

The Shrivelled Roots of Contemporary Society in Malayattoor Ramakrishnan's *Verukal*

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Abstract: Malayattoor Ramakrishnan was a prominent Malayalam writer, cartoonist, practicing lawyer, a Judicial Magistrate and an IAS officer from Kerala, India. He molded well in all these capacities and carved a niche for himself in the social fabric of the state. As a writer in Malayalam language, he penned short stories, novels and biographical sketches of different personalities in the state. *Yanthram*, *Verukal*, *Yakshi* and *Service Story* are some of his most famous works. Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, is a venerated icon of contemporary Malayalam literature. *Verukal* (English: *Roots*) is a Malayalam semi-autobiographical novel written by Malayattoor Ramakrishnan in 1966. It is widely credited as one of his best works. It won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967. It is a simple book, that talks about the value of relations. It is not just another novel that drives us into nostalgia. Instead the book prompts second thoughts on our priorities. The core idea of this novel is that the roots of humans are in our soil. And we need to flourish upon it.

Keywords: Writer, Cartoonist, Nostalgia, Relations, Roots

1. Introduction

Malayattoor Ramakrishnan (27 May 1927 – 27 December 1997) was a prominent Malayalam writer, cartoonist, practicing lawyer, a Judicial Magistrate and an IAS officer from Kerala, India. He molded well in all these capacities and carved a niche for himself in the social fabric of the state. When he was in the service, he had held many prominent posts in state government. He was also a powerful writer and a good cartoonist. As a writer in Malayalam language, he penned short stories, novels and biographical sketches of different personalities in the state. *Yanthram*, *Verukal*, *Yakshi* and *Service Story* are some of his most famous works. Some of his creative works were used in the celluloid canvas to make hit films. He had even translated the famous works like Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Sherlock Holmes novels into Malayalam language. He regularly drew caricatures for the Shankar's daily initially. Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, is a venerated icon of contemporary Malayalam literature.

2. Early Life

Malayattoor Ramakrishnan was born on 27 May 1927 as K. V. Ramakrishna Iyer in Kalpathi near Palghat in the Malabar district of Madras Presidency, British India. He was one of the six siblings of his Kerala Ayer parents. The family settled down in a small village (Thottuva – Cheranalloor East in the Ernakulam district of Kerala) near the banks of the Periyar River. He studied in Perumbavoor and in Aluva and completed his bachelor's degree and a law degree in Thiruvananthapuram.

Even during his student days, he had started writing and cartooning. He became a communist sympathiser and even contested Kerala assembly elections in Perumbavoor only to lose. In 1954, he married Krishnaveni (1935–1999). They had two children.

Career

After earning the BL degree he started his career as an Advocate. Malayattoor was also instrumental in the setting up of Chithrakala Parishad along with P. T. Bhaskara Panicker, E. M. J. Venniyoor and T. N. Jayachandran in 1952. He fought the 1954 election to Thiru-Kochi legislative assembly as an independent candidate with support from leftist political parties, but failed to win. Later he started his work as a sub-editor in *The Free Press Journal* in Mumbai. He was a contributing cartoonist to *Shankar's Weekly*. He is also credited with the first Malayalam translation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* apart from translating Sherlock Holmes novels into Malayalam.

In 1954, Ramakrishnan entered the Kerala judicial service and served as a magistrate. In 1957, he entered the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). He served as Sub-Collector in Ottapalam, Collector in Kozhikode, and held various positions in the Secretariat of Kerala, including as Member, Board of Revenue and Chairman of the Lalit Kala Akademi. The memoirs of his long career as a bureaucrat are narrated in his work *Service Story – Ente IAS Dinangal*.

Literary Career

Along with P.T. Bhaskara Panicker, E.M.J Venniyoor and T.N. Jayachandran, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan established the Chitra Kala Parishad. Later, he joined as a sub-editor in *The Free Press Journal* in Mumbai. As a writer, he came into limelight in 1965 when a semi-autobiography written by him got a Kerala Sahitya Academy award. The name of the work was *Verukal*. This work portrays the story of a family of Tamil-speaking Iyers who got settled in Kerala.

In the year 1967, another work came from his pen in the form of a novel. The name of the novel was *Ponni*. This novel was based on the lifestyles of Adivasis in Attapady village. The novel tells the story of an Adivasi family that got affected by the Kerala government ban on Slash and Burn cultivation. In the story, the character sets out to the outside world in search of new jobs, as he lost his job in his

village due to the government ban on the cultivation. This novel was adapted into the celluloid canvas and a film was made with the same title. After the success of his novel *Ponni*, he began to write scripts for Malayalam movies as well. The scripts written by him for the films such as *Yakshi* and *Iyer the Great* have so far stood the test of time as good creative works.

After getting the literary award and the successful adaptation of his novel into celluloid, his confidence as a writer grew with time. Hence in 1981, he left his lucrative career in a government job and devoted his full time to creative writing. His most productive period as a writer was between 1981 and 1997. During this period, many of his creative works emerged from his pen. They are *Yakshi*, *Yanthram*, *Netoor Matham*, and *Amritham Thedi*. The Vayalar award was given to him for his work on *Yanthram*. Malayattoor Ramakrishnan was a cartoonist and a painter. Some of his paintings are displayed in the Kerala Chitra Tirunal Gallery. For some years; he was Chairman of the Kerala Lalit Kala Academy. Malayattoor remained active though his later years and was working on a novel when he died in 1997 at Thiruvananthapuram. He was given a state funeral by the Government of Kerala.

Verukal

Verukal (English: Roots) is a Malayalam semi-autobiographical novel written by Malayattoor Ramakrishnan in 1966. It is widely credited as one of his best works. It won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award in 1967. It is a simple book that talks about the value of relations.

"Translations (like wives) are seldom faithful if they are in the least attractive," maintains Roy Campbell. On that principle, **Roots** can be considered to be entirely faithful to its original text in Malayalam. Its translator, V. Abdulla, is another distinguished figure on the Indian literary scene and a veteran translator.

The worst thing for a translation is for it to read like a translation. The only way to make it work is to recreate the original work in the new language — transcreate it, as P. Lal defined the process — by taking liberties with the words of the text so as to be true to its spirit. But the translator is seldom able to take this essential liberty, being inhibited by his high regard for the novel he has been inspired to translate. Nevertheless, V. Abdullah does a fairly decent job and *Roots*, the translated version is as moving as the original, *Verukal*.

The rhythm of each language is unique, and so are the associations and nuances of its words — more so in languages that belong to widely divergent cultures, like English and Malayalam — so that a literal translation invariably turns out to be lifeless. This is so even if the translation is idiomatic. Nonetheless, V. Abdullah manages to adeptly use the English language in **Roots**, maintaining literal faithfulness to the original. This is especially so in Abdulla's handling of the sardonic wit of Ramakrishnan, which is not so much in what he says as in the way he says it.

Verukal is one of the greatest novel in Malayalam which initiates the so called modern busy human beings to understand the values of family relationships and blood lines. This book explores the emotional conflicts faced by a man who returns to his village to sell his ancestral home and property. Raghu, returns to his native village after a lapse of several years, to raise money to build a city mansion for himself by selling his ancestral home. He sets about this reluctantly, under pressure from his shrewish and domineering wife. Despite the oppositions raised by his siblings and other relatives, the protagonist Raghu is unmoved. However as he walks around the house and the land, he is taken down a lane of memories from his past. He is reminded of his humble beginnings and the sacrifices made by his family for his good future. In the village, as he meets his sisters and others among whom he grew up, a flood of memories overwhelms him. Finally he realizes that the house and the property is his heritage and that his roots laid there. Raghu changes his plan to sell the property and returns to the city with a firm resolve to revive his connect with his roots by building a new house in the land and staying with his family during vacations.

The novel is all about inner feelings of person who wants to sell his ancestral land, which has lot of memories connected to him. The novel progresses as the central character (Raghu) goes to his village, to sell his ancestral land to build a new bungalow in the city. From this point, the author switches the story line between Raghu's past and present. The novel has a very natural pace which very much helps to get the reader's attention. The story ends as the hero realizes that his roots (*verukal*) are at this land (ancestral land).

Verukal is a story which makes us realize not to forget our roots in any way. Roots are the only mode to find our origin. It is the only answer for our existence in the world. The book narrates the rapidly escalating greediness of the human minds which is built by demolishing our roots and origins. It gives us a clear idea about where our roots should be. Also it arouses our childhood nostalgic memories.

Verukal is such a good prose with notable and archetypical characters so typical to villages in Kerala. The narration is exceptional and characterized particularly by a seamless blending of the past and the present. It is all so real. The proficient use of the Tamil-Malayalam lingo of Brahmins in Kerala, is what distinguishes the novel in Malayalam. There is sort of a melancholy tinge to the novel. The author puts in the elements of old Kerala customs and practices and breathes into it the air of nostalgic childhood times. The way he has intermingled the past and the future is splendid and reminds us of the apt mixtures or recipes of delectable Kerala cuisines. More than anything, *Verukal* has the power to move the hypocritical, selfish and callous new generation to pause and think about the essential irrevocable aspects of their past. In fact, I believe, it's the story of each one of us, who run behind materialistic pleasure, leaving behind the stories, the gentle breeze of our rustic land and the fragrance of the rain.

As he says, "like the trees, Man's self also lives and rests in the roots."

3. Conclusion

Verukal (Roots) by Malayattoor helps reinforce our conviction that there are infinitely talented authors amongst the regional language authors in India who simply go unnoticed because they are inaccessible to a wider audience. This is all the more reason for these gems to be translated to English and other languages. Though it is true that a large part of a work's essence is lost in translation, it nevertheless helps in understanding other cultures and writing styles.

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