Chapter II

Social background of Verlaine and Changampuzha

“Society is a product of man. There can be no social reality apart from man. Yet it may also be stated that man is a product of society. Every individual biography is an episode within the history of society, which both precedes and survives it. Society was there before the individual was born and will be there after he has died. What is more, it is within society, and as a result of social processes that the individual becomes a person, that he attains and holds on to an identity, and that he carries out the various projects that constitute his life. Man cannot exist apart from society. The two statements that society is the product of man and that man is the product of society are not contradictory.”

Peter Berger (“The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion”)

As man is essentially a human being, his life can be fully understood only in relation with his social relationships. And for its well-being every society adopts a set of norms which ensures its safe and harmonious existence. These unwritten norms when violated, stirs up a hornet’s nest, resulting in the ostracization of the individual.
The aftermath of the Industrial Revolution in France, following on the heels of the French Revolution, saw the slow but steady ascendance of the middle-class or the ‘bourgeoisie,’ with its own values and viewpoints. By and by, wealth and power accrued by the bourgeoisie, made it a powerful force in the French society, with a say in all matters from morality to literary expression and the fine arts. The ‘art for art’s sake’ dictum was a revolt against the utilitarian philosophy of the middle class, and made an impact in all fields, ushering in changes everywhere. The very fabric of society - the family, seemed to shake at its foundations.

2:1 Verlaine-the man

Verlaine lived at a time when the values hitherto cherished by society were being questioned, and new perspectives sought. After the death of his father, Verlaine, who was already a frequenter of the ‘Quartier Latin’ (Latin Quarter\(^1\)), grew more dissolute, overlooked by an indulgent mother. However, when he fell in love with the sixteen-year old Mathilde Mauté, it was hoped that he would lead a normal life thereafter. La Bonne Chanson (The Good Song-1870), exposes Verlaine as the impatient lover, expressing his longing to be one with his fiancée, whom he adoringly called “the creature of light.” But very soon after marriage, his old vices returned, and he even did not hesitate to use violence against his wife and infant son, under the influence of alcohol and absinthe. The entry of Rimbaud into the household, on an invitation by Verlaine in sheer appreciation of his poetic talents, dealt a severe blow to domestic felicity altogether.

\(^{1}\)Favourite haunt of wayward poets and writers
Acting against the conventions of society, Verlaine developed a homosexual relationship with Rimbaud, and leaving his wife and son, wandered off with him through Paris, London and Belgium. Together, they scandalized the Parisian society by their ‘bohemian’ behaviour. In their quest for emotional fulfillment they left ‘no stone unturned,’ leading to a ‘total derangement of the senses,’ considered as the ideal state for creativity. Their relationship however, lasted only for about eighteen months. On Rimbaud’s insistence about returning home, Verlaine in a jealous fit of rage, fired at him with his revolver, at a Brussels hotel, wounding him slightly. A Belgian court, strongly influenced by the immoral behavior of the two men, sentenced Verlaine to the maximum penalty of two year’s imprisonment, which was eventually shortened by good conduct to seventeen months.

Ironically though, it was during these wanderings that Verlaine created his finest work of short lyrics – Romances Sans Paroles (Songs without Words-1874) which emphasized resonance above words. It contains beautiful renderings like:

“Je pleure dans mon coeur
Comme il pleut sur la ville
Quelle est cette langeur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?”

“Like city’s rain, my heart
Rains teardrops too. What now,
This languorous ache, this smart
That pierces, wounds my heart?”

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2 A bohemian is simply an artist or ‘litterateur’ who, consciously or unconsciously secedes from conventionality in life and in art. (Westminster Review, 1862, (2)
While in prison Verlaine came to know that his wife had obtained a legal separation from him, which news left him utterly distraught. The prison chaplain, to comfort him, offered Verlaine the eight-volumed “Catechism of Perseverance”, which led him back to the Catholic faith of his childhood days. The work that resulted from this experience was Sagesse (Wisdom), which got published only in 1881. Verlaine’s attempt to reform himself was genuine, and the work contains poignant pieces like ‘Le ciel est pardessus le toit’ (The sky above the roof is..”):

“Le ciel est, par-dessus le toit,  
Si bleu, sicalme!  
Un arbre, par-dessus le toit,  
Berce sa palme…  
…Dis, qu’as-tu fait, toi que voilà  
De ta jeunesse?”

“Above the roof the sky is  
So blue, so serene!  
A tree branch, above the roof  
Sways its branch…  
…Tell me, what have you done, you there,  
With your youth?”

After his release from prison, there was a final meeting with the now embittered Rimbaud. Verlaine tried to get Rimbaud converted, to no avail. Infuriated he got Verlaine drunk and made him blaspheme against God, after which he knocked him senseless, to lie in the gutter! However, in Verlaine’s words,

“For me, Rimbaud is an ever-living reality…. a sun that refuses to be put out…”

Verlaine tried sincerely to leave a staid life. During the next few years, he took up a number of teaching posts, both in private schools in England and France. At one of the schools he got infatuated with one of his
pupils—Lucien Letinois, a peasant’s son, with whom he is said to have a homosexual relationship. According to some, Lucien took the place of his own son Georges, whom he could get to see and live with. Twice with the help of his mother, he bought farming lands in the countryside to be managed by the boy’s parents. But each time, he ran into debt and was forced to return to Paris. While on the farm he used to seduce the farm boys causing considerable embarrassment to his mother. The sudden death of his protégé—Lucien of typhoid left Verlaine devastated. Three years later, his devoted mother, who had always stood by her son, and who had been the victim of his violent excesses, died, leaving him without financial resources. The same year, he came to know of the re-marriage of Mathilde. There remained nothing more to halt his demoralization. For the rest of his life, he lived in and out of pubs and hospitals, taken care of by two elderly prostitutes.

The publication of Sagesse (Wisdom –1881), was followed by Jadis et Naguère (Formerly and Lately –1884), Amour (Love–1888), and Parellèlement (On Parallel Lines–1889). The last, containing much licentious verse, was to run ‘parallel’ to the more edifying Sagesse and Amour. Verlaine’s poetry suffered a steep decline henceforth, with verses full of an often maudlin sensuality, sometimes relieved by bursts of savage humour. But as his talent was on the vane, his literary reputation grew, with the younger generation poets seeking him out and honouring him with the title ‘Prince of Poets’. He was somewhat relieved by a subscription by a committee of literary men.
2:1:1 **The trend of the times**

During the period when the ‘art for art’s sake’ was gaining momentum, it seemed to be the order of the day to uphold strongly the view of ‘sex for sex alone,’ in contrast to the church view of ‘sex for procreation alone.’ Indeed the nineteenth century in France witnessed a dramatic increase in same-sex eroticism, a development that can be traced both to literary trends and to historical change. After 1850, with the birth of literary movements such as realism, naturalism, decadence and symbolism, gay and lesbian sexuality became a significant subject in the national literature. It could be said that constituting more than simply a new ‘theme,’ these new representations changed the course of literary history.

In 1791, the revolutionary penal codes did away with laws that had criminalized homosexuality, a reform that was maintained in the Napoleonic Code of 1804. Yet it was not until the 1830s, at the height of Romanticism, that lesbian and gay male characters began to appear in French literature in significant numbers. This period witnessed an interest in ambiguous gender and mobile sexuality, that included androgyny, transvestism, and hermaphroditism. The most significant contributions to this literature came from the authors Théophile Gautier, Georges Sand and Honoré de Balzac.

French literature of this period seems to confirm historian Michel Foucault’s assertion in ‘History of Sexuality’ that homosexuality as a specific identity emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. He attributed the ‘discovery’ of the homosexual to the medical community.
Defined largely in terms of perversion or degeneration, or often allied with criminality and prostitution by sexologists, gay male and lesbian sexuality came of age in literature at a time when the European medical profession was subjecting it to close and largely unsympathetic scrutiny. Sexologists also helped to establish a new vocabulary – including such terms as ‘homosexuality,’ ‘uranism,’ ‘inversion,’ ‘lesbian’ as a noun and ‘the third sex,’ all of which entered the French language during the second half of the 19th century.

In the late 1840s, Charles Baudelaire, publicized a collection called ‘Les Lesbiennes’ (The Lesbians) that never appeared. In 1857, however, he published, **Les Fleurs du Mal** (Flowers of evil), in which the lesbian is a central figure, represented above all in three poems entitled ‘Femmes Damnées: Delphine et Hippolyte’ (Damned Women: Delphine and Hippolyte), ‘Femmes Damnées,’ and ‘Lesbos.’

On publication, these poems along with four other poems were considered as immoral by the Second Empire court and censored from the work: they were not restored until 1949. Whether ancient or modern, lesbian love was sometimes depicted as naively innocent, sometimes as lasciviously excessive. Some authors, like Baudelaire, turned the lesbian into a highly aestheticized figure who mirrored the artist’s outcast and misunderstood existence.

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3 Great French poet of mid-19thc. whose writings ushered in Symbolism. Hailed as father of ‘modernity’in poetry.
The birth of modern gay literature in France can be attributed to Verlaine and Rimbaud. The mark that they left on the traditions of the lyric and of gay male literature is stunning. Verlaine’s first attempts at erotic verse produced ‘Les Amis’ (Friends): he was one of the only poets of the period to cross over from portraying lesbianism to depicting gay male sexuality, a much more daring undertaking at the time because it had not yet been condoned by literary tradition.

Verlaine’s conflicted sexuality also became manifest in the late 1860s. Although taken up with a friend and literary collaborator Lucien Viotti, whose ‘ephebic body’s exquisite proportions’ he later described, Verlaine pursued a relationship with Mathilde Mauté, whom he married in 1870. In his work The Good Song⁴ he sang with chaste sensitivity of her youthful beauty and of the marriage of their souls. In spite of the joy experienced in her vibrant presence, Verlaine was deeply distraught when Viotti died in combat the same year.

The physical and literary relationship with Rimbaud produced poems that pushed French verse to new extremes. They penned audacious poems on gay sexuality, the most renowned of which is the collaborative ‘Le sonnet du trou du cul’ (Sonnet on the Posterior Hole) – of which Verlaine wrote the quatrains, Rimbaud the tercets. Verlaine wrote a number of poems that appear to be inspired by his relationship with Rimbaud, moving and often melancholic poems, depicting a lover sometimes vulnerable in sleep. ‘Vers pour être calomnié’ (Verses to be slandered) and ‘L’espoir luit comme

⁴ La Bonne Chanson
un brin de paille dans l’etable’ (Hope shines like a blade of straw in the stable) and others, particularly the magnificent ‘Crimen Amoris,’ describing the triumph of a graceful young prince. Much later, Verlaine turned to explicitly erotic verse, writing ‘Hombres’(Men) in 1891. This collection includes fifteen often explicit poems celebrating gay male sexuality. Rimbaud’s Une saison en Enfer (A season in Hell-1873) offers his most direct and seemingly autobiographical reference to a gay couple. ‘Délires I (Delights I) presents the confession of the ‘vièrge folle’ - resembling Verlaine, who recounts his seduction by the young ‘époux infernal‘ resembling Rimbaud.

Verlaine’s Rimbaud tears were turbulent and impassioned. With other poets, they formed a group called the ‘vilain bons hommes,’ and in cafés, they filled a notebook with bawdy poems that survived as the ‘Album Zutique.’

2:2 Changampuzha- the man

The society in which Changampuzha lived followed strict societal traditions and customs, failing which, the members would have to face the scorn of the elders and be alienated from the mainstream. In his autobiography “Thuddikunna Thallukal” (Vibrant Pages) the poet narrates an incident in his childhood - which perhaps formed the basis for his ‘ perverse’ sexual cravings. When he was five years old, his father, wishing to

5 ‘crazy virgin’
6 ‘hellish husband’
7 ‘villainously good men’
invoke divine blessings at the initiation ceremony of education, took him to a famous temple quite distant from his native place. They spent the night at the house of a friend, whose young, seventeen-year-old daughter accorded them a warm reception. The little boy was constantly in the company of ‘Ammu Chechi’ (Sister Ammu) - as he called her, but without him being aware of it, she exploited him sexually!

During the period of his primary education, his constant companion was ‘Kochammu’ (Little Ammu) with whom he is said to have spent many a delightful moment. As he advanced into his teens, the magnetic attraction towards the opposite sex grew only more intense. His scandalous affairs with older women caused considerable embarrassment to his family members, leading to his being treated by the society as a ‘pariah’.

Changampuzha’s wide reading brought him into contact with the stalwarts of western literature. Conditioned by the viewpoints expressed in the Jewish physician Max Nordau’s ‘Degeneration’, whose Malayalam translation, diffused among the disciples of Kesari BalakrishnaPillai, had also come to the notice of Changampuzha, who arrived at the realization that his mind and lifestyle had become ‘degenerate’ enough to form a fertile ground for creativity. As revealed in his Sahitya Chinthakal, he was impressed by Paul Verlaine’s exhortation to infuse verses with music (‘Poetic Art’) thereby laying emphasis on resonance than meaning. Changampuzha’s novel experiments with the Dravidian metre, bringing it within reach of the common man and infusing it all with music, won him the

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8 outcast

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admiration and popularity of the masses as well as the ire of scathing critics, for whom any deviation from tradition was completely unacceptable. As it was a time when the portals of education were thrown wide open to all, irrespective of caste or creed in Kerala, the written word caught up fast among the masses. It was thus that copies of Changampuzha’s Ramanan sold like ‘hot cakes’ and those who could not afford to buy it, even made copies by hand! Undoubtedly, Changampuzha became a poet of the masses, whose emotions and aspirations found a voice in his writings. Moreover, his adaptations of folk tunes in his works, Instantly adhered him to the masses. Needless to say, his popularity invoked the jealousy of the convention-bound literary godfathers, lying in wait for an opportune moment to pounce upon him with their harsh criticism. Changampuzha’s deviation from the paths of morality and decorum, or, in other words, transgression of societal norms, provided an additional tool for them to attack and denounce him.

The fine-tuned sensibilities of Verlaine and Changampuzha prompted them to explore endlessly all the avenues of sensual pleasure, whether they conformed to the norms of the society or not.

In the poem ‘KarayumNjan’ (I shall weep) from the collection NeerunnaThichoola (The Searing Furnace), Changampuzha lays bare the hypocrisy of the society-

“I shall weep, I shall weep, Oh world
Will you hang weeping poets,
If weeping is cowardice –
Is yelling a sign of boldness?”
Changampuzha, like Verlaine, impulsively indulged in the emotion of the moment, quite unmindful of the consequences of the situation. For both of them, the present moment was all important and they blissfully engaged themselves in its vagaries, trying quickly to transpose the ecstatic moment in all its hues into verses imbued with music, unconcerned of vexing the conscience of the society.

Changampuzha, in his poem ‘Ecstatic Delights’ (Diadem) expresses unabashedly:

“In the pure white cup of red wine resides-
A joy unfathomed in the recesses of the temple…”

And again in the poem ‘Pleasing thoughts’ (Swaragasudha):

“As good as honey, taken without adding water
Good old toddy, poured-
In a white glass, tasty,
Savoured along with fish and meat
Inducing laughter, jokes
Merry-making surpassing,
Heavenly delights even!
Away with you, philosophy!”

Indeed it was his vow—“Whatever life withholds from me, I shall wrest from life.” (‘Firm Resolve’ - Swaragasudha).

During Changampuzha’s College days, there was no dearth of fans, especially ladies. As the author of Ramanan, he enjoyed great popularity
among students and teachers alike. This poet of love, however, surprised everyone by yielding to an ‘arranged’ marriage, fixed as per tradition by his mother and uncles. The bride, a coy 18–year old was the daughter of Changampuzha’s teacher of class I, and a native of Edappally too! The family believed that the marriage would put a halt to his ‘vagabond’ ways. Like Verlaine, Changampuzha was very much aware of the sincere love of his spouse, but try as he would, he was incapable of circumventing temptation, easily succumbing to wine, women, inebriants and drugs. It was simply incomprehensible to him that society frowned upon his relationships with other married women, especially his liaison with ‘Devi,’ wife of the doctor treating him for arthritis, herself a great admirer of his poetry, and a charming woman. Changampuzha had plans to elope with her, after handing over a cheque for Rs. 1000/- to his wife for maintenance! The strong protests of Devi’s family, especially that of her grown-up sons forced him to retreat, severing all relationships.

Unlike Verlaine, Changampuzha could not escape societal pressures and flee into a world of his own. There were financial constraints as well. Openly transgressing boundaries set by the society could only earn him repugnance and ostracisation. Convinced as he was of his mission as a poet,

“I was born a singer
Time changed me into a devil…
Now again time is trying to
Transform me into a singer.”

9 Padunna Pizhaju (The Singing Devil)
he expected society to accept him wholeheartedly and give due respect to his
genius, for after all he was its bard. Instead the brickbats he received
confused him totally, making him almost an exile on his own soil.

2.3 **Accursed Poets**

Pursuing a lifestyle against the societal conventions usually results in
alienation or ostracization. It is this condition of the genius that Verlaine
exposed in his ‘Poètes Maudits’ (Accursed Poets-1888). Such characters,
feeling confined by the norms and expectations of society, try to break free
of these confines in unusual or illicit ways, and may seem to be mentally ill,
anti-social, or nihilistic. As early as Freud’s “The Interpretation Of
Dreams” the idea of transgression is contrasted with that of an unsatisfied
desire, able to reach satisfaction in spite of everything that might restrain and
prohibit it, via the detour of dreams even. Like sociologists, psychoanalysts
find that every law is accompanied by criminal infractions of that law -
infractions which the law highlights and describes. It was perfectly natural
that in a dialectical movement, the interest shown in everything that can
prevent a desire being fulfilled–and in particular the formalized, absolute and
non-negotiable limits represented by laws and taboos- should shift to what
can corrupt them, deviate them, or violate them,- in other words, to the
mechanism of transgression, with the focus on ethical debates.

Changampuzha acutely felt the pain of this isolation from the public
at large, which he expressed in his poem ‘*In the shadow of grief*’(*Mark of
prosperity*):

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10 1900a.ch.3
“God granted me not the petals-
Of the flower of life, but its thorns!”

As Baudelaire expressed it: "There is in everyman at every moment two simultaneous aspirations, one towards God, the other towards Satan. The urge towards God, or spirituality, is a desire to rise: the urge towards Satan or animality, is a joy in descent. A Joy. That was the rub, and it explains why Baudelaire lived within the limits of humanity, with many admirers following along his trail.

In his poem ‘L’Irrémédiable’ (The Unremediable), Baudelaire shows how we are all trapped, in a nightmare whirlpool, on an endlessly descending staircase, in the ice of the pole, in a snake-pit, and- most helplessly of all - in our own natures, which allow of no illusions once we have learnt to see into them. He concludes the poem by saying:

“Face to face melancholic and transparent,
As a heart that has become its mirror!
Well of truth, bright and dark,
Wherein trembles a ghastly star,
An ironical, infernal lighthouse,
Torch of satanic mirrors,
Consolation and unique glory,
-The conscience in the Evil!”

The next chapter shall analyse the literary trends in vogue during the period, to get a better understanding of the ambience which nurtured the creativity of the poets.