

## Tracks of Transformation: Railways and the Modern Malayalam Literary Landscape

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### ABSTRACT

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the modern prose literature of Malayalam arose, conjoining with the emergence of a new civil society in Kerala. This epochal shift was propelled by the global enlightenment of English education, which bequeathed the province with the ideals of colonial liberalism. The literary artefacts of this period mirrored the tides of urbanization and the mechanization of existence, heralding the dawn of capitalism from the waning of feudal order. The advent of the railways, telegraphs, courts, and urban migrations became enduring motifs within these narratives, encapsulating the novel and short story as primary vehicles of modern thought.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern education had spawned a literate multitude, birthing a burgeoning middle class amidst industrial advancements and mechanization. This middle class, formed by students, teachers, and diverse professionals, embraced modernity, epitomized by railways—a potent emblem of colonial innovation. Yet, literature oft portrayed the railway not solely as a marvel but as a crucible for cultural and societal transformation, where tradition and modernity converged. The railway, as a public sphere, wove disparate threads of society into a singular narrative of modernity, rendering opportunities for leisure, reform, and equality. Stories like ‘*Narayanikkutti*’ (2006) and ‘*Bodham Vanna Bhootham*’ (2006) depicted its transformative ethos, revealing both the allure and disquietude of mechanized progress. Compartmentalization within train classes, however, mirrored economic and social stratifications, a tacit reflection of society’s inherent inequalities.

In this wise, the tales of the era rendered the railway as a symbol of colonial ambivalence—an emblem of progress yet a critique of mechanized capitalism. It fostered a modern consciousness, both critiquing and embracing colonial modernity, thus revealing the manifold contradictions within the emerging neo-literate society of Kerala. Through the train’s journey across narratives, the early Malayalam prose unveiled the cultural psyche of a transitioning society, ever poised betwixt reform and tradition.

**KEY WORDS:** *Modernity, Railways, Colonial Liberalism, Societal Transformation.*

### 1. Introduction

The emergence of modern prose literature in Malayalam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries coincided with the formation of a new civil society within Kerala. This transformative period was chiefly propelled by the global

awareness imparted through English education, which introduced the region to ideas of colonial liberalism. The literature of this epoch mirrored its historical milieu, marked by urbanization and the attendant institutions, mechanical systems, modes of life, and intellectual streams. The novel and short story, as modern prose forms, gained prominence as they articulated the shift from feudalism to capitalism. In such a setting, the advent of railways, telegraphs, policing systems, courts, and urban migration became integral elements in the narratives (Ravikumar, 2012, p.13).

By the 19th century, the spread of modern education had engendered a literate populace, a tangible manifestation of the colonial exchange of knowledge across the land. This rise of literacy heralded the emergence of a new middle class in Kerala, which flourished amidst the industrial advancement and the proliferation of mechanization in India. The resultant transformation in middle-class life found its articulation in the prose of the time, wherein urban experiences and novel social patterns were vividly depicted in short stories and novels. The railways, introduced as part of industrial progress, served as a potent emblem of modernity. Referred to as the “steam engine” or “iron horse,” the railway system took root in India during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first line being laid in 1853. In Kerala, the railway commenced its journey in 1860 with the Pothanur-Pattambi line and, by 1960, had woven a comprehensive network that unified the state.

Despite the socio-economic influence of the railways, their reflection in the literary domain of Kerala remained sparse (Chandran, 2000, p. 445). Yet, in the early narratives, the railway was frequently portrayed as a symbol of wonder and fascination, emblematic of colonial modernity. Works such as *Indulekha* (Oyyarathu Chandu Menon, 1889) illustrate how inventions like the telegraph and railways began to transform societal norms. Machines, often represented as the fruits of colonization, were depicted as tools for the affluent to conquer time and space (Rajagopalan, 2006, p.127).

In literature, the railway was not merely a mode of transport but also a medium of cultural exchange. Rarely, however, were the sensory experiences of train travel rendered in detail. Stories such as *Narayanikkutti* (Krishna Menon, 2006) by Kunji Krishna Menon captured the train’s noisy, unsteady nature interspersed with its halts and smooth passages, symbolizing its transformative role in bridging distant locales and heralding the modern age.

## 2.Methodology

The article employs a historical-cultural framework and literary analysis to explore the emergence of modern prose literature in Malayalam during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This methodology integrates insights from history, sociology, and literature to analyze how colonial modernity and technological advancements, such as the railways, influenced Kerala’s societal and literary landscapes.

The article situates the evolution of modern Malayalam literature within the socio-economic transformations brought about by colonialism. It emphasizes how English education, the spread of literacy, and the rise of the middle class shaped the region’s intellectual and cultural milieu. By examining events such as the industrialization of India, the introduction of railways, and the establishment of colonial institutions, the author identifies the historical forces that informed the themes and forms of early Malayalam prose. For example, the narrative highlights the role of the railways as symbols of colonial modernity and cultural transformation. References to works like *Indulekha* and stories by E.V. Krishna Pillai illustrate how authors depicted these historical shifts, reflecting on the changing social structure and the tension between tradition and modernity.

The article closely examines Malayalam short stories and novels from the period, analyzing how these texts incorporated and reflected the socio-cultural changes of the time. Through detailed readings of specific stories, such as *Narayanikkutti*, *Ente Kozhikottu Yathra*, and *Nanichu Poyi*, the author demonstrates how the railway and its associated social dynamics became recurring motifs.

The literary analysis focuses on:

- **Characters and Class Dynamics:** The compartmentalization of train travel (first, second, and third classes) is interpreted as a reflection of economic stratification. Stories reveal how the railway simultaneously challenged and upheld traditional caste and class hierarchies.
- **Cultural Symbols:** The train is examined not only as a mode of transport but as a cultural signifier of modernity, individual freedom, and social mobility.
- **Themes of Ambivalence:** The narratives’ portrayal of colonial modernity is shown to be ambivalent, with characters both embracing and critiquing modernization and English education.

The article employs a cultural studies approach to interpret how the railway, as a public space, facilitated new forms of social interaction and cultural exchange. It highlights how train travel brought together people from

diverse backgrounds, fostering equality and modern ideas while also perpetuating economic hierarchies. The stories are seen as reflective of a society negotiating the contradictions of colonial modernity, where traditional values coexisted uneasily with reformist ideals.

### 3.Objective

The objectives of this study are to explore the emergence of modern Malayalam prose literature and understand its historical and cultural context during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It seeks to analyze the influence of colonial modernity, particularly the role of advancements such as railways and English education, in transforming Kerala's social fabric. The study aims to examine how these changes are reflected in early Malayalam prose, with special attention to the portrayal of technological marvels like the railway as symbols of progress and modernity. Additionally, it delves into the representation of social stratification, economic disparities, and the evolving roles of tradition and modernity in these narratives. The objective is to assess the duality of modernization—how it fostered opportunities and equality while simultaneously reinforcing economic and social hierarchies. The study also seeks to evaluate how early Malayalam short stories depicted the public and cultural spaces created by the railway, illustrating transitions in social values, individual freedoms, and interpersonal relationships.

Finally, this research aims to critique the ambivalence towards colonial modernity seen in these works, highlighting the complex interplay between reformist ideals, colonial influence, and traditional values. Through this, the study aspires to offer a comprehensive understanding of how early Malayalam prose served as a cultural and ideological platform during a transformative era.

The study further intends to explore how early Malayalam prose depicted the rise of a middle class shaped by modern education and the colonial experience. This analysis includes an examination of the narratives' portrayal of the middle class's contradictions, aspirations, and challenges in navigating a rapidly modernizing society. It investigates how these stories highlight the cultural shifts brought about by mechanization, urbanization, and industrial advancements, reflecting the changing dynamics of social and economic life.

Another key objective is to analyze how these literary works used train journeys and stations as metaphors for societal transformation, enabling the crossing of caste, class, and gender boundaries. By focusing on narratives that explore love, social interactions, and cultural exchanges in the context of train travel, the study aims to understand how early Malayalam literature contributed to reimagining relationships and individual autonomy in a modernizing world.

Ultimately, the research seeks to position early Malayalam prose as a significant medium for understanding the complexities of Kerala's transition from feudalism to capitalism, providing insight into the ambivalence towards progress and the negotiation between tradition and modernity. Through this, the study aims to illuminate the enduring cultural and historical relevance of these narratives in the broader context of Kerala's socio-cultural evolution.

### 4.Literature Review

The early Malayalam prose literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reflects the socio-cultural transformations of Kerala during its transition from feudalism to capitalism. Scholars such as Ravikumar (2012) note the emergence of modern prose forms like the novel and short story as critical mediums articulating these shifts. The integration of colonial modernity, symbolized by the advent of railways, telegraphs, and other mechanized innovations, deeply influenced the narratives of this period.

Chandran (2000) highlights the railway as a symbol of colonial modernity and cultural exchange, though its literary representation remained limited. Early works like *Indulekha* (1889) by Oyyarathu Chandu Menon depict machines as tools of progress for the affluent, reflecting the transformative impact of modern technology. Krishna Menon's *Narayanikkutti* (2006) provides detailed sensory depictions of train travel, signifying its cultural and physical role in connecting distant regions.

The narratives of the period also portray railways as public spaces fostering social reform. Stories such as Ambadi Narayanappothuval's *Bodham Vanna Bhootham* critique materialism through depictions of rail travel, while others like E.V. Krishna Pillai's *Ente Aadyayathra* celebrate railways as marvels of modernity. However, they also reveal the economic and social stratifications entrenched within train compartments, reflecting broader societal hierarchies.

Studies by *Balaram* (2000) and *Ganesh* (2000) emphasize the ambivalence of colonial modernity. While modern education and mechanization fostered a progressive middle class, these narratives critique the superficiality of Anglicized values and highlight the persistence of traditional ethics. Romantic relationships within train settings,

as portrayed in *Narayanikkutti* and *Nanichu Poyi*, signal a shift toward individual liberty but retain colonial moral structures, showcasing the complexities of evolving social norms.

Thus, early Malayalam short stories and novels serve as critical cultural texts that encapsulate the tensions between progress and tradition, providing valuable insights into Kerala's socio-cultural evolution during this transformative era.

## 5.Discussion

### 5.1 Railways as Public Spaces for Reformists

In the early prose works, the railway emerged as a public sphere predominantly accessed by reformists. Gradually, however, it brought together diverse groups within this cadre, fostering a unique collective ethos. Characters aboard the trains often embodied symbols of the colonial era—Englishmen, urbane elites, and women adorned in modern attire. They were frequently depicted as traveling in the first or second-class compartments. For instance, in Kunji Krishna Menon's *Narayanikkutti* (Krishna Menon ,2006) the narrative opens with a vivid portrayal of a second-class train compartment housing a young man clad in Western attire and a wealthy family enroute to Bombay. The modernity of their lifestyles reflects the transition toward individual prosperity and the nuclear family structure.

Ambadi Narayanappothuval's *Bodham Vanna Bhootham (The Enlightened Ghost)* offers a striking illustration of the train as a cultural signifier. The story critiques the materialistic inclinations of a new generation, epitomized by a protagonist who, despite financial constraints, opts for first-class travel to preserve his social standing. Similarly, in E.V. Krishna Pillai's *Ente Aadyayathra (My First Journey)*, the narrator extols the railway as a marvel of modernity, offering pride and comfort through its technological sophistication.

K. Sukumaran's *Onakkalathu Kittiya Sammanam Athavaa Aarinte Kutti (The Gift Received During Onam or Someone's Child)* portrays the bustling chaos of a railway station as the protagonist awaits a friend's arrival from Madras. The narrative vividly captures the animated scenes of rail travel, while Kalyanikutty's *Nanichu Poyi (Embarrassed)* recounts the awe and trepidation of a family journeying from Olavakkode to Madras, embodying the duality of wonder and unease provoked by modern rail systems.

### 5.2 The Principles of Reformist Life

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, the middle class emerging in Kerala through modern education became a significant social force by the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Education, erstwhile confined to Christians and upper-caste Hindus, began to spread amongst the backward communities. This burgeoning middle class—consisting of students, teachers, journalists, lawyers, doctors, government officials, artists, and writers—arose from highly diverse caste, religious, and occupational backgrounds. Yet, within this group, contradictions between beliefs, thoughts, and actions remained ever-present (Balaram, 2000, p.151). While modernity, symbolized by the railway, was readily embraced, traditional mindsets oft revealed its dangers and deceptive allure.

The transition from perambulation or travel by horse-drawn carriage to the advent of the railway, which rendered long-distance travel possible, engendered opportunities for the cultivation of new preferences. Travel became a leisure pursuit for many. Most railway travelers were learned individuals familiar with urban life, including both Indians and foreigners. Pilgrims, migrants, and travelers were the chief patrons of this mechanized world. Many tales of the era capture the conflict betwixt tradition and modernity. Notably, the structural design of the railway, that marvel of modernity, is seldom discoursed upon. Familiarity amongst the newly literate class appears to have dulled the novelty of its physical form. Instead, the space within the train—its compartments, passengers, and officials—taketh center stage in these narratives.

The compartmentalization of second and third classes established an economic stratification. Third-class compartments were designated for laborers and porters, whilst first- and second-class compartments were reserved for the elite. Thus was a new hierarchical order born. The railway catered to the convenience of the privileged classes and nurtured their affinity for this mechanical innovation. The notion that laborers and porters ought to occupy third-class compartments is justified in tales such as *Ente Kozhikottu Yathra (My Journey to Kozhikode)*, *Nanichu Poyi (Embarrassed)*, and *Narayanikkutti*.

- “Arunachalam is a police inspector. His constables travel in third-class compartments.” – *Ente Kozhikottu Yathra* (Kumaran, 1987, p.20).
- “They travel in the second class, while their porters, women, and goods travel in the third class.” – *Nanichu Poyi (Embarrassed)* (Kodanchery (Ed.), 2006, p.497).

- “The soda had to be opened because the ginger water brought by Gopalan had gone cold; Gopalan travels in the third class.” – Narayanikkutti (The same book, 2006, p.169).

These instances reveal that the railway, a creation of capitalism, justified economic stratification. However, the modernity embodied within the railway system also worked to counter caste distinctions.

In *Ente Kozhikottu Yathra*, the narrator recounted a mail train journey from Madras to Malabar. Boarding the train scant five minutes before its departure, the narrator discovered an empty compartment and took comfort in the prospect of a pleasant journey. Yet, the arrival of a dignified-looking man resembling a “Rao Bahadur” doth disrupt his solitude. Despite initial discomfort, the narrator reflected, “Everyone on the train is equal, after all” (Kumaran, 1987, p.19). Thus is the railway established as a space transcending caste barriers, fostering equality.

In *Oru Kathinakai (A Hardened Hand)*, a tale unfolds wherein a criminal fleeing captivity arriveth at a railway station. The station, train, and its environs serve as incidental elements. The plot turneth upon Raman, a prisoner, binding policeman Achuthan Nair to the railway tracks. Achuthan escapeth narrowly, by providence. The tale extollet the punctuality and precision of the railway, reflecting modern values of timeliness and meticulous planning. For the fugitive, the railway becometh a means to depart from his homeland and connect with the broader world (Moorkoth Kumaran, 1987, p.17). In this wise, the railway opened new possibilities, linking native lands with the wider realm.

### 5.3 The Ambivalence of Civilization

The newly formed culture evinced an ambivalent perspective amongst the neo-literate communities. “The middle class, passing through colonial institutions, education, and similar fields, could not critically evaluate missionary-colonial culture. While censuring exploitative colonialism, this class yet evinced an eagerness to assimilate the cultural values propagated thereby” (Ganesh, 2000, p.629). Hence did this neo-literate society, emerging as the middle class, become advocates of reformist ideals.

Yet, these narratives also reveal a critique of English education. Tales of mock the pretensions of Anglicized individuals, highlighting their gullibility and lack of practical wisdom. The cautionary tales of *Moorkoth Kumaran* reveal how traditional values and practical acumen, inherited from earlier generations, remain indispensable amidst the allure of colonial modernity.

Thus do these early tales of Malayalam literature reveal the railway not merely as a marvel of mechanization but as a cultural space wherein the contradictions of modernization unfolded. It was at once a harbinger of progress and a stage upon which the values of a transitioning society were debated and redefined.

### 5.4 Romance Transitions from the Private to the Public

In feudal society, individual liberty was oft deemed a vice, for lives were expected to follow the strictures imposed by tradition (Vijayan, 2000, p.23). The colonial era, however, heralded change. Protagonists in early tales are frequently depicted as economically and socially independent, embodying nascent ideas of personal freedom. These narratives explore modern perspectives on love and relationships, wherein romance doth forsake the confines of secluded cottages and familial domains for the more public arena of train compartments.

Such tales portray chance encounters upon trains evolving into romantic bonds, thus challenging conventional notions of love. Love, no longer shrouded in secrecy, ascendeth to a realm of individual liberty. For instance, in *Narayanikutty*, the protagonists meet aboard a train, grow closer in the aftermath of an accident, surmount manifold obstacles, and ultimately find union. Similarly, in *Nanjichupoyi*, the hero and heroine first encounter one another during a train journey. Through exchanged conversations, photographs, and promises, they defy societal barriers to secure the triumph of their love. These stories signify the shift from traditional domesticity to modern consciousness, championing free and idealized relationships. Yet, they also bear traces of colonial moral structures, wherein gender interactions adapt to an English model whilst upholding patriarchal family ethics.

### 5.5 A Critique of Colonial Modernity

The writers who rose as advocates of urbanized culture during the colonial epoch oft portrayed the train as a fragment of the mechanized urban realm. Their tales capture the conveniences of travel, the expansion of education, the flourishing of trade and commerce, and the experiences of international journeys, all marking the shift toward reformist ideals. Yet, this modernity did not come untainted, for the mechanized world became rife with avarice, deception, and theft.

Though the egalitarian spirit fostered by train travel find expression in these tales, the economic stratification inherent in travel classes was equally acknowledged. The division of compartments into first, second, and third classes mirrored societal stratifications, and such disparities were passively accepted. Like the broader society,

these narratives reflect the conflicting social mores of Kerala during this period.

As urban reforms transcended the physical limitations of rural life, the progressive neo-literate community displayed a readiness to embrace and sustain these transformations. This is manifest in their widespread adoption of the train as a mechanized marvel. Early short stories thus stand as chronicles of the train's evolution into a public sphere. Moreover, they reveal how individuals constrained by caste, religion, class, and gender-based restrictions discovered newfound avenues of liberty.

These tales depict a hybrid social character wherein reverence for reform, trepidation over modernization, and the exposure of societal hypocrisy converge. Thus, the early short story became a vessel for shaping a nascent cultural construct, bearing witness to the complexities of a society in transition.

## 6.Conclusion

The study convincingly demonstrates how the railway served as a public space that catalyzed reformist ideals. By bringing together diverse social groups within its compartments, the railway reflected the aspirations and contradictions of a society striving for modernization. Stories like *Narayanikkutti* and *Nanichu Poyi* showcase how train journeys facilitated interactions across caste, class, and gender lines, albeit within the constraints of economic hierarchies. These narratives align with the article's objective of highlighting the railway as a cultural symbol that transcended its utilitarian function.

Furthermore, the article identifies the railway as a site of social critique. While it celebrated the egalitarian potential of modernity, it also revealed the persistent inequalities embedded within colonial capitalism. For instance, the compartmentalization of travel classes reflected the stratification of society, even as the train offered opportunities for individuals to challenge traditional boundaries. This duality—progress versus inequality—forms a central theme in the literature of the time, illustrating the ambivalence of modernization.

The article's interdisciplinary methodology, combining literary analysis with historical and sociological insights, proves highly effective in achieving its objectives. By contextualizing literary works within Kerala's socio-political landscape, the study brings to light the intricate interplay between narrative forms and historical realities. The discussion of works like *Ente Kozhikottu Yathra* and *Oru Kathinakai* highlights the meticulous attention to detail in analyzing how writers portrayed the sensory, social, and cultural dimensions of rail travel.

The analysis also delves into the principles of reformist life, exploring how the railway became a platform for the newly literate middle class to articulate its aspirations and anxieties. By tracing the evolution of travel from traditional modes to mechanized systems, the article captures the transformative impact of the railway on societal norms, leisure activities, and personal relationships. This methodical approach enriches our understanding of the cultural shifts that shaped early Malayalam prose.

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