome the season happily. The persona pleads the season not to go away. *The Child and Mother* by Ashan is an engaging poem written a conversational style.

Oh! Mother look! The flowers
Flying from the tendril
You are mistaken, my baby these are not flowers
But butterflies.

The conversation between child and mother is realistic and appealing. The child is portrayed as curious and wonderstruck by the surroundings and has many doubt. He asks many questions on the miracles around him and the mother answers him with equal compassion and love. Mahakavi Ulloor S Parameswara Iyer, best known for classical and scholarly writing style is the author of the famous nursery rhyme, *Kaakkekaakke Koodevide*. It must be remembered here that though these poets are enjoyed and appreciated by young readers their contribution to the genre is much less. Their poems are still prescribed for school children with an aim to improve their reading sensibility.

In the twentieth and twenty first century Kerala witnessed a rapid growth in publications for children. Kerala true to its literacy rate has most numbers of children's magazines, periodicals, children's sections and supplements in mainstream magazines and newspapers. This *muchness* does not imply an equal growth in quality. But still there are some trees that stand tall and proud among the shrubs. Vyloppili Sreedhara Menon (1911-1985) is such a figure. He is someone who brought poetry to the masses. In *Ammayude K annum Karalum* a child fondly talks about a bird and its freshly laid eggs. The simple and lucid language captures the warmth of motherhood immanent in all beings of Nature.

In Malayalam children's literature there is period called The Kunjunni phase. In the poems of Kunjunni Mash (1927-2006) one can feel humanitarian concepts, love, compassion, humbleness, social criticism etcetera. He had written numerous poems, songs, nursery rhymes and nonsensical poems for children. By profession he was a teacher and it helped him to understand the psychology of his readers. Though he is widely acknowledged as children's poet the essence of the poems is equally appealing to adults. Many of his poems have attained proverbial status in Malayalam oft quoted in speeches. For example, "Vayichalum vlarum/vayichilenkilumvalarum/vayichalvilayum/vayichilenkilvalayum".

The poems are matter of fact and touch a chord with the society. His poems are the manifestation of poet's own self. The 'I' in the poem is both the poet and the reader. In his hands words are never twisted, cheated of their meanings, manipulated and burdened with metaphysical meanings. But still they will strike human conscience like arrows of mighty Arjuna. The poems are humorous, satirical, and criticize the hypocrisy of the society. This poem about writing number "1" also preaches about oneness. "Onnuenuenganeezhutham /Valavumvendacherivumvendakunivumvenda/ Kuthaneoruvarakuriyavara/ Onnayinannayi, onnayininnalnannayi."

Sippy Pallipuram, widely acclaimed children's writer of Malayalam is the recipient of first ever Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award in the genre. He alleged that children's literature and

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litterateurs have not been getting due recognition in the past. Addressing the state conference of writers of the genre organized by the Kerala SahityaAkademi he said that writers of children's literature can play a key role in preserving the glory of Malayalam language. According to the writer Children's literature should focus more on imparting moral values and aspects of reality.

The list of poets who contributed to the growth of the genre grows as we include poets like BalamaniAmma, P. kunjiraman Nair, Akkitham Achutjan Namboothiri, Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan, O.N.V. Kurup etc.

There is an urgent need today make children aware of the importance of preserving and protecting environment. Eco writing is an important category in children's literature. Though there are innumerable poems on Nature, animals and birds scholars were not receptive to them writing it off as trivial. But now everyone acknowledges the need to enhance environmental literacy among children. The pictures of little ones curiously examining the beauty of nature have been replaced by the proclamations to protect nature. SugathaKumari's poem "*Oru ThaiVeku*" (*Plant a Plantlet*) asks the child to plant a seedling which will eventually grow with the child to protect Mother Nature. Thus it is evident that poems for children in Malayalam have adapted to the need of changing times.

The poems for children in Malayalam are opulent with variety of themes. The poets of Malayalam do not underestimate the reading sensibility of children. The poems are rich with variety of themes. The poems are creatively beautiful, deal with moral discernment, inculcate cultural heritage of the state. There are prayer songs, lullabies, nonsensical rhymes, rhymes that help children to learn alphabets and numbers. The poems deal with the need of preserving ecology, social etiquettes, patriotism, friendship, critique on over the top modernism etcetera. The poems for children in Malayalam are surely on the right and steady path of development.

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