



POETRY IN MY LIFE EDASSERI

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If anyone were to ask me to write an essay on my life without referring to poverty and poetry, my face would turn dismal; and the paper would remain blank. My wealth is my life made vast and substantial both by the hard battles waged for existence and poetry I indulged in blissfully, at times forgetting myself even. As I traverse in life what I have with me for sustenance is the stock of profound experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant.

My father died in the year 1921. My mother fervently wished to send me to High School. As for me, I wished to be financially able to feed her at least plain gruel. Both these sentences are complete in themselves.

I reached Alapuzha, a southern coastal town of Kerala in search of a job. There I worked as an apprentice under my maternal uncle. The job provided nothing beyond an assurance of daily meals. It was at that time that poetry with its mighty magnetic power pulled me in to its circle.

Prior to that, my acquaintance with literature was limited to a few books - "Adhyatma Ramayanam" which, in any case, had to be read daily at home, being a religious book, Thunjath Ezuthachan's "Maha Bharatham" which was read by me several times due to the sheer fascination it evoked, "Krishna Pattu" by 'Cherusseri', plays by 'Naduvam', other Poems by 'Venmanis', "Sreekrishna Charitha Kavyam" by 'Kunchan Nambiar', a few other "Thullal Poems" and among modern poetry, Vallathol's poem "Shishyanum Makanum" (The Disciple and the Son). That's all. Except for the conjectures that I had gathered from the pieces of poems in 'Padhya Padhavali' which was my school text book, I had no idea about the world of poetry. But, another young man - Manjoor Parameswaran Pillai - who also like me, had come to Alappuzha in search of a job took me to the vast expanse of poetry and also to the history of poetry. Above all, he stimulated the poet which was in its infant stage in me, provided the much needed guidance and led me along the vistas of poetry.

Naturally my seniors at workplace did not approve of the perceived tackiness and the undesirable friendship in me. In fact any well wisher would have condemned such a 'ridiculous' escape to the fold of poetry, from a profession that needed be taken forward by practical dealings with clients, learning of court proceedings and acquiring 'tricks' of the trade. That was the time when any individual, other than an aristocrat or a member of an elite class, who wrote poem was derisively called as "poem-peddler" (Kavithakkaran). The concealed ridicule and contempt that could not be articulated by those words were conveyed with full impact, by the accompanying contortion of lips. He was reprimanded several times, because despite having all the essential requirements conducive to becoming successful in life - like good handwriting and common sense - the boy was going astray with his infatuation for poetry and that too without knowledge of Sanskrit language. The unlucky boy who was accustomed to show only humility in front of elders and teachers withdrew poetry deep into his inner self. But during the secret rendezvous with poetry, within the four thick walls and with all emotional tenderness natural to it, he pledged many a time that he would remain an eternal slave to her. The result? Carrying the slur as having failed at a job which was practised for four to five years, I returned to the veranda of my house. There waiting for me were only the memories of my mother who with tears in her eyes had bid me goodbye, when I started off to Alapuzha.



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But, as far as my poetic development was concerned that period of four to five years in Alapuzha was the golden period in my life. During this period I could read many significant court-epics (Mahakavya), long poems (Khandakavya), poems translated from other languages and also could study some of them. I could get acquainted with the initial chapters of many popular Sanskrit poems; and almost got convinced that as far as composing poems is concerned, my life in this birth was futile due to lack of knowledge in Sanskrit language and that, in the next birth at least I could learn Sanskrit and become a well known poet.

By this time I had already written three long poems (Khandakavya) named 'Ahalya', 'Malini' and 'Oru Latha'. After a lapse of three or four years, Lo!, 'Ahalya' was published in book form, but not in my name. The title of the poem and the poet's name were changed! But, I did not object to it. As summer stands by ever ready to shower compliments and the flowers incessantly blossom and drop, what sense of loss a Pooverinji (a tree that produces a profusion of fragrant flowers) would have, if a plant in the nearby bush not fortunate to blossom, collects a handful of flowers from it to exude fragrance? I was ready to write ten more books of that kind, if somebody wanted! In fact the 'publishing episode' was actually a boon to me. It was not only that a poem written by me who does not know Sanskrit language was published, but a renowned newspaper gave a good review of it too! Never was there any incident like this that could boost my confidence to this level. Followed by this, the poem that I wrote namely 'Janaki' (a requiem for love) and the Khandakavya 'Malini' written along with 'Ahalya' were published in the magazine "Atmavidyakahalam" printed under the supervision of great literary scholar Sreemad Vagbhadananda Guru. Its editor wrote a personal congratulatory letter to me. With this, it was a 'dream come true' for me in the first few decades of this century itself, which I was expecting to happen only in one of my future births.

My struggle to keep hunger at bay was still at its peak. Only difference was that the scenario now got shifted to Ponani, a coastal town of central Kerala. My ability to write poems had inflated my pride. But the politeness in my character that I had developed over years of practice could cover up that pride in me like a strong metal shield. Still the consciousness that "I am unlike others" was growing within me. Even though this feeling gave me the much needed solitude for reveries, it also isolated me from the social circle and opened doors for many misfortunes. I could not do many things, which others could. I had to let with a sigh even those easily convertible opportunities to slip by from the cruel canine teeth of hunger gnawing me. Also, the powerful influence of Gandhism made its mark mercilessly on my thought process. Even while I was loitering without a second pair of dress to wear, without a place to sleep, without a job, without many things, two individuals needed me. One was E. Narayanan, a bud in poetry that dropped off before it blossomed and the second was P.C. Kuttikrishnan, a student lonely because of having inflated self-esteem like me and searching his identity in the labyrinth of thoughts beyond his age. These two youngsters kept me alive; both in life and in poetry.

Life in Ponani was same as in Alapuzha; pursuit of poetry forgetting everything else! We studied together and did critical analysis of the contributions of poets who were well established before the year 1930 and also those who entered poetic field between 1930 and 1940. Many a time we delved deep into the realms of poetry and wandered there day and night only due to sheer fascination. We did not have any definite aim. Everything was amusing and interesting. I did not learn anything consciously. Nor was I industrious. Now that matters had developed to this stage, I wanted to learn some grammar at the minimum. But, instead of finding a teacher to receive knowledge from, I discovered a disciple to receive it from me - it suited me. And I started to learn those portions carefully at least for the purpose of teaching her!

'Vallathol' was my revered poet. Which nascent poetic bud had not flourished when exposed to the aesthetic rays emanating from that great poet? However, going by the



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novelty in thought and warmth, poems of G. Sankara Kurup attracted my interest. You can distinctly see the footprints of these two teachers in a few of my earlier poems namely 'Megham' (Clouds), 'Kodumkattu' (Storm), 'Madya Maranam' (Liquor Menace) and 'Omanayude Achan' (Father of the Darling Child).

It was around this period, that I started considering writing poems seriously. Luckily I could learn from the great critic and essayist Mr. Kuttikrishna Marar that 'poetry is nothing external to life, but a part of the pulsating life itself'. It was he who sternly insisted that I speak in my own tone with my own gestures.

I am a believer of God. But, on occasions when I have to touch upon hunger and the lack of love - facts of life which had always nagged me - I find that the godly humility and respect towards philosophical doctrines leave me in a jiffy. In the poems of the author who swears by Gandhiji, there lie scattered ideas which challenge Gandhism and even faith in God. The poems which reflected the objective social reality written by me who is a follower of Gandhiji and who has not studied Marxian doctrine were adopted by the communists as part of their propaganda. One more reason for failure in life: I am a communist in the eyes of the Congress and a Congress in the Communists' reckoning! But let me not forget; nothing else has helped my quiet poetic life more than this benign neglect.

Poetry also gave me a family of my own. I believe, 'Bramha' (The Creator) must have created this girl exclusively for me; one so fascinated with poetry that it made her lose even her discretion so much as to copy the hymns of 'Sankaracharya' (reverential) and the translations that I had scribbled for 'Pushpabanavilasm' (sensual) in the same note book, for the simple reason that both were in verse.

Making money for a living turned out to be the most important issue in my life. As one of the ways, I decided to publish my book of poems for which I compiled several of my long poems and named it as 'Alakavali'. Printing was undertaken by 'Mathrubhoomi Printing and Publishing Company, Kozhikkode that used to publish and continued to publish most of my major poems in their periodicals. Mathrubhoomi had started to give me small amounts as remuneration for the poems published in their weekly. That money along with the amount I get from writing legal documents was not enough to pay the printing charges; hence those books were lying in the store room of the press for quite some time. Out of the twenty five free copies that the manager Krishnan Nair had compassionately released to me, I sent most of them to the prominent poets in Kerala as also to a couple of my friends and established myself as a poet, thus achieved the eligibility to dream of a lucky future. During this time, one of my friends Mr. E.P. Sumithran, head master of a school in Ponani approached the manager and requested for the release of at least a hundred copies. His idea was to sell those books and with that money to pay the printing charges and get release of the balance books. The manager who was bent upon protecting 'truth', asked the master sympathetically;

"How much money do you have now, sir?"

"Nine rupees, for the time being...."

"In that case, remit that amount now and take twelve books. By remitting nine rupees again, you can buy twelve more books. Like that, eventually you can take all the books from here."

The teacher accepted the twelve books along with the manager's good heartedness and returned.

Later Mr. S.K. Pottekkatt, well-known writer, on coming to know about this, went to the press and got release of the books after paying balance dues. Thanks to the manager, he did not insist for overdue interest, though considerable delay had occurred in the settlement!

Through the mediation by another friend, K.R Brothers published my drama 'Noolamala' (Entanglement) and gave me two hundred and fifty rupees. The handful of money that I received for the first time on account of literature created wonders in my life! Followed by



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this, National Book Stall published many of my books. Instead of being a liability, composing poetry started to be an income generator. But it never reached an encouraging level.

I think it was my play "Koottukrishi" (Collective Farming) in which I also acted, that introduced me and my poems to the literary and cultural circles. Fame apart, I also received a lot of encouragement at that time. Poets like 'Akkitham', 'Kadavanadan', P.C Kuttikrishnan (Uroob), other actors like Gopala Kurup, Padmanabhan Master and many amateurs also acted in that drama. Those occasions - like gathering for the rehearsals, travelling as a group to villages for enacting drama, the quiet nights after drama, bus stops and train compartments during travel - everything turned out to be the venues for literary debates. And forgetting my worldly worries I used to get absorbed in a world of ecstasy, the experience I wished to relish repeatedly in births to come. That was the third phase of my literary life when I remained steadfast with poetry.

Gradually the canine teeth of poverty were losing their sharpness. When I started receiving six hundred rupees a year unconditionally for my literary endeavours from the central government, my hands which were hitherto accustomed to receiving very tiny amounts got used to be left with some cash, howsoever small.

I am writing the remaining lines with great caution. The emotional relationship with poetry is gradually slackening. 'Ambition' is to become a good poet. To be a family man taking care of family to the maximum extent possible is my 'Dharma'. But poetry is not one who will take kindly her fiancé going after anyone else. She insists one hundred percent dedication. It is not the honour that the poet gets from the society but the dedication of the poet towards her that Poetry takes seriously. When the poet as a solitary wayfarer desires to become a dutiful citizen, that social creature faces a dilemma. He needs to forego either of these two. Which one to select? A poet's existence depends on this selection. I am not able to decide on this as yet.

What do we understand when we say a poet lives? It means that he goes on creating own worlds. Any act at variance with this creative process is considered nefarious by him; however great it may be as per the 'Dharma Sasthra'. The poet will only be interested to run away from that nefarious act at the earliest opportunity. It is known to everybody that the Adikavi (the first ever poet) 'Valmiki'² got an opportunity to do so with the blessings of sages. I am continuing with the nefarious act since my wife is not prepared to say, "The consequence of whatever a person does has to be borne by him alone".

So, my poetry cannot but fail miserably. She is bidding farewell with tears in her eyes and continuously looking back. She is my childhood friend!

Rather, she is my known self. I cannot afford to lose her. I have convinced her several times that I am not interested in physical wealth.

"My life like a shack, is noisy each moment,
With absurdities and sins galore,
They are the offspring of penury!
Oh, Lakshmi Devi, the revered Deity of Wealth!
Falling at your feet, I entreat,
"Please do not board to deliver,
Multitudes of your pet miseries too"

These lines are written by me sincerely. But, she is not content. I have not encountered a conflict of this magnitude any other time in my life. I feel that a solution to this dilemma would be found only when everything relating to me break down and dissolve in the earth.

Essay appeared in Visala Keralam. Since the front cover is missing from the available copy of the weekly, we are unable to establish the month and year of writing this essay.



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Notes:

1. This is detailed in the essay 'a short biography of Edasseri.'
2. Story of Valmiki: In the thretha yuga there lived in a forest a cruel hunter and fearless robber by name Ratnakar. Once he tried to way lay Saint Narada. Saint Narada told him that robbery was a sin. Consequences of the sin needs be borne by him alone. His family would be eager to enjoy the fruits of his sin but would not share the sins. Ratnakar asked his wife if it was so and she replied in the affirmative. She told her husband, "The effect of whatever a person does has to be borne by him alone". This had a transformative effect on Ratakarkar who sought forgiveness of the Rishi Narada and went in for a very long meditation. He meditated in stillness so much so that anthills formed around him and covered him completely. Later Narada came there and declared him as a sage. Thus Ratnakar entered a new life as Valmiki (Valmiki means born out of ant hills). Sage Valmiki wrote the great epic "Ramayana".

Translated by the Edasseri Trust Team.