

Kerala Art, Culture & Literature

By

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Abstract

Kerala otherwise called 'God's own country' is bountifully gifted by nature and human resources with a resilient population and culture that can well take up the challenges of the time in a constant process of redefining itself. Kerala being the most literate state in India, with its rich indigenous art forms, folk literature, dance, and music that resonate all over the world with a large number of Keralites spreading all over disseminating their inputs, assimilating other cultures is making a quality contribution towards hybridization and evolution of a universal vision. Malayalam Literature is an emerging, amazing mix of the old and new, in new permutations and combinations. Poetry merges with music and dance, novelists mix up history and the contemporary in meaningful proportions. To warp out a new world becomes the dominant concern with zestful writers and think tanks of the time like Shashi Tharoor voicing their opinion on the right channeling of the world affairs, and molding the youth in proper direction since they turn out to be the architects of the future. Social rebuilding is the dominant concern of all thinking, writing souls of this time, be it an artist, poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist or even the much impactful social media. That is the vibrant Kerala Culture, ever redefining itself.

God's own Country

Kerala is geographically well-positioned between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats with the bountiful greenery, lush green tops, and a coastline that runs more than five hundred kilometers in length cleaving in beautiful backwaters. It is called *God's Own Country* with a rich and indigenous culture defined by its antiquity and organic continuity.

Sad to say, in recent times man's mindless meddling with nature has resulted in real ecological damage. This otherwise attractive abode of a habitation with plenty of rainfall was haunted by floods and tsunamis, landslides, and soil erosion. Earnest efforts at retrieval and rehabilitation are on the rise and the resilient culture of Kerala (high in literacy) is braving all these boldly, redefining and reinventing culture in different hues to outlive time. The Kochi Muziris Biennale, an International Exhibition of contemporary art, is the biggest contemporary art festival in Asia with people like Bose Krishnamachary (Co-founder and President of KBF) and Shubigi Rao (Curator). Mixing up all genres like painting, sculpture, photography, poetry, history, astronomy, technology, installations, art in all forms (Impressionist, Expressionist, Cubists, Dadaist) Kochi Biennale opens up a world of possibilities.



Image 1: God's Own Country

Kerala Culture evolved through the Sanskritisation of Dravidian ethos, revivalism of religious movements, and daring reform movements against caste – creed discriminations. The Keralites as they spread all over the world showcase this unique culture of accommodation, acculturation, and assimilation of various strands of culture that are in tandem with the times.

Performing Arts

The UNESCO designated *Kathakali* as human heritage art. It derives its name from *Katurumbu* (story) and *Kali* (performance). It is a five-hundred-year-old dance-drama that

unfolds through signs and symbols (*Mudras*) that interprets ancient epics. Dancer Guru Gopinath adapted it to contemporary times in the twentieth century, calling it *Kerala Natanam*. There is another performance art form, *Koothu*, which is equivalent to modern standup comedy infusing satire, sarcasm, and humor. Other performing arts include *Thullal*, *Thirayattam*, *Padayani*, and *Theyyam*.



Image 2: Kathakali

Kerala has several tribal and folk art forms. *Kummati Kali* in south Malabar is performed during the festival of *Onam* the harvest festival of Kerala. Kerala has performance genres that relate to different religions. *Thiruvathira Kali* relates to Hindu culture, *Opana*, to Islam and *Margam Kali* to Christian. Daring experimentation is done in street plays that is enacted among the general public in public squares and campuses dealing with the contemporary, aiming at social correction, criticism, and awareness campaigns. Art thus spills over to the public domain as a powerful weapon for conscientization and social betterment.

Literature

Literature, its evolvement is always related to cultural genesis. Kerala culture evolves from *Thamizhakam* (land defined by common Tamil culture and encompassing *Chera*, *Chola*, and *Pandya* kingdoms). *Sangham* literature can be considered the ancient predecessor of Malayalam. Among the Poets of ancient origin and works, the earliest known literary works are *Ramacharitam* and *Thirunizhalamala*, the two epic poems written in old Malayalam. Malayalam literature has been presented with six Jnanpith Awards, the second-highest for any Dravidian language. From its classical language status, Malayalam developed into its current form through the influence of poets like Cherusseri Namboothiri, Thunchath Ezhuthachan and Poonthanam Namboothiri.

The first Malayalam travelogue was written in 1785 *Varthamana Pusthaka*, by Paramakkavu Thoma Tharakan by inculcating a new literary branch called *Thullal*, Kunchan Nambiar, the Poet played a significant role. Prose literature, criticism, and Malayalam journalism flourished in the later of half of the 18th Century.

The migrant culture accentuated assimilation and hybridization. The words used in many Arabic, Malayalam works of 16th and 17th Century bare witness to that. Arabi Malayalam (also called Mappila Malayalam) was the traditional Dravidian language of the Mappila Muslim community in Malabar Coast. Poetry later took to lyrical mode with the advent of Triumvirate poets including Kumaran Asan, Vallathol Narayana Menon, Ulloor S Parameswara Iyer, and later by Changampuzha. The modern Malayalam Grammar is based on the book *Kerala Panineeyam* written by A. R. Rajaraja Varma in the late 19th Century.

In the second half of the 20th century, Jnanpith winning poets and writers like G. Sankara Kurup, S. K. Pottekkatt, Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, O. N. V. Kurup, and Akkitham Achuthan Namboothiri, had made valuable contributions to the modern Malayalam literature. Later, writers like O. V. Vijayan, Kamaladas, M. Mukundan, Arundhati Roy, and Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, have gained international recognition. Poets like Changampuzha, Uroob, Edasseri Govindan Nair, M. T. Vasudevan Nair, Kamala Surayya, Pallathu Raman, and Edappally Raghavan Pillai also contributed to bring Malayalam poetry to the common man. Later, such contemporary writers as Booker

Prize winner Arundhati Roy (whose 1996 semi-autobiographical bestseller *The God of Small Things* is set in the Kottayam town of Aymanam) have garnered international recognition. From 1970 to early 1990s, a number of Malayalam Novelists and story writers contributed to the Literature of Kerala. The contributions from Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer P. Kesavadev, Uroob, O. V. Vijayan T. Padmanabhan, Sethu, , Kovilan, M.Mukundan, Kakkanadan, Anand, Paul Zacharia, Subhash Chandran and K. R. Meera have been remarkable. Significant contributions from poets and songwriters such as Vayalar Rama Varma, P. Bhaskaran, ONV Kurup and Poet Critic K Satchidanandan have influenced contemporary literature.

The world listened with bated breath to the voice of Kerala when poets like Dr. Ayyappa Panicker interwove dexterously the modernist, post- modernist compulsions addressing contemporary reality. The Poet Sugatha Kumari was unique who wrote and worked for saving the environment, mother nature and for the rehabilitation of women who were exploited and pushed to the corners. She started an organization called Nirbhaya for empowering women.

Critics such as Kuttikrishna Marar and M.P. Paul till the sixties and later, M Krishnan Nair, S. Gupthan Nair, M. K. Sanu, Sukumar Azhikode, K.P. Appan, Narendra Prasad and M. Leelavathy have added value by providing critical analysis of the books written during the recent past. The writers like Kavalam Narayana Panicker have contributed much to Malayalam drama. Contemporary Malayalam literature deals with social, political, and economic life context.

Conclusion

Kerala Art, literature and Culture withstands the tests of the time, braving the harrowing times we live in. There is an emerging, amazing mix of the old and new, in new proportions and combinations. Poetry merges with music and dance, novelists mix up history and the contemporary in meaningful proportions. Everything unfolds over the the umbrella vision, that of social rebuilding which is the dominant concern of all thinking, writing souls of this time, be it a poet, dramatist, novelist, journalist or even the social media. That is the vibrant

Kerala Culture, ever redefining itself. Even a magician like Gopinath Muthukad is weaving magic in mesmerising dimensions by setting up an organization called *The Magic Planet* where differently abled children are given shelter honing their different layered amazing creativity. Even a noted writer like Fr. Bobby Jose Kattikad (Kapuchin) has devoted his life to translate his words into action through social service, one of his efforts being, the Founder of *Kapuchin Mess* to provide free meals to all, not doling out things in the name of charity but offering self respect and dignity for all. Many an ordinary man without hankering after name, fame and labels are out there in different walks of Kerala Social life to make the world a better place than they found it. And this offers so much of hope for the future of Kerala as well as the whole world.

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About the Author



Dr. Molly Joseph is a bilingual writer who has published 13 books of Poems, a Novel and a Story Book for Children. She has been widely anthologised and has won accolades - National and International. She believes in the power of the word which can transform mindsets to warp out a brave new word. She travels extensively to gather insights from experience.

