

Autobiography and Literary Public Sphere. An Inquiry into Authorship in Modern Kerala

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Abstract

The most innovative trend in Malayalam literature is identity and resistance found in autobiographical literature. It is evident in every successive writer. Here is an investigation of where it stands in post-modern Kerala. It also mentions the extent to which this identity crisis exists among people involved in public spheres.

Keywords: Authorship, Public Sphere, Modernity

A tendency to study and evaluate the Kerala experience of modernity on the basis of cultural studies is prevalent in academia. 'Autobiography' in Malayalam is a literary form in which the experiences of modernity are abundantly seen. Most of the important writings in the Malayalam autobiographical movement spanning a century and a half were written in the period from 1950 to 1970. This period is associated with the backdrop of Kerala nationalism and state formation. But the time expressed in these works is the last decades of the nineteenth century, when the effect of modernity began to appear in Kerala society, and the first half of the twentieth century, when it reached its peak. Autobiographies written during the above period are widely and diversely marked as how the Malayali met the great socio-historical experience of 'modernity' which brought transformation in all spheres of life. In general, an autobiography can be said to be the story of one's own life. Autobiography has many characteristics and complexities that set it apart from other literary forms.

While literature in general expresses life imaginatively, imagination has no place in autobiography, which should present the life story of a real person. Also, the fact that the narrator and the protagonist are the same person creates a complex relationship between the two. The process of self-realization itself has historical dimensions. Also important are the cultural contexts in which that realization takes the narrative form of autobiography. When this is clear, it is possible to understand that autobiography is not a medium of expression of an absolute individual essence without history, but it is a cultural category that works in subjectivity formation. Approaching autobiographies from the above perspective is not usual in the field of Malayalam studies. Instead, analytical schemes that define the autobiography as a characteristic literary genre and measure its values such as 'honesty', 'usefulness' and 'influence' are more valid. The literary quality of 'interestingness' is also examined in the group. The stated purpose of these studies is to make it clear to others as a model how the characteristics of that personality contributed to the success of a great person in any field.

From a theoretical point of view, the purpose of these studies is to find the autobiography as a literary form that provides direct evidence for the conceptions of human personality. The limitations of this approach are now quite clear. Important in this is that it ignores the multiplicity that autobiographies

display in narrative and intentional meaning rather than succumbing to schemes of definition. But approaching autobiography as a cultural phenomenon opens the way to questioning and transcending established dominants. It is a well-known observation that there is an absence of self-essence in Eastern self-stories.

It is argued that India's social life based on caste and religious group consciousness does not allow self-consciousness. A literary perspective based on Western enlightenment theories that separates the public and private life of the individual through the public/private divide recognizes the expression of private life as autobiography. Social life is common to all while private life is unique. It is certain that the emphasis of the autobiography should be on this uniqueness of the individual being. A large number of autobiographies written in India and Kerala did not attempt to illuminate the 'uniqueness of the individual'. Not all biographies of political leaders and social reformers written against the backdrop of the advent of modernity focused on visions of a changing world and not on the private moments of the individual.

It is not correct to come to the conclusion that the reason for this is the social conventions of this country regarding morality and propriety which hinder the expression of privacy. Observing that it is not beneficial for autobiographical studies to believe that all autobiographers universally have the desire to write openly about their private lives. Udayakumar also presents an interesting finding. "Instead of looking for an unmanifest desire behind the writing, what should be investigated is the nature of the desire that pervades the writing. Looking at it this way, it is not a lack of privacy, but a public narrative that is connected to the public sphere that characterizes most of the Indian autobiographies" (Udaya Kumar, P. 212: 2011). This finding sheds light on the unique authoring processes determined by our socio-cultural contexts.

In that view, Western Enlightenment concepts of self-reliance such as the 'uniqueness of the individual' and the 'universality of the individual' lose relevance. As a result, autobiographical studies have no obligation to uphold them. Thinking in relation to the public sphere, the autobiographies written in the 1950s and 60s must take into account the urgent political and cultural context they faced. This was the time when the questions of what is the identity of united Kerala and what are its achievements in literature and culture shaped the linguistic debates. Autobiography has also been used as a weapon in the competition between different communities for cultural capital.

In order to discover how the characteristics of the relationship between these interactions in the literary public sphere and the concept of 'soul' or 'authorship' formed through it are marked in Atmakatha, "Atmakatha and the Malayalam Literary Public Sphere: An investigation into the formation of authorship in modern Kerala" is attempted through this research paper. Autobiography is a field of literature with many works, but correspondingly less serious studies. If we exclude the general descriptions that are part of literary histories, Dr. Vijayalayam Jayakumar wrote in 1982 'Atmakathasahityam Malayalam', Dr. 'Atmakathasahityam Malayalamthil' written by Naduvattam Gopalakrishnan in 1985 is the only research in this field till date. These are movement studies. By any stretch of the imagination, the autobiographies selected are not movement studies. An issue of 'Thudi', a research publication of Kannur University's Malayalam Department, has been published as a collection of essays on autobiographical studies. The relevance for this study is that autobiographies are analyzed based on the innovative concepts of 'literary public domain' and 'authorship'. This thesis is also relevant as it corrects existing understandings regarding autobiography and tries to present a new model for studying autobiography in the field of research.

Apart from the general reviews of the autobiographical movement in literary histories, there are only two studies on the autobiographical movement in the proper sense in Malayalam. They are 'Autobiography in Malayalam' (Dr. Vijayalayam Jayakumar, 1982) and 'Autobiography in Malayalam' (Dr. Nathuvattam Gopalakrishnan, 1985). An awareness of these limitations will clarify the need to approach autobiography from new theoretical perspectives.

How did autobiographical studies overcome definitions and symptoms and discover the autobiographical form as a purely literary form? Studies have highlighted the merits and demerits of autobiographies. What is the theoretical basis for the identified factors? How do these philosophical underpinnings and the resulting literary understandings obscure the pragmatic nature of the autobiography of the soul? This type of thinking is yet to emerge in this field. New age studies and research can lead this field to new hope.

The Public Sphere and Authorship: A Conceptual History

The concept of 'public sphere' gets its conceptual precision through the book 'The structural transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society' (1962) by the German sociologist Jurgen Habermas. Habermas' concept of 'public sphere' is introduced in general. And it also clarifies the limitations of using the said concept in the special situation of Kerala. In terms of another concept used in the study, 'authorship', post-structuralist thinkers Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Slavoj Zizek, but does not fully rely on the said theories in the analysis and explanation of the course materials. The genesis, history, and characteristics of theoretical concepts are not described in a discourse-free manner. Instead, the method of forming theoretical materials from the cultural practices of the period being studied is adopted.

In the special situation of Kerala, in the last quarter of the 19th century, in relation to other public spheres such as community and politics, the 'literary public sphere' and new 'authorial forms' that intervene in it are emerging. In Malayalam at that time, extensive debates were staged in the fields of literature, language, history, community and administration through rich newspapers and magazines etc. By discursively explaining these discourses and their social conditions, it is attempted to mark the characteristics of the literary community and authorial structures.

Conclusion

In the early days, all the popular autobiographies in Kerala belonged to the Namboothiri or similar high social classes. But with the birth of modernity such tendencies changed and instead became a breeding ground for the socially oppressed and feminist thinkers. There came a time when even language had no boundaries. Even those who had no language of their own created works in their own language (borrowing only the Malayalam script). It led to another revolution in literature itself. Such writers became independent without any boundaries of caste or religion. Although these changes are mostly seen in stories, novels and poetry, they have also started to spread to autobiographies.

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