

Deconstructing Borders and Militarism: A Critical Study of K.G. Sankarapillai's "Sainikante Premalekhanam"

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Abstract: *This paper presents a comprehensive critical analysis of "Sainikante Premalekhanam" (A Soldier's Love Letter), a seminal work by the prominent postmodern Malayalam poet K.G. Sankarapillai. Renowned for his consistent interrogation of state power structures and militarism, Sankarapillai utilizes profound irony and harsh imagery to expose the brutal, blood-stained realities of war under the deceptive guise of a romantic title. Focusing on the contemporary socio-political crisis in Manipur, the poem radically deconstructs geographical frontiers to highlight the deep psychological and political boundaries manufactured by the state to divide humanity. Through a detailed thematic exploration, this study examines the internal moral collapse and sleepless guilt experienced by the soldier, who struggles with his identity within the institutional state apparatus. By framing the perpetrator as a victim of systemic conditioning, the poem underscores how violence systematically obliterates human empathy and linguistic communication. Furthermore, through deliberate intertextual references to literary figures like Leo Tolstoy and Kovilan, Sankarapillai elevates a localized conflict into a universal anti-war discourse. The paper demonstrates how the poem redefines the concept of Swaraj (homeland) not through weapons or borders, but through the ultimate triumph of love, peace, and raw humanism. Ultimately, this research highlights how Sankarapillai's work serves as an uncompromising critique of manufactured nationalism, advocating for a borderless world.*

Keywords: K.G. Sankarapillai, Sainikante Premalekhanam, Postmodern Malayalam Poetry Militarism & State Power, Manipur Crisis, Deconstruction of Nationalism, Anti-war Literature, Swaraj, Intertextuality, Political Irony.

1. Introduction

K.G. Sankarapillai is a prominent postmodern poet who charted the 'political map' of Malayalam poetry. He has consistently interrogated state power structures and militarism throughout his literary career. By asserting that "borders are not around us, but within us in Manipur," he questions the psychological divisions and alienation manufactured by states among human beings, rather than mere geographical frontiers. A defining feature of his poetry is the seamless integration of irony and harsh imagery—adopting a unique style where the brutal realities smelling of war, death, and blood are conveyed under the deceptively tender title of a 'Love Letter. The profound line, "Every murder distance the killer from language," and the stark imagery of the killer's camel wandering the desert while feeding on the thorns of lies stand as exemplary testaments to Sankarapillai's powerful and deeply philosophical poetic diction.

Blending Contemporaneity and Philosophy

The poet skillfully juxtaposes the contemporary realities of Manipur with the profound internal guilt experienced by a soldier. By interweaving references to monumental writers like Leo Tolstoy and Kovilan, the poet successfully elevates a localized political crisis into a global, anti-war philosophical discourse. Sankarapillai's poems consistently align with the victims rather than the predators. In this poem, the haunting memory of a violated woman's burning eyes and the silent, unspoken words lingering on the lips of Manipuri corpses forcefully underscore this allegiance. The poem "Sainikante Premalekhanam" (A Soldier's Love Letter) does not depict the romantic tenderness of love; instead, it articulates the intense internal conflicts and political consciousness of a

soldier trapped in the midst of war, occupation, and systemic power.

Poetic Analysis: Borders and Internal Wounds

The very phrase 'Love Letter' in this poem is highly ironic. Instead of the conventional romantic expressions typically found in such letters, it is laden with fear, death, guilt, and blood.

The Politics of Borders: The poem opens with a radical re-reading of boundaries. Through the line, "Borders are within; not around us in Manipur," the poet highlights the psychological and political boundaries that divide humanity, contrasting them against mere lines on a map. Artifacts of state control like the uniform, the gun, military commands, and pervasive fear turn into suffocating borders that restrict the soldier's life, speech, and gait.

Manipur and the Reality of Violence: The poem directly confronts contemporary Indian political realities. The snow-covered, frozen corpses of Manipur fill the soldier with a profound sense of guilt. He is continuously haunted by the sleepless question of whether his actions in the name of national security are merely the work of a mercenary "contract gang" (quotation sangham).

The Internal Collapse of the Predator: The narrative clarifies that violence destroys not just the victim, but the predator as well. This is illustrated through the figure of the Havildar, who mentally burns to ashes upon remembering the 'fiery eyes' of a woman who was raped. The 'red ants' emerging from the lips of the corpses symbolize the silenced language of oppressed human beings who have been denied a voice.

The True Swaraj (Homeland): It is only towards the very end of the poem that his lover, 'Kunjamina', enters the narrative. The soldier reclaims his true Swaraj only when he puts down his weapon, unburdens the weight of the mountains from his feet, and looks at her photograph kept inside his trunk- re-emerging as a raw, organic human being akin to the characters found in Kovilan's literature. The poet effectively argues that love can only survive in a world liberated from borders and militaries.

Distinctive Characteristics of the Poet's Style

The structural and stylistic devices employed by the poet include:

- 1) Anti-Romantic Style: The poet vehemently refuses to romanticize either love or war. There are no elements of glorification, empty heroism, or blind patriotism typical of conventional soldier-centric poetry. Instead, he confronts the reader with brutal, unvarnished realities.
- 2) Use of Harsh Imagery: Striking images such as blood-stained snow, red ants, a camel feeding on the thorns of lies, and eyes resembling a burning house provoke deep discomfort and intellectual introspection in the reader.
- 3) Simple yet Profound Language: Utilizing everyday vocabulary (trunk, purse, photograph, market), the poet communicates complex political and philosophical concepts with ease.
- 4) Intertextuality: References to Kovilan, who profoundly captured military life in Malayalam literature, and Tolstoy, who masterfully interrogated war and peace, significantly expand the conceptual horizons of the poem.

2. Reflection of Contemporary Malayalam Poetry

This poem serves as an accurate reflection of Contemporary Malayalam Poetry, which evolved through the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries:

- 1) Intense Political Commitment: Contemporary poetry moves beyond mere subjective, emotional expression to actively respond to immediate social realities. By incorporating the Manipur violence and its socioeconomic backdrop, the poet forcefully clashes with contemporary politics.
- 2) Deconstruction of Nationalism: Interrogating blind patriotism and structural violence perpetrated under the guise of border protection is a core trait of postmodern poetry. In this work, the nation on a map is deconstructed, and true Swaraj is redefined through the lenses of love and peace.
- 3) Siding with the Victims and the Marginalized: The text consistently champions the cause of ordinary citizens and women (the Manipuri corpses) who are systematically victimized by power structures.
- 4) Questioning Power Structures: The poem unmasks how core humanity gets obliterated within military commands and dictums. The line, "They will not be tamed within our political dictionary," marks contemporary poetry's outright rejection of official state rhetoric.
- 5) Deconstruction of Language: The philosophy that violence fundamentally obliterates language is a prominent theme in contemporary poetry. The assertion, "Every murder distances the killer from language," serves as an ideal example.

K.G. Sankarapillai's "Sainikante Premalekhanam" is far from a conventional romance; it is an outstanding political critique that philosophically synthesizes anti-war sentiments, institutional critique, and humanism. The poem can be comprehensively analysed through four distinct thematic stages:

The Construction of Borders and the Human Prison

The poem opens by completely redefining the traditional notion of a 'border'. When the poet writes, "Borders are within; not around us in Manipur," he underscores that the internal divisions sowed by the state within human consciousness are far more destructive than geographical frontiers. He systematically illustrates how every facet of a soldier's life is imprisoned by institutional restrictions:

The Uniform: Far from being just clothing, it represents the boundary that confines one's personal identity.

The Gun: It marks the boundary of creative and constructive labour (the spade).

The March Past (Parade): It restricts the freedom of a natural human gait.

The Command: It sets the boundaries and limitations of one's own voice.

Fear and Alienation: These become the boundaries that choke mental peace.

Here, the poet frames the soldier not as an aggressive predator, but as a tragic victim of the state apparatus. His intrinsic humanity remains systematically incarcerated by official decrees.

The Haunting of Guilt

As the soldier descends the hills, the sight of Manipuri corpses strewn across the blood-soaked snow becomes his daily reality. Guarding a land where fellow human beings lie slaughtered awakens a harrowing sense of guilt within him. The soldier laments, "The corpse gives no clue to let me know which among them I killed. The moral crisis of whether his duties under national security are equivalent to being a member of a mercenary hit squad (quotation sangham) plunges him into sleepless, haunting nights.

The poet introduces the memory of a Havildar who encounters the 'fiery, blazing eyes' of a violated woman at a local market. The Havildar eventually burns to ashes from within under the psychological weight of that gaze. Sankarapillai uses this profound imagery to demonstrate how violence corrodes the perpetrator's soul from the inside out.

The Language of the Silenced and the Political Dictionary

The soldier observes the unspoken words lingering on the lips of the deceased crawling like 'red ants'. He is unable to decode whether those silent voices are singing, weeping, or revolting. Through this, the poet delivers a scathing critique of contemporary political rhetoric:

"Every murder distance the killer from language": Acts of violence destroy human empathy and communicative capacity. Consequently, the perpetrator is condemned to live in an artificial world constructed of falsehoods (symbolized by the camel eating the thorns of lies).

The authentic trauma of the wounded and the visceral throbbing of their lives can never be tamed or accommodated within the state's 'political dictionary. The genuine suffering of the victims can never be captured by sterilized official press releases or political manifestos.

Love, Kovilan, and True Swaraj

The soldier finally returns to his military tent only in the final segment of the poem. It is only when he disarms, sheds the heavy burden of the mountains from his weary feet, and looks at the photograph of his lover (Kunjamina) tucked inside a purse underneath his trunk, that he is resurrected as a real human being.

The Reference to Kovilan: The soldier yearns to shed his institutional identity and become a raw, human character straight out of the works of Kovilan- the legendary writer who authentically chronicled the psychological realities of soldiers in Malayalam literature.

True Swaraj: He realizes that his authentic Swaraj (sovereignty/homeland) does not reside in weaponry or borders, but in that fleeting, peaceful moment when his lover's face comes to light.

The poem culminates in a profound philosophical dilemma. Great minds like Tolstoy and Kovilan, who championed peace and anti-war philosophies, have passed away. Yet, the human-made borders, betrayals, mass destructions, and deaths remain immortal. As the poem draws to a close with the poignant lines, "If only there were no borders... if only there were no armies... I would have always been by your side, Kunjamina," the immense tragedy of how war violently strips humanity of love and life diffuses deeply into the reader's consciousness.

3. Conclusion

Through this analytical study, K.G. Sankarapillai successfully strips away the hollow veneer of artificial 'patriotism' manufactured by state systems. By prioritizing the core humanity and emotional vulnerability of the soldier guarding the frontier, the poet asserts that the world desperately requires love and peace over borders and standing armies.

References

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