

CHAPTER II  
 MODERN MALAYALAM FICTION IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION:  
 A SURVEY

The history of translation of modern Malayalam fiction into English begins with O. Chandu Menon's novel, *Indulekha*, translated by John Willoughby Francis Dumergue. The novel and its translation are of great importance in the history of modern Malayalam literature. *Indulekha*, first published in 1889, is the first significant Malayalam novel. Although Appu Nedungadi's *Kundalata*, published in 1887, is the first novel in Malayalam, *Indulekha* is undoubtedly the first that corresponded perfectly to the definition of the Western genre. We can now see that *Indulekha* has been doubly fortunate: during the colonial era, an Englishman translated it competently within a year of its first publication. It is to be noted here that the translation remains fresh and eminently readable even today; when T. C. Sankara Menon revised it in 1965 (published by the Mathrubhumi Printing & Publishing Co., Ltd., Calicut) only very little work needed to be done on it according to his own admission (p.vi).

Chandu Menon, who began his official career in 1864 as a junior clerk in the service of T. E. Sharpe, a judge in the Madras Presidency, soon won the appreciation of his superiors for his sharp intelligence and other outstanding abilities. Besides Justice Sharpe, William Logan, the District Collector and author of the famous *Malabar Manual* too was greatly impressed by his performance and Chandu Menon became a Munsiff in eleven years and went on to become a Sub-Judge. He held this position for seven years with distinction; the Government

honoured him with the title of Rao Bahadur and the Madras University made him its Fellow—great achievements for an Indian in the colonial set-up of those times, even by modern reckoning.

How the novel came to be written is well documented, as the author himself provides a description in great detail of the factors that prompted him. In his ‘Preface to the First Edition,’ Chandu Menon mentions that after he left Calicut in 1886, he began to read English novels extensively, which alienated the circle of his intimates, as he was not able to find time to have social intercourse with them. And yet, he was unwilling to give up his favourite pastime, either. To reconcile both these conflicting interests, he began to narrate in Malayalam the gist of the novels he had read, in the assembly of his friends. This turned out to be some kind of an oral translation of the novels concerned. Friends kept on importuning him for more. Finally, he attempted a translation into Malayalam, of Lord Beaconsfield’s *Henrietta Temple*. Soon he found that he was unable to make a correct transmission of all ideas expressed in the original through a translation, although he was successful in making an oral rendering of the summary of the novel. Says Chandu Menon: “Taking, therefore, all these circumstances into consideration, I determined to write a Malayalam novel more or less after the English fashion....” However, in his letter to Dumergue, requesting him to translate the novel, he sets for the reasons thus in his “Preface”:

First, my wife’s oft-expressed desire to read in her own language a novel written after the English fashion, and secondly a desire on my own part to try whether I should be able to create a

taste amongst my Malayalee readers, not conversant with English, for that class of literature represented in the English language by novels of which...they have no idea, and to see whether they could appreciate a story that contains only such facts and incidents as may happen in their own households under a given state of circumstances—to illustrate to my Malayalee brethren the position, power and influence that our Nair women, who are noted for their natural intelligence and beauty, would attain in society, if they are given a *good English education*; and finally—to contribute my mite towards the improvement of Malayalam literature which I regret to observe is fast dying out by disuse as well as by abuse.

The book is written generally in the style of (the) Malayalam which I speak at home with such Sanskrit words as I might use in conversation with an educated Malayalee (pp. xvi-xvii).

He finished writing the novel in fifty-eight days.

On the face of it, one is struck by the genuine solicitousness he expresses for his friends, his wife, for his mother tongue and its literature. One also notes the rare instance in which the author of the S L text describes the salient features of its language, to the potential translator.

His personal experience in self-empowerment through English education must also have led the altruist in him to aspire for the same for the contemporary society, especially its youth and women. Says T. C. Sankara Menon in his “Foreword”:

*Indulekha* is a story of that eternal conflict between two generations, the aged and the young, the passing and the rising. The important difference which the author makes in this story between the two generations is not so much age, but English education. Again and again, directly, or indirectly through characters in the story, he affirms his faith in the refining and liberating influence of English education and the great need for giving that education specially to the women of India.

In the present set-up in India, such championship of English education will be considered by some as an unhappy feature of the novel. There is also a controversy about the 18<sup>th</sup> Chapter. It contains nothing that is necessary for the plot, but is a discussion between the hero and two other characters on English education... (p.iv).

We do not have to look elsewhere for the author's anxiety to get the novel translated into English almost simultaneously as its original publication.

However, Chandu Menon seems to have attempted at reforming the society of his day in less obvious ways as well through the writing of this novel. Anitha Devasia and Susie Tharu in their essay, "Englishing *Indulekha*: Translation, the Novel and History," offer major perspectives into the act of Chandu Menon's writing the novel, through deconstructing the sequence of events that led to the writing of the novel as already shown above. They trace the genesis of the novel in five stages: in the first, fascinated by the English novels, he spends more and more time reading them, and consequently less time with his intimate friend/friends.

“Friends” is interpreted as an honorific plural, and the argument is put forward that it was a friend/lover/wife who put pressure on Menon for sharing his pleasure in reading novels. Behind the veil of this honorific, in its English translation, languishes the Nair woman, whose “power and allure” are obscured by colonial intervention, here epitomised by the insensitivity or indiscrimination of the English language to the nuances of honorific pronouns referring respectfully to the noble, elegant, aristocratic Nair woman, which, in Malayalam, experiences no difficulty in communicating to the intended readers. Say Anitha Devasia and Susie Tharu:

The original displays a performative force which functions both as a gloss on translation and as an ironic comment on the blindness to cultural difference that marked colonial assessments of Nair women and Nair marriage. In a note of dissent appended to the report of the 1891 Malabar Marriage Commission, Chandu Menon protested against the violence of this ethnocentricity and its theory of translation and accused the British of contemplating reforms that would destroy Nair society (A. Devasia and S. Tharu, 1997: 57-58).

At the second stage, his friends/lover/wife resent his distraction and demand that he must share his pleasure. Chandu Menon is forced to narrate the essence of the story. But this ploy rather fails. The third stage is when he stumbles on Lord Beaconsfield’s *Henrietta Temple* as already seen above. Her appetite for the pleasure of listening to the story whetted already by Menon, the friend/lover/wife importunes him to render the novel into Malayalam. Having no other go,

Menon attempts an oral translation of the novel. Thus, the “afterlife” of an English novel takes a new lease in a Nair society that is on the lookout for a modernity. The fourth stage shows Lakshmikkuttiyamma, Menon’s wife, as not satisfied with the oral rendering. She demands of her husband to make a novel that she can read by herself in her own language. Chandu Menon attempts a Malayalam translation of *Henrietta Temple* but soon despairs of it; the tedium of the enterprise is reflected in Menon’s laboured translation of an excerpt from Charles Bradlaugh’s book, inserted in Chapter Eighteen of *Indulekha*. In the fifth stage, taking all the above problems into account, Chandu Menon decides to write a novel—a full-fledged novel in Malayalam after the “English fashion,” as the only way of fulfilling the desire he has aroused in his wife, and by extension, the expectation of reform in his community. Anitha Devasia and Susie Tharu wind up this section with the following observations:

Chandu Menon’s task, then, is to create a novel for a Nair reader-subject who aspires to a place in an emerging Indian middle-class; or, changing the emphasis somewhat, to write a novel that will figure into being this Nair-Indian, hyphenation and all, as subject for the liberal-bourgeois project in colonial Kerala. Crucial to that project is the critical mediation of imperial initiatives and the consolidation of Nair hegemony in the region. His novel must re-fashion and re-organize the codes and subcodes, indeed the whole corpus of philosophical assumptions and juridico-political contracts that constitute the bodies of the Sanskrit-Malayalam reader and of

the English novel. In order to conjure into being his new Nair-Indian subject (pleasure and all) Chandu Menon must also catch the European novel at work. He must assay the historical movement inaugurated by the original and recreate, appropriate, its performative energy. Only then will he succeed in writing a Malayalam novel that would be, like its model, an inaugural scripting, an “indulekha.” Wittingly and unwittingly, then, Chandu Menon deconstructs/supplements his “original” to remake his world his reader and—we must not forget—himself as husband-lover. Nair, Malayalee, Malabar, India—here are not “living subjects,” or empirical objects exemplary of already existing formations, “but names at the edge of language, or, more rigorously, the trait which contracts the relation of the aforementioned living subject to his name...” (A. Devasia and S. Tharu, 67).

What V. C. Harris in his “Introduction” to *Pandavapuram* By Sethu, observes about *Indulekha* is pertinent in the same context:

Historically, *Indulekha* (1889), arguably the first significant novel written in Malayalam was, in a sense, spurred on by the author Chandu Menon’s quarrel with Imperial initiatives, being taken around that time, to regulate Nair marriage and sexuality, and is primarily concerned with the setting up of an imagined Malabar with its centre in the Nair taravad (household) and in rewriting power relations within the Nair family (p.vii).

What Harris has hinted at is elaborated by K. N. Panikkar as Chandu Menon's well-considered political stand, which is obliquely brought out in the heated exchange between Indulekha and the hero Madhavan on the subject of the impermanence or otherwise of the Nair marriage of the day. Writes Panikkar:

Indulekha's spirited defence, however, reflects the gender equality that Nair women had enjoyed for centuries, which the reforms contemplated by the government and supported by the educated middle class was likely to upset. Whether the practice, which had evolved as a part of cultural tradition, needed to be changed was itself a matter of doubt for many. In the evidences and discussions of the Malabar Marriage Commission and the public responses to its recommendations, this uncertainty found varied expression. Chandu Menon, who was a member of the Marriage Commission, in a note of dissent argued that Nair marriages had validity both in law and religion and that no legislative interference was needed in this matter.

The Madhavan-Indulekha conversation was in many ways a precursor to the debate among the educated middle class generated by the marriage reform proposal. Indulekha's arguments can perhaps be identified with the largely unstated opinion of women, which did not altogether match the patriarchal urge to control women's sexuality and independence (Panikkar, 1995: 137-138).

*Indulekha*, which ran into its second edition within three months of publica-

tion in 1889 remains one of the most popular novels in Malayalam. It has gone into nearly one hundred editions in the one hundred and thirteen years of its existence.

J. W. F. Dumergue joined the Civil Services in India in 1878 as Assistant Collector and Magistrate at Arcot. He took to Malabar and its people in a very short time and mastered Malayalam so perfectly that he was engaged as Malayalam Translator to the Madras Government for some time, and was also posted as District Collector, District and Sessions Judge and Assistant Resident for Travancore State and Cochin in various stints. It goes to his credit that instead of looking at *Indulekha* in those colonial times “as a worthless story of native life” he saw in the novel a “well-told, pleasing love story, which would have a wide appeal.” He has strong extra-literary reasons, though, for translating the novel as he reveals in the “Translator’s Preface.”

So far as Europeans are concerned, the value of a book like *Indulekha* can hardly be over-estimated. Few amongst us have opportunities of learning the colloquial and idiomatic language of the country, which, so far as I am competent to express an opinion, is far more important for the ends of administration than all the monuments of archaic ingenuity which we read and mark and leave undigested under the present “Rules for the encouragement of the study of Oriental Languages.” In this respect, therefore, a novel supplies a distinct want and I would respectfully commend this point to the consideration of the powers who regulate such matters.

Of all the recognized Vernaculars in South India, Malayalam, being confined to one district in the Madras Presidency, and the Native States of Cochin and Travancore, is least known to the world in general and the influence of the new departure made by Mr. Chandu Menon would, therefore, in itself be limited to a narrow sphere. Hence, apart from the interest with which *Indulekha* inspired me, and the linguistic profit I derived from its perusal, I thought it desirable, with Mr. Chandu Menon's permission, to assist him in his declared object by translating the work into the "lingua franca" of the East (pp. vii-viii).

It seems even Queen Victoria, the Empress of India, was convinced by Dumergue's arguments. She awarded a certificate to Chandu Menon, "in recognition of the service rendered by him in the cause of Malayalam literature..." (p.vi).

The present researcher has dwelt, at some length, on the factors that governed the writing and translation of *Indulekha* in order to focus attention on the inter-relationship between the colonial agenda and the role of the English language and literature in the inauguration of modern Malayalam fiction; attention is also drawn to the politics of translation during the colonial times.

With such a fine launch for the translation of modern Malayalam fiction into English, one would expect that most of the Malayalam novels that followed *Indulekha* would somehow have shared its good luck. However, the next Malayalam novel, an equally great and more ethnic work, C. V. Raman Pillai's *Marthanda Varma*, published in 1891 from Madras, had to wait for forty-five

years, till 1936, when a translation by B. K. Menon came out from Kamalalaya Printing Works, Ernakulam. The translation, as admitted by the translator himself, was arduous and resulted in the mutilation of the original in many ways. The translator's daughter, Prema Jayakumar, revised it and Sahitya Akademi reprinted it in 1998, sixty-two years later.

K. Ayyappa Paniker says in his "Introduction" to the Sahitya Akademi reprint that C. V. Raman Pillai is "not only one of the earliest Malayalam novelists, but is easily the greatest of them all." *Marthanda Varma* was C. V.'s first novel, of which the first draft was completed as early as 1883, four years *before* the first Malayalam novel, *Kundalata*, was published. In its 111 years of existence, more than 100 editions have come out. Even to this day, the novel is the source of lively discussions, new studies and annotated editions. If the "afterlife" of this book, to follow Walter Benjamin's logic, is so vibrant then there is little need to highlight the fame that has accrued to it over the years. C. V. describes the work as a historical novel and at one point critics identified similarities between *Marthanda Varma* and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. However, the similarities are confined to plot-construction since in both novels one finds a fusion of historical facts and romantic elements. C. V.'s compulsions of adopting a historical romance-mode were in response to certain political trends of the times. Writes Ayyappa Paniker in his "Introduction" to *Marthanda Varma*:

What impelled him to fictionalise history was, both consciously and unconsciously, his involvement with his own times.

*Marthanda Varma*, on the surface, is a historical romance. But its

sub-text is a political one of contemporary significance. On the one hand, the work is concerned with the author's ideal of what constitutes good government. In the historic document, the *Malayali Memorial* of 1891, which was submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore in the same year as the publication of *Marthanda Varma*, and in the writing of which C. V. Raman Pillai had a significant part, the concept of good government is elaborately discussed (p.12).

C. V. Raman Pillai wrote his three historical novels, *Marthanda Varma*, *Dharma Raja*, *Ramaraja Bahadur* and *Premamrtam*, a novel of social satire, not as a means of entertainment but as his attempts at social reform. He also highlighted patriotism in his first novel *Marthanda Varma*, completed in draft form well before Indian National Congress was established in 1885. Rather than romanticise a patch of the past of a small region like Venad, C. V. Raman Pillai gives expression to his own enlightened political opinions developed through his exposure to liberal Western thought.

Through the character Subhadra, C. V. is creating an Indian woman who was yet to emerge — one of the first 'female heroes' in Malayalam literature, as Ayyappa Paniker calls her — valorous, self-sacrificing, with an open and sharp mind, playing big social/political roles. If Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* is a contemporary heroine of outstanding qualities, Subhadra could have existed any time in history—like Boadicea or the Rani of Jhansi.

C. V. is credited with the first-ever depiction of Muslim characters in

Malayalam literature, through this first novel of his. The Muslim characters are honourable, compassionate, and patriotic, painted with conviction. C. V. must have personally experienced the generosity and large-heartedness of some Muslims in Hyderabad or Mysore where he had lived incognito for a couple of years in his early youth, as Ayyappa Paniker has observed.

C. V. is the first novelist to present Dalit characters in a work of fiction in Malayalam. The Channars play a decisive role in the action of the novel.

C. V. towered like a colossus among the petty minds and puny figures of his time. His choicest figure of speech is the hyperbole and the dominant *rasa* in his works is *adbhuta*, wonder. The characters and action in his novels remind one of a Kathakali performance. He has coined separate, individual variants of dialects for each of his characters in his three historical romances. Commenting on C. V.'s art, Ayyappa Paniker says again, in his "Introduction":

C. V.'s narrative art, often transgressing the boundaries of realism and reaching into magical realism, illustrates a difficult model for his successors. One is yet to see another Malayalam novelist who has successfully dared to take up the challenge posed by this early work of C. V. Raman Pillai. His magnum opus, of course, is *Ramaraja Bahadur*, which has not been equalled by any later work of fiction in Malayalam—but few are those who have produced a maiden work so fascinating as *Marthanda Varma*, a classic that has jealously maintained its popularity for over a hundred years (p.19).

*Marthanda Varma* is also a work produced during the heyday of colonialism and translated during a critical phase of the Travancore monarchy's reign, marked by the intensified national struggle, emergence of Communism in Kerala, and the rising popular resistance to the royal family's interference in the administration of the Kingdom. The language of the translation, selection of equivalent terms, the so-called "explanatory" experiments done by the translator within the body of the translated text and so on will be looked into in detail in a later chapter.

Translations of *Indulekha* (as *Crescent Moon*) and *Marthanda Varma* by R. Leela Devi came out in 1979 from Pankaj Publications and Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, respectively. The present researcher was amazed to find that the earlier versions were heavily borrowed from, without any acknowledgment. Emergence of multiple translations of a work, cannibalising on already existing versions obviously with motives far removed from literary pursuits is a reality, as evidenced here.

Modern Malayalam fiction had to wait for twenty-six years more, after the appearance of the translation of *Marthanda Varma* in 1936, for another translation landmark. Victor Gollancz, London and Harper & Brothers, New York, published Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Chemmeen*, translated by Narayana Menon, in 1962. The Harper & Brothers edition came out as part of the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works: Indian Series. Thus modern Malayalam fiction entered the arena of world literature. When the book was hailed all over the world as a modern classic, Malayalam literature was finding voice on a world-scale for the first time. When over 20000 copies of the book were sold (according to Meenakshi

Mukherjee writing in 1972) and thus an Indian book in translation was listed as a best-seller, and that too a book from the obscure South, from such a minority region so far removed from the national mainstream and the dynamics of the hegemonic, majority language, not only Malayalees, but all Indians felt proud about the novel. When it was made into a film a couple of years later, which went on to win the President's Gold Medal, it again made news.

It is a very interesting work, being the first significant Malayalam novel to be translated into English after Independence—or, rather, during the post-colonial era. The politics of translation and the peculiar approaches towards culture in the then Third World, emerging in Shanta Rama Rau's, "Introduction," is worth noting:

It was our duty in those days (of colonialism) to understand the West and our colonial rulers, but not necessarily vice versa—except for broad administrative purposes. . . . Often one would acquire a great deal of information about a foreign literature along with a comparatively slender acquaintance with one's own. . . . It is not surprising that our literary lingua franca became English. In a country of the size and linguistic diversity of India, any writer who wanted to reach a national audience had to write in English. . . . It gave him access to the educated public anywhere, and, even more important, to the people who could actually afford to *buy* a book. . . . Extremely few Indian writers, working in their own provincial languages, have managed to reach the wider audience that working in English or the

translation of their work into English can attract.

Understandably, then, the idea of a “best-seller” in India is a strange and wonderful thing. Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai’s *Chemmeen* is precisely that strange and wonderful thing. The odd aspect of the situation is that he became celebrated throughout India for his penetrating descriptions of the “little people.” ...Now, at last, in Narayana Menon’s brilliant translation, his work can get the international audience it deserves.... As always, India offers its people a poor living but a rich life, and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai must be congratulated for capturing that quality in the microcosmic but enormous world he describes (pp.vii-ix).

Thakazhi came on the literary scene of Kerala in the early nineteen thirties, as a youth who saw raw realities of life, fought for the independence of the human individual and for social justice. During his life in Trivandrum as a law student he had come under the influence of the radical thinker A. Balakrishna Pillai, the editor of the literary journal, *Kesari*. It was under his guidance that Thakazhi read Freud, Marx, Bertrand Russell and the French and Russian masters of the nineteenth century like Zola, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Chekov, Gogol and others. With his contemporaries like P. Kesava Dev, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, Ponkunnam Varkey and Lalitambika Antarjanam, all great fiction writers, he shared social reformist zeal as his life’s guiding principle. It was about this time that the Progressive Writers Movement swept all over India, and Thakazhi was caught up in it in a big way. His stories were noted for their strong social content.

Throughout his long life, Thakazhi went on renewing himself, drawing on the changes his life was undergoing in each phase. He always left behind movements and doctrines that were outdated, and were of no use. This flexibility stood him in good stead and ensured his growth as a writer of national and international importance. If his early youth was devoted to stark realism, he gradually mellowed enough to allow some lyricism to enter his narrative art. By the time he wrote *Kayar* he attains a rare kind of detachment possible only for the writer of an epic; indeed Thakazhi has admitted that the inspiration behind the construction of the structure of *Kayar* was the *Mahabharata*.

As noted above, Thakazhi made a departure from his avowed commitment to realism in *Chemmeen*—he brought in a fresh breeze of romanticism. The novel acquires the quality of a fable in which life in the fishermen's community is depicted in great emotional detail. The customs, taboos, beliefs, rituals and the day-to-day business of living through the pain of stark existence come alive magically through Thakazhi's pen.

Narayana Menon's translation remains very popular even to this day; it has gone into several editions and is readily available in all bookshops and stalls all over India.

However, successive translations did not follow immediately. Only two novels came out in English translation in the next ten years: both were Thakazhi's. *Rantidangazhi* (original published in 1948), translated by M. A. Shakkoor as *Two Measures of Rice*, came out of Jaico Publishers, Mumbai, in 1967. *The Unchaste*, (original *Paramarthanalla* first published in 1945) translated by M. K.

Bhaskaran appeared in 1971, published by Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi. Both were failures; according to Meenakshi Mukherjee:

Among the three (above) novels of Thakazhi as read in English translation, *Chemmeen* is the best both because as a novel it is artistically most successful and because the translator has so competently rendered the narrative in the most appropriate style. It is symptomatic of the lack of literary discrimination in our publishing world that just because one novel by a particular author turned out to be such a commercial success in translation, there was an attempt to exploit this situation by publishing two more, both less successful as novels and incompetently translated. Such indiscriminate publishing does more harm than good to the author. The non-Malayali reader whose interest was aroused by the translation of *Chemmeen* must have been compelled to revise his opinion of Thakazhi after reading the two later translations. It does not matter to the reader that there was a wrong choice of the novels to translate and a wrong choice of translator. The reader will react to the available book as a novel... (M. Mukherjee, 1972: 64).

In retrospect, one is struck by the accuracy of the assessment made by Meenakshi Mukherjee, with regard to selection of works for translation and the competence of the translators, when one goes through the majority of the translations that appeared through the seventies. The poor quality of translation and indiscriminate selection of works for translation during this period seriously

injured the prospects of Malayalam fiction in English translation winning a non-Malayalee readership.

The nineteen seventies saw intense translation activities in the domain of modern Malayalam fiction, though one remains sceptical about the quality of most of them. Beginning with Thakazhi's *The Unchaste* (1971), fifteen or more titles came out in the decade that began in 1971 and ended in 1980. Thakazhi's *The Iron Rod*, Trans. Anonymous, Sterling, New Delhi, 1974; Uroob's *The Beloved* Trans. Raghav R. Menon, of the original *Ummachu*, Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi 1974; C. Radhakrishnan's *Zero*, Trans. The author, Arnold Heinemann, New Delhi, 1974; Thakazhi's *Scavenger's Son* Trans. R. E. Asher, Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi, rpt. Oxford, Heinemann, 1993 included in the Asian Writers Series; M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *The Legacy* Trans. C. Mathew, Vikas, New Delhi, 1975; N. P. Muhammad's *Driftwood/The Bull*, Trans. P. Bhaskaran/V. Abdulla, Sangam Books, Orient Longman, New Delhi 1976; *Malayalam Short Stories: An Anthology*, translated by various translators, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Trichur, 1976; Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's *Voices* Trans. V. Abdulla, Sangam Books, Mumbai, 1976; Thakazhi's *Rungs of the Ladder*, Trans. C. Paul Varghese, Arnold Heinemann, New Delhi, 1976; Matampu Kunjukuttan's *Aswathama* Trans. Prema Menon, Vikas, New Delhi, 1978; Basheer's *Magic Cat*, Trans. N. Kunju, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1978; V. K. N.'s *Bovine Bugles*, Trans. The Author, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1978; P. Kesava Dev's *Neighbours* Trans. P. K. Ravindranath, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1979, Uroob's *Ammuni*, Trans. Susheela Mishra, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Trichur, 1979; Lalitambika Antarjanam's *Agnisakshi*,

Trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Trichur, 1980; S. K. Pottekkatt's *Visha Kanyaka* Trans. V. Abdulla, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1980; and Basheer's '*Me Grandad 'Ad An Elephant'*' Trans. R. E. Asher, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, for UNESCO's Indian Series, 1980, are some of the titles the present researcher came across.

Most of the above translations are noted for the incompetence of the translators in the creative handling of the target language. An unbelievable kind of insensitivity and amateurish approach resulted in turning out translations of even successful originals as rank failures.

The early eighties saw very few translations of Malayalam fiction coming out; but towards the end of the decade, a trend of competent selections and quality translations began to emerge. O. V. Vijayan's self-translated stories and novels that came out of Penguin India dominate this phase of the decade. The books are: Parappurathu's *The House Unfinished*, Trans. K. M. Tharakan, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Trichur, 1981; Uroob's *The Beautiful and the Handsome*, Trans. Sushila Mishra, Trichur, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1982; Anand's *The Death Certificate*, Trans. Gita Krishnankutty, New Delhi, Sangam Books, A Division of Orient Longman Ltd, 1983; Thakazhi's *Children of Ouseph*, Trans. Samuel Mathai & Mary Mathai, New Delhi, Arnold Heinemann Publishers, India, 1987; C. Radhakrishnan's *Patches of Shade*, Trans. The Author, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1987; O. V. Vijayan's *Saga of Dharmapuri*, 1988 and *After the Hanging and Other Stories* 1989, reprinted in 1989, both from Penguin India, New Delhi.

The period since 1991 till date saw a hitherto unseen bloom in the area of

publication of Malayalam fiction in English translation by leading publishing houses. O. V. Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* published from New Delhi by Penguin India in 1991, ran into reprint in 1994. Vijayan's *Infinity of Grace* followed from Penguin India. An omnibus edition of Vijayan's fiction, *Selected Fiction* came out of Viking Penguin in collaboration with D. C. Books, Kottayam, in 1998. Penguin India published Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Yakshi*, Trans. Prema Jayakumar in 1991; *Doorways to Death*, Trans. Prema Jayakumar, in 1995 and *Five Cents of Land*, Trans. R. Viswanathan, in 1998. Penguin India also published M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Demonseed and Other Stories*, Trans. V. Abdulla and Gita Krishnankutty in 1998, Anand's *Desert Shadows* Trans. K. M. Sherrif in 1998 and Paul Zacharia's *Reflections of a Hen in Her Last Hour and Other Stories*, Trans. A. J. Thomas and the Author, in 1999. Sterling Paperbacks, New Delhi published Kamala Das's *Padmavati, the Harlot and Other Stories*, Trans. The Author, in 1992, which ran into a reprint in 1994. The other major publishers are Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, Disha Books, an imprint of Orient Longman and Macmillan India Ltd. Disha Books published Kamala Das' *Sandal Trees and Other Stories*, Trans. V. C. Harris and C. K. Muhammad Ummar, in 1995, M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Mist/Creature of Darkness*, Trans. V. M. Prameela/Saraswathy Menon, in 1997 and *Kualam* in 1998 and Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Roots* Trans. V. Abdulla, by Macmillan, Chennai in 1983, rpt. Orient Longman, Hyderabad, in 2002. Macmillan India published Sethu's *Pandavapuram*, Trans. Prema Jayakumar in 1995, Matampu Kunjukuttan's *Outcast* Trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan in 1996; M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Second Turn*, Trans. P. K.

Ravindranath, in 1997 and N. P. Muhammad's *The Eye of God*, Trans. Gita Krishnankutty in 1997. Sahitya Akademi brought out C. Radhakrishnan's *Maybe Another Day*, Trans. The Author, in 1993; C. V. Raman Pillai's *Marthanda Varma*, Trans. B. K. Menon, rpt. in 1998; *Short Stories of Karoor* by Karoor Neelakanta Pillai translated by various translators; *And Now Let Me Sleep* by P. K. Balakrishnan, Trans. K. C. Sarasamma, in 1999 and *Kayar* by Thakazhi, Trans. N. Sreekantan Nair. Sahitya Akademi has recently announced that the following works of Malayalam fiction in English translation are in press, due to come out in a few months: V. K. N.'s *Payyan Stories*, Trans. The Author, Punathil Kunhabdulla's *Smarakasilakal*, Trans. Elzy Tharamangalam, and C. V. Raman Pillai's *Ramaraja Bahadur*, Trans. Prema Jayakumar. A few other significant publishers like National Book Trust India, New Delhi, Rupa and Co., New Delhi, Affiliated East-West Press, Chennai, Katha, New Delhi, The Book Review Trust, New Delhi, India Ink, New Delhi; Roli Books New Delhi published important works during this period. Rupa and Co. published *Catching and Elephant & Other Stories* by M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Trans. V. Abdulla in 1991, *Arab Gold* by N. P. Muhammad & M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Trans. P. K. Ravindranath, in 1993, *What the Sufi Said*, novel by K. P. Ramanunni, Trans. N. Gopalakrishnan & R. E. Asher, and Anand's *Twilight Encounters* translated by various translators in 2002. National Book Trust India has brought out *Under the Wild Skies*, a comprehensive collection of Malayalam short stories translated by various translators and edited by K. Satchidanandan. Affiliated East-West, Chennai, brought out *Bhaskara Pattelar & Other Stories*, a collection of Paul Zacharia's stories translated by Gita

Krishnankutty, A. J. Thomas and the author, in 1994. Affiliated East-West Press also published *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi*, M. Mukundan's magnum opus translated by Gita Krishnankutty, in 1997. Katha, New Delhi, published *Short Stories by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer*, translated by various translators in 1996, *Vyasa & Vigneswara*, Anand's novel translated by Saji Mathew in 2000 and *Two Novellas: Praise the Lord/What News, Pilate?* by Paul Zacharia, translated by Gita Krishnankutty in 2001. The Book Review Trust has brought out in 2002, *Saraswatheevijayam*, the earliest Dalit novel in Malayalam, by Potheri Kunhambu, published in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, translated now by Dileep Menon. Roli Books, New Delhi, published *The Best of Thakazhi*, a collection of Thakazhi's best short stories translated by various translators and edited by K. M. George, in 1999. IndiaInk published V. K. Madhavankutty's *The Village before Time*, translated by Gita Krishnankutty in 2000. This would bring the tally to about thirty-five titles. Certainly this is boom time for Malayalam fiction in English translation.

A close look at the major works from 1980 till now will reveal the most important gains made by modern Malayalam fiction in English translation, after a period of eclipse, and, venturing into a phase of wider acceptance. The Jonathan Cape edition (1982) of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* carries the legend on the front cover: "The literary map of India is about to be redrawn... *Midnight's Children* sounds like a continent finding its voice. An author to welcome to world company." The novel had won the Booker Prize in 1981, the same year it had first been published. This kind of an opening up lead to a boom in the area of Indian writing (mostly fiction) in English. And as a benevolent side-view in this intense

gaze towards Indian fiction in English, Indian fiction in English translation also gained considerable attention. Hopeful attention from the western market, and almost assured warm reception in the domestic market, encouraged publishing houses like the newly opened Penguin India, Macmillan India, Orient Longman, Harper Collins Publishers (India) and several other smaller publishers to open up their doors to English translations of Malayalam fiction by eminent writers. Among the publishers in India, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi is the biggest and the most prolific. With an eye solely on the propagation of good literature in translation, Sahitya Akademi brings out translations of fiction, from all Indian languages into English, and among the languages themselves. Indian English, a language and literature recognized by Sahitya Akademi as one of the Indian languages, gets its fair share, through translations into English. If not entirely meant for Western consumption, these translations serve to cater to the needs of the city-dwelling, English-reading public who had slowly begun to be convinced that literature worth reading existed in the regional languages, albeit due to the endorsement by the West. At least two books of O. V. Vijayan going to reprint in Penguin India in 1989 (within a few months of first publication) and in 1994 is indicative of the good times Malayalam fiction in English translation was enjoying. The harbinger of this resurgence was Ronald E. Asher's translation of Thakazhi's *Scavenger's Son*, published by Orient Paperbacks, New Delhi, in 1975.

Asher went on to translate Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's three novels, *Childhood Friend*, *'Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant!'* and *Pattumma's Goat* published in one volume titled *'Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant!': Three Stories of*

*Muslim Life in South India* in 1980 by Edinburgh University Press. This book also was included in the UNESCO's Indian Series. Once again, the quality of translation was lauded, as Asher the Scotsman, besides being a linguist of renown, is an enthusiastic translator from the South Indian Languages, especially from Tamil and Malayalam. He is something of a crusader in his service to Tamil and Malayalam language and literature and his tenacity and perseverance brought some of the best Malayalam works of fiction into national and international attention.

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer is considered by many as the greatest Malayalam fiction writer of the twentieth century. Basheer is synonymous with the heights of perfection Malayalam literature has achieved during this period. At a time when literature was confined to certain sections of society and academic circles, he took it out to the open world and adjudicated with words in his own right. He had plunged headlong into the nationalist movement, running away from home while he was a student of Class IX, discontinuing his studies and coming into contact with Congress Leaders in Kozhikode. Taking part in the Salt Satyagraha in 1930, he was briefly imprisoned; upon being released, he joined the extremists and began to attack the government through fiery pamphlets. Between 1930 and 1945, he was in and out of jails, and in between, to escape imprisonment, left Kerala and travelled all over India, the Persian Gulf countries and North Africa for about ten years, during 1931-1941, doing all kinds of odd jobs. He lived for many years as the disciple of Hindu Sadhus and Sufis, leading an ascetic's life. Returning to Kerala after a prolonged absence, he settled down to full-time writing. He created his own inimitable language and style. His first novel, *Childhood*

*Friend*, is a good example of stark realism. But this was not any ideology-driven realism. The realism he experimented with was not the Socialist Realism of the early Thakazhi or Kesava Dev. Neither was he under the sway of the Progressives. His realism was tempered by his own personal experiences, acquired over long years of travel among the masses of India and its neighbourhood doing all kinds of jobs that enabled him to mix with the people of different strata of society. Hope and despair, ecstasy and disillusionment, privation and plenty, comforts and hardships he experienced at first hand, like the extreme heat and cold climatic conditions prevalent in the northern regions of our country. His teacher and mentor is none other than the Creator of the Universe. It was from the University of the World that he had graduated. Basheer would never acknowledge any influence of world writers in his creative writing. Says R. E. Asher, Basheer's celebrated translator:

It is a common pursuit in certain critical circles to seek Western influence in Asian prose fiction, as if a novel or short story written by anyone other than a European or an American must necessarily be derivative. It is true, admittedly, that some of Kerala's most original writers acknowledge their debt to Zola, Maupassant, Chekov, and others. Basheer, however, is conscious of no such influence and it will be a fruitless task to try and find one. In fact, there is in all respects no neat way of pigeonholing his writings (p.ix).

As Asher has pointed out, categorizing his works is difficult. His first

published story “The Love Letter” that came out in 1943 defies time. It can easily be classified as “post-modern” by any definition. If a person who has not heard of Basheer and his place in Malayalam literature reads it now, he/she would certainly take him for the latest of the avant garde writers. Except for internal evidence like references to obsolete coins such as “annas,” it is impossible to date this story. Whether it is autobiography or fiction, novel, novelette, novella or short story, or none of this that Basheer wrote, has been debated threadbare by the academic circles in Malayalam. Although some very short stories can be termed as “short-story,” most of the longer stories resist classification. Any attempt to pigeonhole his works will meet with failure. He was not in the least concerned as to what genre his works belonged to. What he wanted to communicate, he did in a very intimate, conversational language that appeared deceptively simple. But to arrive at that way of expression, Basheer would chisel and prune his works repeatedly over a long period. To cut out or replace a word that he wrote would snap the spell; such is the magic he weaves with words. No one before or after him could accomplish what Basheer did with language. Says Asher in his “Introduction”:

Different as types of narrative, our stories also vary stylistically. They share an avoidance of any sort of linguistic pedantry—a tendency perhaps oversimplistically stated by Basheer when he summarises his approach with the words, “What I have put down in writing is the way I talk in conversation.” There is, however, more to Basheer’s writing than an attempt to keep reasonably close to colloquial language. Within this general tendency, the style of his

books varies with the subject. The extremely short and staccato sentences that characterise *Childhood Friend* are not matched in the other two books, particularly *Pattumma's Goat* (the other being '*Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant!*'). It is as if the author sensed that the more profound the emotions he wishes to convey the simpler and more stark (sic). the language used must be. Paradoxically, perhaps, the simpler the structure of sentences he uses, the slower is the pace of the story. This, too, may be taken to be part of his purpose, for the deep feelings he is concerned with in *Childhood Friend* would be less readily conveyed to the reader in a runaway narrative (p.xi).

Basheer remains an enigma even now, not confined by the limits of genre or literary movements and head and shoulders above the greats of Indian literature. No wonder, many writers like M. T. Vasudevan Nair and Paul Zacharia would acknowledge their indebtedness to the inspiration Basheer generated.

Authors like Chandu Menon, C. V. Raman Pillai, Thakazhi and Basheer and the path-breaking translation of their important works have been discussed at great length in the preceding pages, as they form the bedrock of the translation of modern Malayalam fiction into English, and needed to be looked at from several angles for a better understanding.

After the works of Thakazhi and Basheer, the landmark works in translation that dominate the bloom-time, i.e. roughly the last quarter of a century, are those of Lalitambika Antarjanam, O. V. Vijayan, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Kamala Das, V. K. N. , Anand, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, N. P. Muhammad and Paul Zacharia.

All these writers have received high critical acclaim and, except Malayattoor, all are still living. The prominent translators of this period are, O. V. Vijayan (translating his own works), P. K. Ravindranath, V. Abdulla, Prema Jayakumar, Gita Krishnankutty, Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan and K. M. Sherrif. V. K. N., C. Radhakrishnan and Paul Zacharia are also noted for translating their own works. Paul Zacharia translated other's works also, even winning the Katha Award for the translation of Thomas Joseph's short story "The Ship of Butterflies." O. V. Vijayan won the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize for his *After the Hanging and Other Stories*. Gita Krishnankutty shared, with author M. Mukundan, the first-ever Crossword Award, described as the Indian Booker Prize, for Indian fiction in translation, for *On the Banks of the Mayyazhi*. She was short-listed for the same award a year later for her translation of V. K. Madhavan Kutty's *The Village Before Time*; she also won the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize the same year.

When some of the above works come up for mention in the succeeding chapter, necessary background information on the authors shall be provided.