Chapter V
5.1. A Brief Introduction to Malayalam Literary Background

It is estimated that the Malayalam speaking population constitutes almost four percentage of the population of India. It is also the mother-tongue of more than ninety six percentage of the population of the southern state of Kerala. Historians also confirm that the word 'Malayalam' must have derived from two Tamil words: 'mala' (which means mountain) and 'alam' (which stands for depth of the sea) making Kerala a land which is sandwiched between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea.

Searching for the origin of the language, grammarians, historians and scholars in Malayalam language have got different opinions. One orthodox view is that it originated from Sanskrit while another view holds that its source was from early Prakrit. It is also speculated that it could be a mixture of an aboriginal Kerala dialect, Sanskrit and Tamil. Its similarity with Tamil is very
prominent. This can be authenticated by the fact that the influence of Tamil Brahmins and their culture on the life and language of the people of Kerala has been considerable.

From many bygone ages, Kerala's literary worth has been influenced by various social, political, cultural and even economic changes. Along with these changes, a trend of romanticism also received a respectable place. Kerala with its beautiful landscapes and very orthodox cultural milieu and traditional ethical norms radically enriched the value of its literature.

According to critics, novel writing in Malayalam has gone through three phases. The first phase spans over progressive literature following the socialist revolution in Russia which inspired the radicals much more than the Gandhian principles to achieve social and political freedom. Kesari Balakrishna Pillai and M.P.Paul held the intellectual leadership during that period.

The second period follows from the renaissance of Malayalam novel. Vaikkom Muhammad Basheer, Keshava Dev, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, S.K.Pottakkad and 'Uroob'
(P.C.Kuttykrishnan), the group popularly known as "The Pentagon," belonged to this phase. Their primary concern was to uplift the oppressed class and to bring about a social revolution.

Critics point out that the modern phase of writing began with M.T.Vasudevan Nair, Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) and T.Padmanabhan, closely followed by Kakkanadan, M.Mukundan, Anand, Sethu, Zcaria and others. The soul embracing writings of Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Beckett, etc. were a powerful source of influence on these modern writers bringing about a revolutionary change in the reading and writing arena.

In this section, the spotlight will be on novelists, Anand*¹ and M.Mukundan and their work under consideration are Marubhoomikal Undaakunnathu (Deserts are born)*² and Maiyyazhi Puzhayude Theerangalil (On the Shores of the River Maiyyazhi)*³ respectively.

*¹ Anand is the pen name of the author, his real name being P. Sachidanandan.

*² & *³ The English translations of the Malayalam titles are mine.
SECTION - I

5.2. A Retrospective of Anand: The Writer

Anand came to the Malayalam literary scene with powerful expression of language through a wide range of works which include novels, short stories and literary reviews. His talents find expression not only in literary creations but also in sculpture and in engineering skills. He arrested the attention of the public as soon as he entered into the literary scene bagging prestigious national and state awards for his literary works in which he presents the absurdities of individual existence as in the case of Sartre.

His highly acclaimed novels - *Aalkootam* (The Crowd), *Marana Certificate* (The Death Certificate), *Abhayaarthikal* (The Refugees), etc. reveal generally the serious, inmost problems of human life, the way in which human beings wander in pursuit of individual freedom - a theme which is highlighted in many of Sartre's literary masterpieces. These themes are powerful enough to haunt the readers in a disturbing manner.
For Anand each work is an experiment to judge the existential situation which encounters individual life at every instant. Each work unveils the basic tendencies, dejections and depressions of modern life. His style of presentation is quite unique, enabling the reader to witness the theme mentally as if playing a role in it. There lies the originality of his works.

Anand opines that a literary work is not a mere thing, an in-itself from the perspective of Sartre. Its life begins only after it gets printed. What is shared between the author and the reader and also among readers is not the created thing but the creativity itself. Like the writing process, reading is equally a gifted creative process. A good work of literature should exalt both the author and the reader. A literary work which leaves the reader as a mere reader can never be considered to be a worthy one. Sartre's influence on Anand is relevant here. Like Sartre, Anand is convinced that if literature is not everything, it is worth nothing, (vide: 3.5). A literary work should also make the reader a man of letters. It should liberate the reader and the author from alienations (another Sartrean notion is seen here).
The literary creation, according to Anand, is the art of stealthly bringing out the author's latent talents and his sense of values which lies embeded in his imagination. Through the art of writing these values get revealed and become the meeting place for such liberated values, talents and aesthetic norms. This phenomena is incessant even after the disappearance of the author from the scene. The literary work becomes the esteemed medium of discussion irrespective of the place and period in which it is discussed and in which it is written. It remains a fact that to enjoy a classic work, for example a Shakesperean tragedy, neither regional nor cultural standards impose a barrier. Any literary creation serves as a bridge which enables the reader to know various cultures.

Anand views that the present-day generation survives in a terrible, merciless period. Justice, righteousness, cultural heritage, etc. are considered as worthless and thus they are threatened. The fields of art and literature are not exempted from this evil, man made calamity. Though technical excellence miraculously shortened the global and individual distances, we now confront a world bereft of any cultural values, moral norms
or excellence. The only fruitful remedy to rectify these absurd situations rest with the gifted writers. They need to capture, highlight and expose these basic necessities with all their vigour and authenticity through their works.

One should keep in mind that when the creative talent is infested with cultural and moral degradation what gets ruined is the bridge between / among men. The result will be the isolated, alienated man. In the present world in the prevailing conditions, the governing authorities squeeze man from all sides crippling his talents ignoring his identity and dignity. On the one hand ugly distortions of art and literature are taking place and on the other religious texts and scriptures probe into the privacy of literary personalities. These texts which are to be revered become the instruments to destroy cultural heritage. In this manner literature is not only conquered but also humiliated.

The blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
These lines of Yeats portray the present age. One should realize that the potency and dedication towards literature is not totally lost. The literary work never imposes a linguistic barrier. This medium still offers a higher scope of influence among the public. It alone can successfully bring together our scopes, ideas and convictions thereby liberate us from the alienated feelings. This process should be incessant for a better future.*

5.3. The Influence of the Sartrean Ontology in Anand's Novel

*Deserts are Born:* An Elucidation

The story unveils in Rambha Ghat, a desert area where Kundan - the lead character of the said novel - comes to live and work as a labour officer in a high security strategic satellite installation project. The severe drought and famine conditions in the desert, the merciless plight of the villagers, labourers and recruited prisoners

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The content of this retrospective is adapted from Anand's address on the occasion of receiving the prestigious Vayalar Rama Varma Sahitya Award for the year 1993 for this remarkable novel *Marubhoomikal Undaakunnathu (Deserts are Born).* It is given in the prologue to the said work under the subtitle, *Art and Literature,* D.C.Books, Kottayam, Kerala, 1993.
and their lack of individual freedom, above all Kundan's personal traumas are stunningly portrayed in the novel.

In one context Anand pictures the tragic return of the villagers from distant places - the return of the migrated men-folks who have gone to far away places in search of a livelihood. It is not happiness that awaits them on their return. Anand writes: "They are anxious to know whether some of the women and children whom they left behind are missing. It may be the nature of the migration which compels one to be so anxious."

On the other hand, some of the prisoners are eliminated in unexpected confrontations, some others disappeared in natural calamities. But often it is seen that they are either hanged or forced to face a firing.

* The English version which follows immediately after the Malayalam quotations are not the verbatim translation. It is the translation of the meaning and significance of the Malayalam text and is translated by me.
squad. Yet, some others are seen waiting clutching on to the throny fences of security camps. This is because the author points out: "Such inhuman situation results in riots and revolutions every year."

Anand deals with Sartre's notion of the other in a unique manner. The other's look freezes the possibilities of Kundan eroding his subjectivity. As in No Exit, the other becomes a hell for Kundan in his professional and personal life. The author compels Kundan to introspect: "Kundan wonders why the mind which one claims to be one's own becomes the corridors in which the ghosts of others freely roam about?"

One occasion Kundan warns his colleague, Hassan, of the aftermath of the inhuman, brutal situations as such: "[It indirectly indicates that such situations may result in the stealthy creeping of the barren, droughty,
The other who becomes greedy for power and dominance will crush the down-trodden, the suffering class. Anand reminds: "It may be the way that dictators are born."

Basically they are fearsome, anxious and restless. Their extreme attitudes liberate them from their own weaknesses, fears and guilty conscience for a while. They exhibit a fake armour of courage by inflicting pain on others.

Apart from the other as an adversary to individual freedom, as held by Sartre, Anand too shows how one's place, past, environment and one's own death restrict one's freedom.

Anand's acumen in dealing with Kundan's individual freedom is appreciable. Kundan realizes the difference between the freedom which he enjoyed in the city and which he experiences now in the desert. In the city he was accustomed to his place. He felt secure, enjoying his
rights. It was a systematic, orderly life. There his fellowman accepted and acknowledged him. His existential situation was related to others. But in the desert he encounters only the lack — lack of boundary, the want of human comforts, the absence of a pleasing and soothing atmosphere and above all, lack of stable intersubjective relations. To make it worst:

[In fact it is the lack of basic resources of livelihood that makes the desert boundariless.]

In Anand's words, it is this lack which exists as an ugly darkness that removes not only the possibility of freedom but also even the knowledge of freedom. It compels the people to migrate for survival.

Towards the end of the fiction Kundan faces two options: either to face the consequences of the false accusations levelled against him or to run away from the desert to take refuge in Delhi. He choses the latter. This shows his capacity to realize his freedom irrespective of all kinds of limitations which confront him.
Anand's message is clear: man must realize his freedom and responsibility in every moment of crisis, if not, he needs to bear the consequences of them. He agrees with Sartre, (though not directly) that man is freedom. But he experiences it when he successfully overcomes the obstacles thrown open to him. The author ends the work in a positive note hoping to revive the warmth of friendship and interpersonal relationships by making use of the freedom of choice when an existential situation demands it.
SECTION - II

5.4. A Retrospective of M. Mukundan: The Nostalgic Author

M. Mukundan has re-drawn the structure of Malayalam literature through his fascinating novels and short fictions. Gifted with an innovative mind that always reveals in stylistic experimentation and with an unusual ability to fictionalize diverse existential situations, Mukundan depicts the dreams, despair and agony of an anxiety-ridden generation. The quest for identity, anguished search for order and pattern in a chaotic life, etc. are some of his major preoccupations.

It is not common for regional language writers to be recognized outside their language readership, given the present state of translations. And recognition from abroad is indeed coveted especially when it comes from a country like France. Mukundan recently has bagged the prestigious honour of Chavalier of Arts and Culture from the French Government at a simple but august ceremony at the French Embassy in New Delhi in 1998.
His first novel *Delhi*, published in 1969 was extraordinary. It was a deviation from the existing genre of novels, a trendsetter in many ways. It became a literary event and the influence it had on contemporary writers and readership was enormous. Mukundan was accused of utilizing those usages and narratives which were till then unacceptable to any lay readers. The furore that the book created ensured that Mukundan had arrived on the literary scene with a bang. Critics accused him of foreign influence, especially from the French literature, because of the existentialist undertones.

It was a bold experiment in style and form. It had originality and freshness. In those days there were debates and discussions on crisis of identity, disillusionment, frustration and a sense of alienation. They were termed foreign and extraneous to regional and vernacular literature, but the one like Malayalam where every western trend had found a place in writings, overt or covert, it was inescapable not to have such deliberations. Names like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Kafka, etc. were predominant and Camus', * Outsider* was a household name, as he
was considered to be the master of the doctrine of alienation in Malayalam literary circles. Mukundan initiated the trend and a large number followed the suit. Since then he has not looked back and his books are always bestsellers running into several editions every year.


His writings have always been deeply rooted in his home town, Mahe*, which has a particular socio-

* Mahe is the English substitute for the Malayalam name Maiyyazhi.
political setting. It was a French pocket before its independence (and is now a part of Union Territory of Pondicherry) and thus has remained aloof from the mainstream culture of the region, as the surrounding areas were under the British rule in the pre-independent period. In a recent interview, Mukundan admitted:

Sartre and Camus have tremendously influenced my style of narrative. There was also the films of Godard: his experiments in form amazed me. The French philosophy of alienation and ideas have also had an impact. But my characters are mostly acquaintances drawn from my intimate surroundings and people.

When asked about his preferred medium, the novel or the short story he explained:

Definitely, the novel. It gives a lot of freedom. There are no limitations and restrictions. The canvas is wide and unlimited. The novel has a wider readership. But story writing necessitates a discipline and calls for evoking intensity of feelings in the minds of readers. Therefore there is an element of teaching oneself in story. In a novel you have unlimited freedom.

When enquired about his process of writing he commented:

A lot of ideas keep coming into the mind. During the initial period, I would write as the ideas came. Later I started searching for form, style, idiom and language. In my mind I keep myself
active with these ideas churning them out. Then the ideas keep changing ... I consciously avoid monotony and then there is a period of hibernation, for stories it takes a short period. For novels it takes a long period, at times, years. In the case of Maiyyazhi Puzhayude Theerangalil, I took five long years to write it.

The best novels of Mukundan are Deivathinte Vikritikal (The Pranks of God) and Maiyyazhi Puzhayude Theerangalil (On the Shores of the River Maiyyazhi). In both these there is a strong backdrop that unfolds the changing, social and familial relations and shifting of the socially accepted values. There are elements of fantasy, myth, legend and personal bond. The stories unfold from the older generation to the present one and to their nostalgic recounting and hopes. They also bring out the despair and the disillusionment of contemporary youth along with human understanding and the harmony. The novelist portrays the youth as powerful, but a dormant force. Both novels bring out the best of Mukundan's writing talent making him a master story teller of lyrical beauty. His passionate nostalgic touch is seen in the work On the Shores of the River Maiyyazhi as the theme focusses on Maiyyazhi's environment, its churches, seashore, festivals, legends and myths, buildings, architecture and above all on its people.
5.5. On the Shores of the River Maiyyazhi: A Study of the Confrontation Between Two Kinds of Freedom

This beautiful, engrossing work is a delicate blend of facts and fictions. A delectable deployment of lyrical imagination has gone into the fictionalization of historical reality in the novel. It is the story of the principal character, Dasan, who attempts to explore freedom as in the case of the Sartrean characters like Mathieu (The Age of Reason) or Orestes (The Flies).

The theme focusses on two aspects: (1) Maiyyazhi's struggle to attain liberation from the French colonial rule and (2) Dasan's individual attempt to attain his own freedom. But both are intertwined in such a way that one cannot be separated from the other.

Dasan's individual commitment to liberate Maiyyazhi from the French rule subjects him to questioning from two sides to which he belongs intimately, from his family as well as from the Communist Party. However, Dasan commits himself whole heartedly to the freedom movement. He believes that he is destined to rewrite the history of Maiyyazhi, to demonstrate how individual freedom can induce
a mass movement to attain socio-political freedom. Dasan gives no room for regret in his decision despite occasional failures. Thus he opts for a free choice against all odds.

The sheer influence of Sartre's elucidation of freedom, as a choice from among different alternatives is unquestionably explicit here. The depth of his commitment to his native land makes him identify his personal sorrows with the sorrows of Maiyyazhi. In Dasan's words: "Dasan's sorrows can be removed only when Maiyyazhi's sorrows are obliterated. The happiness of his native land is the joy of Dasan."

It was his firm conviction that the overthrowing of the French rule is meant not only to benefit the present generation but also the future ones. Here one can notice the undertones of the Sartrean words that man is responsible not only for himself but also for the whole mankind. In Dasan's view: "Communism in fact is nothing other than humanism."
This statement seems to echo Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism*.

Irrespective of his intense efforts to realize his own freedom as well as that of Maiyyazhi, Dasan feels occasionally that he is not free. He blames himself when his father suffers the consequences of his involvement in the freedom movement and also when his sweetheart, Chandrika, commits suicide. To add to the dismay Dasan's efforts to liberate Maiyyazhi turns upside down due to the intervention of the French naval fleet. The result of it all is this: before achieving anything tangible, Dasan disappears from the scene to undergo twelve years of imprisonment. And, finally it is in his absence that Maiyyazhi attains its liberation from the French.

When his term in jail gets over, his existence turns out to be a question mark — no where to go and nothing to do for a living. He was free to go to his parents or to his sister. But he decides against it. Even at that stage he was keen on keeping his basic principles of life. When asked about his insecure future Dasan says that
he is unwilling to make it secure at the cost of his principles. The author comments:

In other words, without his principles of life Dasan may seem to be naked and unarmed, irrespective of the fact that his principles be high or low.

In the end, he choses to commit suicide. A reader may say that Dasan is not making use of his freedom to begin a new life or that he is not realizing that he is free to modify his living standards or to turn over a new leaf. I wish to point out here that as the master of his own principles, he choses his way. Out of the various alternatives thrown open before him, he choses the one best suited to him.

Here too the Sartrean influence is very much, man is the maker of himself and that freedom is not the freedom to achieve a goal, that freedom consists in choosing a goal. So Dasan, in fact, makes use of his freedom to its full extent, though it turned out to be of an extreme kind.
Like Sartre, Mukundan was also fond of depicting an introspective mind that wanders through a power-crazy and dehumanized society that is divested of all values. Even then Mukundan maintains his 'Indiannes' irrespective of the Sartrean influence. This fact is to be appreciated.