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Pre-texts or pretexts? prefaces and the social reformist agenda in early malayalam novels

Rohith P
Associate Professor, School of Letters, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala, India

Abstract
This paper examines the prefaces to early Malayalam novels such as Indulekha and Saraswativijayam as both pre-texts and pretexts, paratextual thresholds that mediate between aesthetics and ideology. Drawing on Gérard Genette's theory of the paratext and the social-material insights of Raymond Williams and Georg Lukács, the article argues that these forewords are not mere authorial appendages but active sites of negotiation between colonial modernity, realism, and reform. By juxtaposing aesthetic innovation with moral pedagogy, these prefaces articulate the dual ambition of nineteenth-century Malayalam fiction: to create a modern literary form and to reimagine the social order.

Keywords: Paratexts, malayalam novel, colonial modernity, realism, social reform, chandu menon, potheri kunhambu. preface studies

Introduction

The prefaces to the early Malayalam novels assume enormous importance in any study of these works. The growing significance of prefaces in recent critical explorations of early novels across India arises not only from their authors' explication of aims and objectives, but also because they provide valuable insights into the literary reception and resistance that characterized the early reading public. As Gérard Genette argues, paratexts such as prefaces act as "thresholds," spaces that mediate between author and reader, text and world, shaping the entry of the reader into the narrative and authorizing the work's meaning (2). In the Malayalam context, forewords perform precisely this mediatory role.

Since the genre of the novel was new and unfamiliar, these prefaces functioned as introductory statements that situated the novel within a literary culture dominated by poetry, verse narratives, and puranic tales. As Devasia and Tharu observe, "this is the place in which remainders—claims, debts, promises, intentions, failures, incidental affairs, the trivial and chancy beginnings of grand projects—are acknowledged." The forewords thus offer rich commentary on both literary history and the social transformations that produced the modern Malayalam public.

Most early Malayalam novels—like their counterparts in Bengali, Hindi, and Marathi—carried prefaces by their authors. Unlike the appreciative forewords of later editions, these nineteenth-century prefaces were often programmatic. They declared their authors' motives, which ranged from the desire to promote social reform (as in Saraswativijayam) to offering moral entertainment (as in Kundalata). Works such as Indulekha aimed to combine the aesthetic and the instructional. Some also acknowledged the influence of English novels or of narrative experiments in other Indian languages.

These prefaces are direct authorial interventions—moments, as Genette notes, when "authors appear uncostumed to play their everyday selves and engage readers in an autobiographical mode of address" (15). They guide readers toward the text's expected meanings while disclosing the historical anxieties surrounding authorship and genre. The forewords, therefore, are invaluable historical documents, offering impressionistic yet authentic glimpses of the evolving relationship between art, society, and modernity.

Performing the role of a traditional Sutradhara, these prefaces elaborate the characteristics of the new aesthetic object—the novel—preparing readers for its reception. A classic example is Chandu Menon's foreword to Indulekha (1889). Menon uses the preface to differentiate his work from earlier "books filled with the impossible and the supernatural," introducing what he calls "stories composed of incidents true to natural life, and attractively and gracefully written." He adds, "If … stories composed of incidents true to natural life, and attractively and gracefully written, are once introduced, then, by degrees, the old order of books filled with the impossible and the supernatural will change yielding place to the new" (preface Indulekha).

As is obvious from this passage, the forewords to early Malayalam novels suggest an existing yearning for literary accounts of "incidents true to natural life," at least among Western-educated writers. In the short run, this longing for a new literary technique displaced hitherto "popular" genres such as poetry, verse drama, and other stylized forms from the literary arena.

Menon's principal concern throughout his preface, as we have already noticed, is the obvious issue of the newness of his genre. Being aware of this does not satisfy his genuine anxiety over the popular as well as critical reception of his novel. Though he is heartened by the knowledge that his literary endeavor looked quite enticing to his "friend/wife" (and this wish to read a book like the English novel indirectly suggests a lack of realistic material in the language), his preface is an anxious rumination over the uncertain reception of his literary effort. "I do not know how my countrymen will be disposed to regard a work of this description. Those who do not understand English have had no opportunity of reading stories cast in this mould; and I doubt if they will relish their first experience of this kind of literature" (preface Indulekha).

This apprehension, as he writes, stems from certain hostile remarks by some of his intimates: "Others again asked me, while I was employed on this novel, how I expected to make it a success if I described only the ordinary affairs of modern life without introducing any element of the

supernatural" (preface Indulekha). In spite of such apprehensions Menon's desire to furnish a new artefact of imagination to readers of Malayalam is overwhelming: "A desire on my own part to try whether I should be able to create a taste amongst my Malayali readers, not conversant with English, for that class of literature represented in the English language by novels, of which at present 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" (preface Indulekha).

This, as Lukács would suggest in The Historical Novel, exemplifies the novelist's predicament—the attempt to construct "typical situations" that reveal the broader social totality of a world in transition (152). Menon's anxieties were not merely artistic but civilizational. His preface shows the intellectual negotiation between inherited narrative modes and emergent realism—a negotiation that Raymond Williams later terms in his The Long Revolution a "structure of feeling" in societies at the cusp of modernity (64).

Menon was also influenced by the changing trends in the field of painting which, in India, had been dominated by unrealistic techniques. He perceived an emerging taste for realistic representation in art and drew an analogy between pictorial realism and literary realism: "A taste has set in for pictures … in which shall be delineated men, beasts, and things according to their true appearance … the closer that a picture is to nature the greater is the honour paid to the artist" (preface Indulekha). A direct comment on the lack of realism in Malayalam literature, the preface to Indulekha copies the realistic mode of the Victorian novel and thereby triggers contemporary creative imagination.

Providing a brief yet succinct genesis of the novel in Malayalam, Menon's preface links its development to other Indian languages. He remarks: "Finally, I was urged to produce a written translation of the novel by Beaconsfield. I thought the matter over, and decided that a translation thus made would be absolutely without value. … Taking, therefore, all these circumstances into consideration, I determined to write a Malayalam novel more or less after the English fashion" (preface Indulekha).

This experience parallels Gubbi Murigarabhya's confession in Kannada as quoted by Mukherjee in her Early Novels in India: "At first I thought of translating an English 'novel' into Kannada. But when I examined one or two works closely with this intention in mind, I realised that some of the matters they treat went against Hindu self-respect and therefore abandoned my enterprise… So I decided to retain Hindu self-respect with regard to content, follow the style of the English novel, and write an entirely new kind of narrative" (XII).

The preface to the second edition of Indulekha confirms the genre's success. The author expresses regret for his earlier doubts about its reception and recounts the warm response it received from critics and readers. The English translation by W. Dumergue further consolidated its canonical status. As Dumergue notes, "Mr. Chandu Menon has quit the well-worn track, paved with plagiarism; modern Malabar is depicted in his pages and the language of Indulekha is the living Malabar of the present day." Translation thus functioned as canonization—"If it is true that no book should be written without justification, then it is certainly true that no book was ever written with greater justification, than the Malayalam novel Indulekha"—placing it ahead of popular literature "with all its unnatural and supernatural paraphernalia."

Menon's stylistic choice—to use "the language that I ordinarily speak at home"—is a visible sign of change in perception and attitude among the new generation. "The linguistic interest of the work lies in the fact that it succeeded in establishing the use of a simple, literary Malayalam for telling such an interesting story," he observes. This challenged the traditional belief that a work must adhere to classical conventions to merit literary appreciation.

With modernity, ordinary men and women began to gain attention from writers and became both subjects and readers of literature. The spread of literacy altered the composition of readership and, consequently, the social purpose of literature.

The preface to the revised edition of the English translation regards Indulekha as "a path breaker… It is a good story, with a very simple plot, of true love which does not run smooth, but where in the end, the jewel of a girl is united to the hero of her choice and they live happily ever after." It narrates "the conflict between two generations, the aged and the young, the passing and the rising." Menon's emphasis on education, especially women's education, is elaborated in his letter to Dumergue: the heroine's English education, he explains, illustrates "the position, power and influence that our Nair women … would attain in society, if they are given a good English education."

This concern for women's empowerment resonates with Kumkum Sangari's observation that nineteenth-century reform discourse sought to "domesticate modernity" by constructing the educated woman as the moral center of the reformed home (10).

Menon's foreword thus embodies both literary innovation and social vision. It introduces realism not merely as a stylistic device but as an ethical stance toward life and art. The preface marks Malayalam literature's entry into modernity by redefining its audience and moral purpose. However, Menon was not alone in this project. The prefaces of other early novelists, such as Appu Nedungadi and Potheri Kunhambu, extend this negotiation between aesthetics and reform into the domains of caste and religion.

Kunhambu's Saraswativijayam (1892) represents what Meenakshi Mukherjee calls a "novel of purpose," a form that sought to educate rather than entertain (82). His preface is a moral exhortation rather than a discussion of form, yet it is no less significant as a paratext. Kunhambu declares his wish "for the betterment of the social status of the lower castes, especially of the Pulayas who occupied the lower stratum of Hindu society." He continues, "those who are charitably inclined should work with the lowest castes … to remove the darkness in their minds, and enlighten them. … If any Malayali who reads this book is moved enough by the plight of the suffering creatures mentioned above to uplift them from their present helpless state, my purpose will have been fulfilled" (preface Saraswativijayam).

As Genette argues, such paratexts not only introduce texts but also position them within an ideological field—they "negotiate the conditions of reception" (Paratexts 12). Kunhambu's preface performs precisely this function, transforming his novel into a manifesto for social reform.

While Menon's realism emerged from his encounter with English education and administrative service, Kunhambu's

engagement was shaped by his proximity to Christian missionary institutions and his commitment to social equality. As Anupama Rao notes, nineteenth-century reformers often linked education and conversion to an "ethics of recognition," a politics that sought dignity through the language of modern rights (37). Kunhambu's call for educating lower castes exemplifies this transformation of the religious into the social and the moral.

Unlike Menon, who framed Indulekha as a work of realism and aesthetics, Kunhambu emphasized literature's social function. His preface situates the novel as an instrument of awakening — "It is not necessary that all the children born of one father or indeed, that everyone in a country, can have access to education. Those with an education have a responsibility to enquire about the well-being of those without education, advise them on good living and show them the right path. It is a false and perverse argument that it is necessary to educate only those who ask to be taught. A man with intelligence enough to search for knowledge and acquire it does not really need the help of scholars" (14–15).

This reflects the broader reformist temper of Kerala's late nineteenth-century public sphere, where literature served as a means of collective moral improvement. It also illustrates what Williams identifies in his Marxism and Literature as the "practical consciousness" of a society in transition: literature as both a reflection of and a catalyst for cultural change (132).

Kunhambu's use of Biblical imagery and Christian values in Saraswativijayam underscores the influence of missionary discourse on vernacular modernity. Yet his advocacy of conversion was strategic rather than confessional—he never personally converted. His goal was emancipation, not evangelization. The preface's critique of Brahminical domination aligns with later subaltern insights into how caste and religion intersected with colonial structures of power. "For too long," he writes, "they (lower castes) have been cut off from society by upper castes who believed that they should wash their eyes out if they saw Parayas, and treated them as if they were poisonous or suffered from some disease" (preface Saraswativijayam).

His indignation culminates in a direct challenge to upper-caste complacency: "In earlier times the Brahmins were the only ones in India who had both knowledge and intelligence. Therefore it is worth reflecting on the proposition that they bear the sole responsibility for having kept these poor Cherumas isolated in such a state of ignorance" (14–15).

The differences between Menon's and Kunhambu's prefaces thus reveal two trajectories of modernity in Malayalam fiction: the liberal-humanist modernity of the English-educated upper castes and the radical egalitarian modernity of the socially oppressed. Together they constitute what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the "heterogeneous time of the modern," where multiple modernities coexist within the same historical moment (43).

Mrs. Collins's Ghatakavadham offers another dimension to this paratextual tradition. The preface to the English version of the novel, written by her husband Richard Collins, explicitly frames the work as an instrument of Christian instruction, expecting "that the work will one day assume a vernacular dress." True to this statement, he himself translated the novel into Malayalam in 1877, making it one of the earliest in the language. The preface insists that the work should be "only as much interesting as is needed for holding the reader's attention to its missionary message." The heroine, Mariam, becomes the "carrier of modernity," embodying faith, education, and reform.

Yet, as Mukherjee and Sangari both observe, such figures of the educated woman also reveal the limits of reform—the containment of female agency within moral virtue and service. The preface to Ghatakavadham thus exposes the gendered underpinnings of reformist discourse in early Indian fiction.

Appu Nedungadi's Kundalata (1887), though less didactic, also used its preface to critique the stagnation of traditional literary forms. "The old stories of gods and demons," Nedungadi laments, "have grown stale to readers, and literature must now reflect the secular life of man." By selecting a secular theme and employing prose narration, he declared his dissatisfaction with puranic storytelling. His preface situates the novel's aesthetic novelty as a cultural response to colonial modernity—anticipating Menon's more sophisticated theorization of realism two years later. Both prefaces mark what Lukács describes in Theory of the Novel as literature's "turn toward the everyday," in which the novel becomes the form best suited to represent modern social life (88).

The prefaces discussed above also emphasize the politics of reception. In aligning the novel with new forms of readership, Menon and Kunhambu were not merely authors but public intellectuals mediating between elite and subaltern worlds. Their prefaces register anxiety about acceptance, but also confidence in the novel's potential to shape moral sensibility. As Benedict Anderson argues, print culture enabled colonized societies to imagine themselves as "communities of readers," bound not by blood but by shared reading practices (25). The Malayalam prefaces perform this very act of community formation.

When read alongside forewords in other Indian languages—Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and Kannada—the Malayalam examples reveal a pan-Indian pattern of didactic realism. Like their counterparts elsewhere, these authors viewed fiction as a vehicle for moral education and civic virtue. Mukherjee documents similar trends in early Urdu and Bengali prefaces, where authors sought to instruct women and youth in modern conduct. Thus, the Malayalam novel's emergence was not an isolated phenomenon but part of what Francesca Orsini terms the "vernacular cosmopolitanism" of colonial India (72).

In this light, Indulekha, Saraswativijayam, Kundalata, and Ghatakavadham appear not as isolated achievements but as interlinked experiments in reform and realism. Their prefaces articulate the dual project of colonial modernity: the creation of a new aesthetic form and the moral reordering of society. The novel, as Lukács suggests in Theory of the Novel, becomes "the epic of a world abandoned by God yet striving for totality" (88). In Malayalam, this quest for totality took the shape of education, social mobility, and moral regeneration.

By concluding that the prefaces "mark a break from the existent narrative techniques and present the blossoming of a new artefact of imagination," this article situates Malayalam fiction within the broader history of Indian modernity. These forewords are not mere appendages; they are ideological manifestos that mediate between the aesthetic and the political. They reveal how authors negotiated the onslaught of colonial modernity while simultaneously mobilizing literature for reform.

As Genette would remind us, the preface is both inside and outside the text—a "threshold" that defines the work's conditions of reading. In these early Malayalam novels, the preface stands as the true site of modernity: a discursive space where art, ethics, and social change converge.

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