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From Reception to Resistance: Multiple Languages of Indian Modernism

Abstract: The canonical view of modernism as a quintessentially Western cultural phenomenon has been contested over the last few decades by Caribbean, Afro-American, and South Asian critics and social scientists. The present essay examines the trajectory of modernism in some of the Indian languages, like Malayalam, Marathi, Kannada, and Hindi, from the 1940s to the 1960s against the background of these contestations. As a prelude to the modernist turn, the Indian encounter with colonial modernity and its impact are discussed in the opening section of the paper. India's encounter with colonial institutions of power and their conventions of knowledge production resulted in the emergence of new genres of literature and a new critical vocabulary of evaluation. Translation was central to the new sensibility that shaped new forms of poetry and prose. In engaging with the principles of Western literary criticism, Indian authors evolved their own evaluative norms in the context of the new literary forms that redefined the very idea of the literary in Indian languages. This is discussed in relation to trends in Marathi and Malayalam in the first section. The shift from the nationalistic-Romantic to the modernist sensibility is brought out in the second section with examples from the poetry of Agyeya and Gajanand Madhav Muktibodh (both Hindi), and Ayyappa Paniker and K. G. Sankara Pillai (both Malayalam). The trajectory of modernism in fiction is illustrated with the novels *Khassakkinte Itihasam* [The Legends of Khasak], by O. V. Vijayan (Malayalam), and *Samskara*, by U. R. Ananthamurthy (Kannada), in the third section.

Keywords: colonialism, decolonization, Eurocentric discourses, high modernism, modernization, modernism, modernity, reception, resistance, self-criticism, translation

The context of the present study is the current climate of critique of Eurocentric modernity that has generated much enthusiasm among scholars of South Asia. From being a quintessentially European phenomenon exemplified by a few masters such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Pablo Picasso, Andre Breton, Sergei Eisenstein, Samuel Beckett, and Tristan Tzara, the pantheon of modernists has been revised to include Caribbean, Latin American, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian modernists in addition to Afro-American, Irish, and African authors. Its transnational and multidisciplinary significance is now understood better.

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The canonical view of modernism as a Western cultural phenomenon, originating from a specific set of historical conditions such as industrial capitalism, the rise of the nation-state and the metropolitan centres of imperial power, and the pervasive dissemination of a new cult of experimentation, is still considered valid in Western scholarship. But increasingly, dissenting voices are heard from Asian, African, Caribbean, and Latin American thinkers on the subject. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, a historian, has this to say on the subject:

> I have tried to argue that modernity is historically a global and conjectural phenomenon, not a virus that spreads from one place to the other. It is located in a series of historical processes that brought hitherto isolated societies into contact, and we must seek its roots in a set of diverse phenomena [...] the Mongol dream of world conquest, European voyages of exploration, activities of Indian textile traders in the diaspora [...] and so forth. (Subrahmanyam 1998, 99–100)

In a detailed essay published in 2001, Susan Friedman opened up the meanings of "modern/modernity/modernism" to show how "periodization, canonization and the naming of the defining characteristics of modernism are all based on a pool of tenets, people and/or events whose selection depends upon pre-existing notions of the period" (2001, 495). By way of illustration, Hugh Kenner uses internationalism as a defining feature of high modernism, thus consecrating Pound, Eliot, and Joyce as modernists and Williams, Faulkner, and Woolf as "provincial" or "regional." The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s never figures in the history of modernism, though Picasso's primitivism and Faulkner's racial narratives are part of its canon. The Afro-American myth-making and its great historical displacements have been largely invisible in the accounts of modernist breakthroughs. Paul Gilory, in his *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), traces historical modernity to the racial terror of slavery, black cultural practices (music in particular), politico-philosophical interventions (rights discourses, literary compositions), and economic activities (plantation labour). The trauma of the Middle Passage and the existential crisis occasioned by being an outcast in the country of immigration created a nightmarish sense of history among the Black diaspora that Europe was to go through much later during the world wars. The social reformers of nineteenth-century India, like Jotiba Phule from Pune in western India, recognized that the oppressive caste system in India was comparable to slavery in America, as he explained in his book *Gulamgiri* [Slavery] (1873), inspired by the black revolt against slavery in the US. In fact, his book was dedicated to the black community of America in honour of its heroic struggle.

India remained a colony of Britain for the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But from the 1860s, a newly educated elite exposed to the English language and grounded in Western models of modern thought had begun to

redefine what readers expected from literature. This happened in all the major literatures, which numbered more than twenty. These literary traditions went back to the early centuries of the second millennium or even earlier. In his essay on literary modernism in South Asia, Vinay Dharwadker speaks of the "conceptual turbulence" that confronts any attempt to study modernism in this region, originating from the region's complex multilinguality, its long history of literary production long before the colonial encounter with Europe and the colonial context that presides over the advent of the modernist temper. He is right in saying that the arrival of print in South Asia was a defining moment as it led to standardization of the writing systems that "provided the prime material context in which modernist textual practices took shape in South Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries" (Dharwadker 2015, 128). He traces the trajectory of modernism in India through four phases, the first from 1882 to 1922, the second from 1922 to 1950, the third from 1950 to 1980, and the fourth from 1980 to the present. Any such chronology is bound to be arbitrary due to the numerous variables enmeshed in the complex self-fashioning of highly pluralistic Indian society, divided along the lines of caste, religion, and region. In the following discussion, I would like to identify two moments with which to map the trajectory of Indian literatures from modernity to modernism that has evolved in the Indian subcontinent. The first moment belongs to the period between 1860 and 1880, which witnessed the emergence of a public sphere across Indian languages. This enabled modernity to manifest itself in hegemonic structures of power that regulated knowledge and culture. The second moment, which belongs to the period between 1950 and 1970, marked the beginning of modernist writing in the major literary traditions of India. The founding of the nascent nation-state and the formation of linguistic states in India were crucial in shaping the trajectory of modernity and modernism in Indian languages. During this phase of decolonization, a critique of hegemonic narratives of modernity becomes a defining feature of modernism. The modernist movement embodied diverse elements, and it was not confined to the literary field alone. We need to locate the modernity–modernism conjunction in the Indian subcontinent in the massive reorganization of knowledge and power, not to mention the redefinition of literary genres and reinvention of modes of representation, all of which collectively made it possible for the modern subject to emerge. The modernist textual practices contain a complex grid of cognitive filters that help retrieve marginal voices, creatively transforming the indigenous modes of literary expression into a dialogic domain of cultural resistance.

1

Translation and travel, as Peter Kalliney argues, are the prime movers in shaping modernism across the world (2016, 3). The colonial intervention in administrative and educational domains in India resulted in a churning that forced the newly educated upper-caste elite to review their identity in the emerging colonial world. The new genres of literature that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century were responding to this need to locate oneself in the changing environment of colonial modernity. However, this new writing produced by the educated elites could not be understood or evaluated in terms of the prevailing poetics. This prompted Indian writers to theorize and articulate an evaluative approach to the new forms of the novel, short story, proscenium play, autobiography, biography, travelogue, lyric, and so on based on Western concepts that required them to look at their own traditions from a critical perspective.

The period between the 1860s and 1880s marks a nodal point of colonial modernity, when widespread social reform movements across India to educate women, to stop the archaic custom of sati (widow-burning), to eradicate child marriages, to end the oppressive caste system, and to create legal frameworks for ensuring equality and social justice created a social awakening on a massive scale. Taboos regarding the crossing of the seas now became a thing of the past, enabling Indians to travel to Europe and America. The travelogues became a means of informing and educating the public. Cities such as Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay were now centres of culture and education where English education opened up new career options for the upwardly mobile middle-class Indians. This was also the class from which a new group of writers who shaped Indian experiences into novels, lyrics, dramas, autobiographies, and so on emerged. Dharwadker comments that South Asian modernism begins in the late nineteenth century "as an aesthetic outcome of a quest for social reform and self-modernization under colonialism, and not merely as an imitative offshoot of Euro-American *modernismo* or modernism" (2015, 129). His use of the term "modernism" is anachronistic here, as modernism, as a movement in arts and literature, emerged in Indian society only from the 1940s. But he is right in suggesting that the larger process of modernization began in the late nineteenth century.

Modernity and its manifestations could not be explained in terms of prevailing norms of literature. The principles of Sanskrit poetics could neither explain the new literary forms nor interpret their content for a bilingual audience who were familiar with their own literary traditions and had now cultivated a new taste for the great works of English literature. The literary genres such as the novel, the lyric, and autobiography needed new sets of norms that were not available in traditional Indian poetics. The language of "modernity" necessitated a re-

vision of aesthetic norms. R. B. Patankar, a Marathi critic, comments on the shift from Sanskrit theory of literature towards Western theory that "the *rasa* theory was not consciously rejected; it died a natural death because it had no place in the context of new expectations from literature. The scope of the legitimate use of the older concepts like Rasa went on gradually shrinking" (2014, 228).

Modernity, at this stage, manifested itself as a search for critical norms in evaluating literature. Some early examples of literary criticism in Marathi and Malayalam will be briefly discussed here to bring out the nature of the debates that were shaping the literary field. The introduction written by Mahadeo Moreswar Kunte (1835–1888) to his narrative poem on the Maratha ruler Shivaji (1869) is an early example of a new kind of discursive prose. What makes this introduction stand out is the fact that it is written in English. In nineteenth-century India, we very often come across the practice of Indian writers using English to introduce their texts. Rangalal Bandopahyaya, a Bengali poet, wrote a long introduction in English to his heroic poem *Padmini Upakhyan* in 1858. Narmada Shankar, a Gujarati poet, wrote an essay entitled "Kavi ane Kavita" [Poet and Poetry], deploying Hazlitt's arguments in favour of Wordsworth's idea of poetry (Gurjarpadhye 2014, 104) to introduce a new concept of lyric poetry. The text here becomes bilingual in more than one sense: by setting up a comparatist paradigm mediating between two conceptual worlds, articulating it in English; and by addressing a native audience whose taste is being reformed through such interventions. What makes Kunte's commentary relevant to our discussion is that he is conscious of what he is attempting, namely creating a "modern" critical discourse. He is able to confront English from a rootedness in his culture, and he speaks from a felt need to incorporate transnational cosmopolitan ideas into Marathi discourse without surrendering to the hegemony of English. The new discourse evidences how the native languages and cultures in India negotiated modernity from their diverse standpoints. Kunte was an experienced teacher and administrator, and had close relations with many British officials. He was well versed in the Sindhi, Gujarati, Marathi, and English languages. In his introduction, he uses the tenets of romanticism and utilitarianism to project a new poetics that cannot be defined in terms of Sanskrit poetics. His definition of poetry reminds one of Wordsworth's arguments in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*:

> Poetry in the largest sense given to it, is that which charms the feelings without offending the understanding. It is essential for a poem to confirm to this definition and fulfil all the conditions it embodies. But its success depends upon the taste and feelings of its readers and the feelings or taste may be refined, pure, or hypercritical or vitiated in the case of a nation as well as an individual. And a work of art therefore may not be properly appreciated. (quoted from Gurjarpadhye 2014, 222)

Kunte is critical of both the Sanskritists and the Anglicists for their lack of involvement in the Marathi language and its literary tradition. He finds that the ordinary rustic people, with their long familiarity with native poetic tradition, may be better at appreciating poetry written in Marathi. One is reminded of Wordsworth's idealization of the rustic community in his search for a new concept of poetry. In Kunte's opinion, literature serves the purpose of bridging the gap between the elites and the masses (Gurjarpadhye 2014, 106). He feels that Western education is disrupting the native taste for poetry. Kunte wants to create a new kind of poetry that will speak to the masses and elevate them morally. As Gurjarpadhye comments, "one finds a hotchpotch of Romanticism, Utilitarianism and Nativism in Kunte's thought. English Romanticism, with its emphasis on simple diction, love of Nature, and distinctions between the Classical and the Romantic is adopted by Kunte while its fascination with the mysterious, the unfamiliar and the irrational does not surface in this scheme" (2014, 109).

This moment of modernity was constituted by institutional changes in the production of knowledge as well as the formation of a public sphere that was shaping public opinion. The new critical discourse on literature is marked by a dialogism that brings the transnational face-to-face with the native. Consequently, the alien tradition is incorporated into the new poetics on terms that are defined by the needs of the new literary genres being shaped by society. The intertextuality of the new genre is what organizes the mutual relation between the native and alien traditions. The reception of European modernity, in the context of colonialism, renders the domain of the literary relative and open-ended, denying absolute power to both colonial modernity and the hegemonic Sanskrit poetics.

This dialogic element becomes evident in the essay on the novel and drama written by Kasinath Balkrishna Marathe (1844–1918) in 1872. This essay has a preface written in English, where Marathe acknowledges his indebtedness to Addison, Scott, and Macaulay. His essay clearly shows the imprint of Western training as he begins by defining the novel. He does not dismiss the ancient classics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Obviously, he finds merit in these narratives as they had been able to capture the imagination of generations of Indian readers and offer them moral instruction and artistic pleasure. In his attempt to reconcile the principles derived from Addison, Scott, and Macaulay with the role played by ancient classics in Indian society, we can discern Marathe's attempt to evolve a dialogic attitude towards modernism. This is also reflected in the two types of novels he proposes, the first one being "romances" where the characters are real but the story has elements of fantasy and adventure, and the second one being novels where characters are fictional but actions are real. The critical discourse of Kunte and Marathe is characterized by their inherent dialogism and a self-conscious critical attitude that denies authority to either Sanskrit or European po-

etics. It is important to note that they do not endorse an essentialist view of the native poetics, nor do they find it necessary to consecrate their methods with reference to local or regional histories.

What becomes obvious here is that the literary becomes a site of struggle in nineteenth-century India, as the epistemological constructs derived from the West gain increasing legitimacy through new genres like the novel and drama, and also through translation. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Sanskrit cosmopolis came to be replaced by English. Sanskrit, as orientalists testify, was complicit with a colonial imaginary reinforcing India's image as a decadent society, while English penetrated deeper into the domain of education, culture, and polity, and finally into the normative world of aesthetics, breaching the self-validating claims of Sanskrit. Translations from English became the habitus of a new epistemology.

Malayalam, a language spoken in the south of India, is a case in point where modernity impacted literary production in the second half of the nineteenth century. Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* was translated into Malayalam by the editor of a new periodical, Kandathil Varughese Mappila, under the title *Kalahinidamanakam*. This translation uses everyday Malayalam used by the Christian community in Kerala with remarkable dramatic effect. This was at a time when literary Malayalam was heavily loaded with Sanskrit in both prose and poetry. The prestige and power associated with Shakespeare is now deployed in the service of a contest challenging the supremacy of Sanskrit. Here it must be added that the newly emergent class of lower and middle castes and Christians formed the driving force of the translation practices of nineteenth-century Malayalam. In dislodging Sanskrit from its pedestal, the symbolic capital of the Western canon is strategically deployed in the translation of Shakespeare. Translation becomes a mode of self-fashioning in the epistemological context of colonial modernity where the grand narratives of the East and the West confronted each other, mutually reinforcing an essentialist view of India against the contingent, fragmentary, and fluid perspectives of contemporary India as articulated in the nascent forms of the lyric, the novel, the short story, the proscenium play, and so on. These new genres were "translational" to begin with, as their subtexts were dialogically oriented towards the everyday reality of a living society.

The impulse towards modernity shaping the translation of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* can only be understood by unravelling how it critiques the prevailing literary culture and social values. In his introduction to the second impression of *Kalahinidamanakam*, Varughese Mappila claims that his translation is aimed at introducing the dramatic mode of English plays to those who are not familiar with English (Mappila 1977, 22). He had "Indianized" the original settings by making the characters "par-desi" (pan-Indian Hindus). One of the contempo-

rary critics, C. P. Achuta Menon, praised the translation for its effective use of colloquial Malayalam but suggested that the translator should have used verse instead of prose in the translation, and he also wanted more songs in the play. In the introduction to the second impression, Varughese Mappila argued that the play lacked "profound" themes and hence the use of poetry was not justified. He had, he wrote, used "natural" prose, close to the everyday speech of the community, enabling the translation to convey the experiential content of the book. He also dismisses the suggestion that the play should have more songs on the grounds that the theme does not warrant it.

In nineteenth-century Kerala, the popularity of *sangeet natak* was at its peak, and the induction scene of the translation is used by Varughese Mappila to satirize this trend. In the second half of the nineteenth century, most of the languages in India had a tradition of musical theatre which dealt with mythological and historical themes in melodramatic and spectacular manner, with a large number of songs punctuating the action of the play. Varughese Mappila uses his translation of Shakespeare to lampoon this mode of theatrical performance and bring out its excesses. Translation functions here as a self-reflexive mode mediating between the prevailing taste of the feudal class and the critical realism that appeals to the emergent middle class that has a cosmopolitan and secular outlook on reality. The ability of the translation to engage with the real and the contingent, as opposed to the unreal and artificial spectacles that passed for "theatre," points to the inherent dialogism of the translation that "performs" a society pulled between opposing ideas of the "real." Here are two worldviews derived from two aesthetic norms that are brought into a dialogic relation, without being reconciled. The many languages that are played against each other – English vs Sanskrit, the language of *sangeet natak* vs realistic plays, the everyday language of Malayalam vs the stylized language of Shakespeare's verse comedy – enable us to discover the cultural contestations that define the moment of modernity in India in the late nineteenth century.

This can also be illustrated by one of the early Malayalam novels, *Indulekha*, which has become an Indian classic by now. Published in 1889, it was translated into English, within six months of its appearance, by a colonial administrator of Calicut. In the preface to the book, O. Chandu Menon, the author, says that he was in the habit of narrating the stories of English novels he had read to his friends, and for their use he wanted to translate an English novel into Malayalam. He found the task of translation tedious, and decided to write an original Malayalam novel, "more or less after the English fashion" (2011, 74). He told an imaginary story, but in doing so he described "only the ordinary affairs of modern life without introducing any element of the super-natural" (76). The full title of the novel is *Indulekha: A Story Written in the Manner of English Novel*. The reason why this

has become an iconic Indian novel of the nineteenth century is that it stages the cultural contest between Sanskrit and English, between tradition and modernity, creating a dialogic discourse which refuses to reconcile the opposing demands of the two diametrically opposite cultural worlds which have their separate cosmologies. The modernist impulse manifests itself in the nineteenth century in the formation of this dialogic discourse which can bring together multiple cosmologies and shape a critical attitude towards them without essentializing or endorsing their respective claims. There is a built-in ambivalence in this very articulation, but it marks the moment of colonial modernity as a constitutive force of the modern subject in Indian literary traditions.

2

As a rule, Indian critics have used the term "modernist" to denote a phase of innovative experimentation in the mainstream literatures of India in the period between the 1940s and 1970s. The nationalist-Romantic phase of the first three decades of the twentieth century left a rich legacy of poetry and fiction with writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Premchand, Vallathol Narayana Menon, Subramanya Bharati, Qurratulain Hyder, and so on embodying the aspirations of a nation moving towards freedom under the ideals of Gandhian principles. By the 1940s, dissenting voices could be heard within these literary traditions. The Bengal famine of 1943, the travails of the people during World War II, and the massive communal violence and large-scale displacement of people that accompanied the Partition of India into two nation-states, India and Pakistan: all this resulted in the rejection of idealism and humanism in favour of a dystopian view of the world rooted in violence and brutality. The works of the great modernists such as *The Waste Land* and *Guernica* were not abstract and distant for a new generation of well-read writers who could no more subscribe to the idealism of Gandhi or the optimism of the Socialists. The modernists who rose to prominence in the 1940s spoke of disillusionment, defeat, and alienation to an audience who were visibly disconnected from the great beliefs of liberation and social emancipation.

Agyeya (Sachidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan) is a representative poet of high modernism from Hindi. In his essay "Culture and Environment," he says that "it is not life style alone that has changed, but life itself. Now life is neither urban nor rural, its very structure has been lost. There is nothing that unites it" (1973, 20–21; my trans.). He refers to the alienation of the worker but adds that the problem is more cultural than economic. Since literature is valued by those who value freedom, beauty, and intelligence, the job of correcting the popular taste is vested

with the serious writer. His response to the growing gulf between the elite and the popular is basically one of rejection and negation. He takes a position which is blatantly elitist. He echoes T. S. Eliot when he says that culture is a matter of cultivation of critical taste and cannot be developed through "machine, propaganda, lectures, debates or poets meeting" (Agyeya 1973, 21; my trans.) Differences of class are not primary for the writer because grief, imperfection, and suffering are universal and cut across classes. Agyeya is emphatic that in a society which is largely illiterate and where much of education is carried out in a foreign language, the writer cannot be expected to write for the masses or about the masses. Most of the ideas summarized here are from his book *Trishanku* (first published in 1945). His high modernist approach has been seminal in directing the "New Poetry" (*Nayi Kavita*) of Hindi. He grounds his aesthetic vision in an ahistorical, psychological domain which retreats into bunkers of individualism, resulting in reinforcing the status quo. For him, a poem is a verbal artefact which is meant to provide a refuge from modern society. His modernism has been further mediated by existentialist thought, as his privileging of an ahistorical subjective space has attributes of existential aestheticism. Agyeya maintains that the ultimate creative inspiration for literature comes from the anguish (*vivasatha*) of the writer. His latent Romantic view of a writer as an isolated "creative self," the modernist obsession with the themes of isolation and alienation, and his existentialist concern with extreme moments of self-consciousness collectively define Agyeya's view of the self as solitary and asocial, an interior space which is discontinuous with the common world of discursive speech and communal interaction.

It is the capacity for self-criticism that marks Muktibodh's modernity and his separateness from his contemporaries. Gajanand Madhav Muktibodh (1917–1964) was a poet included in the first major modernist anthology of Hindi poetry, *Tar Saptak* (1943) edited by Agyeya, whose approach to poetry is discussed above. Although Muktibodh began as a high modernist, he developed into an avant-garde poet in the 1950s and early 1960s before his untimely death. His radical views inspired a new generation of Hindi poets, and his poems were widely translated into other Indian languages in the 1960s and 1970s. He was deeply bilingual, as he was born in Jalgaon in Maharashtra, where Marathi is spoken. In his statement in *Tar Saptak*, he says that he was torn between the aesthetic ideals suggested by contemporary Hindi poetry and the human realities presented by Tolstoy and some of the Marathi writers. Emphasizing the migration instinct of the writer, he says that one has to rise above the purely personal and individual in order to realize the multiplicity and plurality of the modern world. In his essay "The Achievements and Limitations of Modern Poetry," he argues that poetic life is an essential part of our daily life and hence the values of poetry cannot contradict those of our common life. Aesthetic questions are relevant because they have a bearing on real life. The

version of modernism championed by Agyeya, discussed above, derived its rationale from the principles propagated by the New Critics and the Anglo-American literary establishment. By the mid-1950s, the revolutionary potential of this high modernism had been domesticated and it had become part of the liberal-conservative consensus of the times. The potentially liberating energies of modernism had been tamed, and it had lost its validity as an oppositional culture. This is where the modernist movement takes on the mantle of resistance.

This can be clearly felt in Muktibodh's essay on "New Poetry and the New Sensibility" (1982, 307), where he regrets that we have come to associate modernism with Europe and America. He wants Indian poets to derive inspiration from the emergent societies of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where there has been a new awakening brought about by emancipatory ideologies. He mentions Algeria, Egypt, the Congo, Cuba, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Japan, Indonesia, and Argentina as places where new artistic experiments of significance are taking place (Muktibodh 1982, 309). Obviously, he was convinced that the high modernism of Europe and America had run its course. He was consciously arguing for an avant-garde sensibility that would not be domesticated by the ruling elite in favour of the status quo. He was one of the early poets who revolted against the forces of domestication that had been put in place by the post-colonial nation-state.

Muktibodh's poem "Andhere Meim" (1982, 355–365) spells out the crisis of Indian modernity in a stark idiom riddled with images of despair and negation. Muktibodh had published a book entitled *India: History and Culture* (1962) which was accepted by the government of a province (Madhya Pradesh) as a textbook at the secondary-school level. However, in 1962 the book became controversial with some editors and writers alleging that it offended the sensibility of certain religious communities. They also argued that the book contained obscene passages. Without giving Muktibodh a chance to offer his explanations, the government withdrew the book in an order issued on 19 September 1962. This episode deeply unsettled Muktibodh, and the poem "Andhere Meim" [In the Darkness] was written during this period of persecution by the state and a section of the intelligentsia. Muktibodh saw this event as indicative of the emergence of fascist forces which were out to smother the free spirit of scholarship and creativity. He was able to see that the fragmentation of the self he went through was an effect of the fractured cultural sensibility of society itself.

Muktibodh's poem "Andhere Meim" enacts the dark night of the soul that he must have confronted in his personal life. The narrative identifies the self of the poet as a site of conflict and struggle. Metaphors of violence and confrontation from the inner and outer worlds punctuate the poem. The invisible figure who walks restlessly in the dark chambers of the poet's life is located in a red cave

filled with red frost, bathed in blood-red light. This mysterious figure has luminous eyes, arms reaching to the knees, and a calm face:

> This mysterious figure
> Has got to be my own
> Unachieved expression
> My own unrealized latent
> Light and talents –
> He has got to be
> The very tension of
> The blocked wisdom
> Of my heart the very
> Image of my soul
> The embodiment of
> All my ideals.
> (Muktibodh 1988, 187)

This unexpressed self, which is in rags and has a wound in its chest, is trapped in the cave of guilt, regret, anxiety, and worries. From this private world of horrors he can only escape to the urban hell of squalor and deprivation. It is relevant to recall that Muktibodh had to suppress his identity as a communist when he took up jobs in the government service. The haunted self which retreats into morbidity and the persecuted self which is pursued by authority belong to the same artist who cannot integrate his different selves into a unified vision that will make absolute expression possible. Several passages in the poem speak of turmoil in the streets, evoking the atmosphere of a mass movement. But such rebellions have been crushed brutally by the state in developing countries. The poet sees the eerie spectacle of a death squad moving through the streets. The strange procession of soldiers, critics, thinkers, scholars, journalists, industrialists, and notorious criminals brings out the sense of siege that has turned the poet's self into a prison. He can articulate himself only by endangering himself. He will have to break out of the prison and mount the difficult cliffs to reach the blue lotus in the mountain stream which is emblematic of the moment of absolute expression he has been seeking. The self's journey involves a rejection of his middle-class self. The fourth section of the poem contains a confessional outburst that traces the social malady afflicting his context to the constricting solipsism of his vision:

> I banished fatherly spirit from my home
> I crushed motherly compassion for the poor folk
> I kept terriers of selfish gains as my pets
> I renounced feeling
> I killed the calls of my heart
> I smashed my intellect

I dislodged my reason
I got bogged down in my own slime
I sacrificed my ideals
My knowledge of good and evil
For my selfish ends
What I have done so far
What have I done? Why have I
Given so little.

(Muktibodh 1988, 200)

This self-criticism is an attempt to resist the domesticating and predatory traits of modernism. He cannot take a self-righteous position blaming the world for all its ills. His passive attitude has precipitated a social catastrophe. The agency of the self is implicated in the revolutionary potential of the mass movement which can speak truth to power. In holding himself responsible for the crisis enveloping contemporary society, he concedes that his true identity lies not in his separateness but in his ability to see himself as part of a larger collective self of that society. This amounts to a rejection of the stance taken by the high modernists, who saw the masses as a threat to culture. The poem is about the spiritual void at the very heart of the liberal humanist ideology that had held sway over Indian intellectuals in the first part of the twentieth century.

In the concluding lines of the last section of the poem, Muktibodh scrutinizes each face, movement, character, the history of each soul, each land and its politics, each human ideal issuing from individual experience, each thought process, and the consequence of each deed. The unexpressed self has to be recovered from the specific reality of the social environment and the felt quality of the life lived. As an avant-garde poet committed to the revolutionary potential of art and social change, Muktibodh recognizes the ability of art to mediate between the individual and the social in achieving a dialogism of understanding where the aesthetics will be directed by a larger ethics of participation and sharing.

What we witness in the shift from Agyeya to Muktibodh is a turning away from high modernism towards a more politically conscious engagement with everyday reality. High modernism had disrupted and renovated the canonical tradition of poetry but kept its distance from the domains of politics and everyday life. This made it incapable of engaging with marginal voices in society. A similar shift is visible in languages like Malayalam and Marathi as well. In Malayalam, Ayyappa Paniker was a pioneer who, like Agyeya, cultivated a hermetic aesthetics that emphasized the distance of art from life. In an article written in 1950 on T. S. Eliot, Paniker underlines the idea that it is not form and prosody which create poetry but the invention of rhythm and resonance that suit emotion. He wants the new poets to follow rhythmic free verse (Paniker 1985b, 30). In another essay on new Malaya-

lam poetry, Paniker argues that the syntax of the poem embodies the ideology of the poet. According to him, the modernist treatment of myth is characterized by a rejection of allegorical and didactic attitudes, complexity of meaning, and diversity of suggestiveness. He feels that the movement towards open forms is a way to assimilate the changing relations between the individual and society. In rejecting conventional metres, a poet asserts his freedom to speak differently, and thereby attests to the fact that each poem has its authentic form, which cannot be approximated to a metre which functions independently of content. Paniker's "Kurukshetram," a poem of 294 lines in five sections published in 1960, heralded the arrival of modernist poetry in Malayalam (2006, 148–156; trans. 1985a, 14–28). What makes the poem an authentic rendering of deeply felt conflicts is its resonant diction and haunting rhythm, which communicates the angst and agitation of a distraught mind. At the heart of the poem is a profound disquiet that cannot be particularized. The metaphor of *kurukshetram* from the *Mahabharata* epic foregrounds the moral crisis of a generation caught in the violence and trauma of sectarian genocide. The poem communicates a deep distrust of all collectivized systems of thought. To him, the entangled wisdom of philosophical systems looks unreal against the endless grind of quotidian suffering. Paniker was able to create a new poetic line and voice through his radical departure from the canonical tradition.

However, by the 1970s, a new generation of poets found Ayyappa Paniker's high modernist idiom distant and unreal. By the end of the 1960s, Indian society was caught in a new crisis of values and ideas. The new generation of modernist poets was aware of the anti-colonial struggles in Africa and resistance movements that were shaping new narrative and lyric voices in Latin America. Poetry now became a radical pursuit that went with activism, and the cosmopolitan voices were now infiltrated by regional inflections that concretized the presence of a region, its history and culture. K. G. Sankara Pillai can be considered a representative voice of this generation of modernists. His early poems, like "Bengal" (1970) were characterized by revolutionary rhetoric (Pillai 2016, 1–11). But soon he develops a more nuanced ironic tone which speaks of greater involvement in issues of ecology, subaltern movements, gender, and oppression, apart from public culture and its distorted worldviews. In the poem "Baldness," he warns that "there is a crocodile living in the swamp of our brain feeding on us" (Pillai 2016, 14). This tone of irony directed at the middle class and its insensitivity becomes strident in his poetry from the mid-1970s onwards. His poem "Kochiyile Vrikshangal" [The Trees of Kochi] deals with pervasive decay and decadence in contemporary Indian society. The organic nature of communitarian solidarity has splintered into consumerist and predatory impulses of alienated and anonymous crowds living in cities. In the poem, the disappearance of trees is seen as "emblematic" of modernity and all that it implies. The octopus-like smoke envelopes everything, in-

cluding “tiny feet long before shoes” (Pillai 2016, 31). However, the middle class that was on the forefront of struggles for reforms and emancipation has now withdrawn into its shells. The poet does not exclude himself from the middle class, and it is this self-critical tone that gives the poem greater moral value. In another significant poem, “Mirrors,” he investigates intersecting points of history, politics, and culture (Pillai 2016, 140–142). The narcotic gaze of the market and gilt-edged neon lights of urban jungles have robbed us of the moral vision that animated the modernity of Kerala in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The crisis of liberal humanism in the wake of globalization has turned the dreams of modernity into the nightmares of a society of exiles who lack a sense of memory and history.

3

In this section, two modernist novels, one by O. V. Vijayan in Malayalam entitled *Khassakkinte Itihasam* [The Legends of Khasak] and the other by U. R. Ananthamurthy in Kannada called *Samskara*, are briefly discussed to bring out the nature of the vision of decolonization embodied in their narratives. O. V. Vijayan’s novel is about a young postgraduate, Ravi, who turns down a fellowship to Princeton for research in astrophysics to go to a remote village on the border of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The new nation-state has initiated a new scheme under which the District Board establishes a school with a single teacher in interior villages to spread literacy among young people. Ravi’s encounters with the inhabitants of the village, its mythic past and struggles of the present, form the background against which Ravi’s metaphysical quest for his own identity and haunting sense of loss and alienation are narrated.

Khasak is a land of stories where oral narratives of various kinds meet to produce a mythopoetic geography of the unreal. Ravi finds himself an outsider who cannot crack open the mystery and mystique of the land which grows on him like an addiction. Allah-Pitcha, the priest of the ancient mosque of the place, finds Nizam Ali as a foundling in the valley of the Chetali mountain that borders on Khasak. Nizam Ali, much to Allah-Pitcha’s consternation, grows up to be a rebel and a disbeliever and becomes a trade union activist. He is obviously in love with Maimuna, the hauntingly beautiful daughter of Allah-Pitcha, his benefactor. In the figure of Maimuna, Vijayan has created a woman endowed with otherworldly charm: “Maimoona walked with power and abundance, sleeves rolled up to bare her arms, revealing the translucent skin beneath which the blue veins were a gorgeous filigree. Often Maimoona turned her charms on her pursuers, reducing them to blushing juveniles. She was the sacrificial mare no one could

lasso" (Vijayan 1994, 25). She is given in marriage to Chakru, the diver who wandered in the nearby villages to retrieve materials lost in the depth of wells. He dies while diving into the interior of a deep well.

Meanwhile, Nizam Ali's life has gone through many ups and down. He had become a successful entrepreneur after setting up a beedi-manufacturing unit, but disappears after Maimoona is married off to Chakru, the diver. He reappears, becomes a beedi worker again, then a trade unionist, and is arrested for leading a strike. In the police cell, he has a supernatural visitation and is ordained to become the Khazi of Khasak. His fight against Allah-Pitcha continues, but now he is a lost soul who wanders among the memorial stones of the burial ground and the dilapidated buildings of the mosque. There are other fascinating characters, like Sivaraman Nair, the feudal landlord who is unable to tame his wayward wife; Madhavn Nair, a philosopher-companion to Ravi who is a tailor in real life; Appukkili, whose stunted body makes him an overgrown kid; Kuppuvachan, who perennially spreads gossip about the people around him; and the many travellers who keep coming and going. Ravi's past is shrouded in mystery, but there are hints about his incestuous relations with his stepmother. He is fleeing from himself and is not able to find peace with himself, even in this remote village where the past appears distant.

Vijayan had begun to write the novel around 1956 when he was a card-holding communist. His original project was to narrate a story against the background of peasant struggles in this part of Kerala. But as he wrote the story, it assumed a different shape. Meanwhile, in 1958 he moved to Delhi, where he found employment as a journalist and a cartoonist in newspapers. Later, he became a renowned cartoonist whose cartoons regularly appeared in the *International Herald Tribune* and many such publications. He says in one of his memoirs:

> I had left for Delhi, with many doubts, in 1958. Strike in Poznań, the attack on Hungary and the execution of Imre Nagy – all this unsettled me and destroyed the monolithic quality of my political belief. But it was still not time for gaining something meaningful from this collapse. I developed the sense of openness to confront this loss of belief, after years of ideological monotony. I still had to wait for the holistic intimacy that combines laughter, grief, and meditation. It was through these long years of waiting that I found the form for *Khasak*, after much effort. (Vijayan 2010, 29; my trans.)

We need to read this modernist novel as an act of resistance against such monologic/monolithic belief systems. That modernity had taken on the mantle of absolute faith that brooks no dissent in post-colonial societies such as India complicated the act of searching for alternative belief systems.

Khasak was premodern and postmodern at the same time as it defied the instrumental rationality of the state apparatus with its plurality and polyphony of beliefs and customs. Its illiteracy was a challenge to the nation-state, but it also

allowed the people to retain their fuzzy identities where religious identities were not sharp or deep. It is significant that in the original Malayalam, the novelist does not use the words "Hindus" or "Muslims" anywhere. He writes: "The Ravuthars and Ezhavas of Khasak offered regular prayers to the spirit of the Sheikh living there" (Vijayan 2001, 17; my trans.). Modernity demands adherence to taxonomies of the state where one's sense of being multiple and plural is lost to the monologic sense of being this or that. In a revealing scene in the original Malayalam, there is a discussion in the local teashop about the new school being set up by the District Board. The young Khazi, Nizam Ali, supports the school, whereas Allah-Picha is opposed to it. The conversation in the teashop goes like this:

> "The Sheikh's is the truth", they said.
> "Then, is Mollacka a lie?"
> "Mollacka is also truth".
> "How can that be?"
> "Truths are many".
> (Vijayan 1994, 38)

This passage obviously suggests that Khasak does not subscribe to an essentialist sense of reality. Modernity as embodied in the nascent nation-state has lost this ability to hold on to a dialogic sense of contingency and flux where the act of living can easily accommodate contradictions. Ravi's own training as a scholar does not prepare him to accept the truth of Khasak. He is pulled in opposite directions and cannot decide for himself what to choose. At the end of the novel, we find him willingly choosing death, which marks an inability to hold on to a meaningful sense of unified self.

U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* is a novel set in a traditional Brahmin village, where Praneshacharya has been living the ascetic life of a priest, nursing his sick wife, for years. Now a crisis in the form of the contagious plague afflicts the village, and the first to die is Naranappa, who has lived the life of a heretic. Now Praneshacharya is called upon to decide who will perform his last rites. His traditional knowledge is put to the test, and he goes to the temple in the forest for prayers in search of an answer. On his way back, he meets Chandri, who was Naranappa's low-caste mistress. He loses his self-control and enters into sexual relations with her in the forest. Now he is back in the village but finds that he has transgressed from the preordained ways of a Brahmin priest. He is more like his opponent, Naranappa, and has no authority to decide on his fate. The moment of sexual transgression makes him an outcaste, and he leaves the village and begins to wander aimlessly. The author writes:

> The Acharya felt not only remorse, but a lightness in the thought that he was now a free man, relieved of his responsibility to lead the way, relieved of all authority. 'What manner

> of man am I? I am just like you – a soul driven by lust and hate – is this my first lesson in humility? [...] I am sin, my work is sin, my soul is sin, my birth is sin.' No, no, even that is a lie. Must forget all words learned by heart, the heart may flow free like a child's. (Ananthamurthy 2004, 78)

He has now lost his authority to address the Brahmin community. In the outside world, he is a lost man who cannot find his path.

He is befriended by a trickster called Putta who has no moral scruples but is worldly-wise. Praneshacharya is helplessly dependent on him as he wanders through forests and villages, fairs and festivals, and markets and roadside hotels. He cannot go back to his traditional world of certainties where dharma and adharma were clearly defined. He is not equipped to survive in the large world outside, as he is an outsider there too. He says: "Even to the point of doubting who I really am, I have become several persons on a single day" (Ananthamurthy 2004, 123). At the end of the novel, Praneshacharya does not know where he is headed:

> He will travel for another four or five hours. Then, after that, what?
> Praneshacharya waited, anxious, expectant. (Ananthamurthy 2004, 138)

As in *The Legends of Khasak*, the protagonist has no society to go back to. The novel is a critique of tradition as a way of life, as an epistemological construct that directs one's right conduct.

D. R. Nagaraj, a well-known Kannada critic, has argued that *Samskara* is unable to represent the cosmology of the non-Brahminic world that Praneshacharya breaks into. His attempt to transform himself into a modern man fails because the novel remains true to his former self and cannot find the imaginative resources to represent his transformed self. Nagaraj comments:

> The lyrical intensity of the novel is a product of the truthfulness of the vision of his cosmology. It is true that the cosmology of the Brahmin caste presented in the novel is an imaginative distillation of Lohia and Lawrence. Sartre also seeps in – in large quantities. But the critique of the caste system offered by this amalgam is much sharper and more insightful than the ones offered by nationalist Navodaya writers such as Shivarama Karanth. (Nagaraj 2010, 226)

The argument that the novel remains powerful at the level of realism but breaks down when it tries to move to a symbolist plane also shows the crisis of modernity at the epistemological level. The Brahmin community remains the only "knowable community" in the novel, and it is unable to realize the cosmology of the non-Brahmin communities. The "modernity" of Indian society is largely a creation of the upper caste, and it has not evolved the means and resources to represent the other in the novelistic narrative.

Samskara was written while the author was in England, when he was researching the British novels of the 1930s. In an autobiographical essay, Ananthamurthy has mentioned that he happened to watch Bergman's *Seventh Seal* while in England, in the company of Malcolm Bradbury, his research supervisor. He did not understand the film fully, but its images stirred something latent in him and he went back to an old manuscript he had, and rewrote the novel in a feverish pitch in a matter of weeks. He writes:

> It was a partly understood haunting experience – such experiences can trigger off your creativity. The spiritual crisis of the hero came through and I remember I had remarked to Professor Bradbury that a European had to create the medieval times from his reading and scholarship, but for an Indian writer it was an immediate experience – an aspect of the living memory. (Ananthamurthy 2014, 39)

Several historical epochs coexist in the consciousness of an Indian writer, facilitating his dialogue with tradition. The character Putta in *Samskara* is inspired by the gypsy of the *Seventh Seal.* And the crisis of Praneshacharya was in fact the author's own crisis as a modern Indian. The plague and the episode of sexual transgression in the novel, which may remind us of Camus or Lawrence, become metaphors for the crisis of modernity as he perceived it. Ananthamurthy feels that the modernizers, which includes the communists, the champions of private enterprise, and the revivalists, do not have access to the soul of India, which has to be located in its complex tradition, which has been renovated from time to time. *Samskara* is an attempt to retrieve tradition as usable past while rejecting its baggage of discrimination against lower castes and women. It is the lower-caste woman who enables Praneshacharya to see tradition in all its traumatic oppression. His state of disintegration is the price he pays as a modern Indian for his inability to reconcile the present with the past. Ananthamurthy writes:

> Our future as a nation is therefore threatened either with the waste of *unused* past, or of regression, similar to what we see in Iran. No magic can prevent such happenings. A truly critical insider would have boundless compassion for the poor and disinherited India, would passionately engage himself with the present in all its confusion of values, and only with such a mind and heart would he know what is usable in the rich past of India for a creative present. (Ananthamurthy 2014, 43; emphasis in original)

Both *Legends of Khasak* and *Samskara* go back to the Indian village and probe its creative potential to confront its problems of modernity, not from the perspective of modernizers who have no sense of the past, but from the collective memory of lived traditions.

In the above discussion, texts from Malayalam, Marathi, Hindi, and Kannada have been analysed to bring out the trajectories of modernity and modernism at nodal points of the development of Indian literatures, with reference to the ori-

gins of modern critical discourse, the transformation of modernist Indian poetry from the high modernist mode to an avant-garde mode of resistance, and the novel in its post-colonial moment of self-criticism. At all these points, the cosmopolitan, universalist values were assimilated critically into Indian traditions of modernist thinking on terms set by the indigenous literary traditions. The same dynamics of selection, assimilation, and adaptation are at work in the phase of resistance, as Indian modernism aligns itself with its counterparts in the countries of Asia, Africa, and South America to rediscover its resources of multilingualism and cultural plurality. The subversive potential of the other is what drives Indian modernist explorations in their phase of resistance, where issues of ecology, gender, caste, sexuality, and location have become central to the production and explication of literary texts.

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