



## ‘Making It New’ In Malayalam Literature: A Modernist Study of *The Death Certificate* and ‘Comala’

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The ‘Making It New’ phenomenon has been a continuing presence in Malayalam literature, dominating the literary circles in Kerala from the 1960s. Modernist novels, poetry, prose and drama emerged, creating a veritable revolution in the literary arena. In the genre of fiction, an era of novelty was ushered in by writers like Basheer, Ponkunnam Varkkey, Uroob, Sachidanandan, Echchikkanam, Kovilan etc. P.Sachidanandan’s *The Death Certificate* and Santhosh Echchikkanam’s short story ‘Comala’ are magnum opuses in the arena of Modernist Malayalam fiction, taking up themes that have been major preoccupations of the avant garde movement. Life in the metropolis, the alienation and existential angst of the modern man, increasing bureaucratization and commercialization leading to the objectification of human beings, time and memory---all find space in *The Death Certificate* and ‘Comala’. My paper attempts to explore the Modernist elements in the two works, which have exerted a tremendous impact on the Malayalee intelligentsia of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ‘making new’ a literature that traces its roots back to the twelfth century AD.

Metropolises and big cities have now become a reality in Kerala. The problems that plague the modern city are many, the most glaring ones being the anonymity of the individual and impersonal relationships. Wordsworth said about London:

How often, in the overflowing streets,/Have I gone forward with the crowd and said unto myself, ‘The face of every one/ That passes by me is a mystery!’ Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look/. . ./ Until the shapes before my eyes became/A second-sight procession. . .

(as quoted in Middleton 3)

The “second-sight processions” of unknown people, the individual’s alienation and loneliness in the multitudes, impersonal relationships and anonymity become themes in *The Death Certificate* and ‘Comala’. In *The Death Certificate*, the protagonist, who lives in a city “cramped for space”(19) where “municipal workers start excavating in order to install traffic lights at the highway crossing”, creating “pits and holes and crowds”(48) does not have a name. Indeed, none of the characters have names. Other characters become for the nameless protagonist, ‘the crematory clerk’ or ‘my Communist friend’ or ‘the chemist’ or ‘the librarian’ or ‘the Personnel Officer’, despite the fact that he is ‘close’ to all of them. The tragedy of city life, where one is identified not by his name, but by his profession, is evident here. The excessive importance accorded to professional life can be seen in ‘Comala’ when the ever-smiling newsreader, in his coat and suit and tie, introduces the people who have come for the talk (on the suicide threat of Vishwan Kundoor, who had hung a board in front of his house saying that he and his family would commit suicide on the Independence Day, as he could not pay back the loan his friend, Sudhakaran [who absconded] had taken from the bank [for which Vishwan had stood security]) stressing on their respective jobs. He says: “To discuss the different aspects of this matter which holds Kerala in tenterhooks, we have here prominent writer and psychologist Dr.C.Nandakumar, the Secretary of the Velloor Cooperative Bank Madhavan Nair, an officer in the National Crime Records Bureau Alex Punnoose at the studio and Vishwan Kundoor and Advocate Fathima Begum on the line”(26). Whenever he addresses the panelists, he addresses them primarily by their professional title. In both the works under consideration, what gives the modern man his identity is his profession. Sans profession, he is

a nobody. In 'Comala', the psychiatrist says : "If he has decided to die, why doesn't he just go and die instead of choosing the Independence Day to commit suicide and putting up a board and stuff" (29). The brutality of the modern man towards a fellow being can be seen here. Again, after the news programme, nobody bothers about Vishwan, but the fact that the famous cricketer Sreeshanth was prosecuted for slapping Harbhajan Singh across the face is a topic important enough to be discussed. In *The Death Certificate*, the boss of the sales company expresses a false sympathy for the grieving protagonist and ensures that despite the latter's misery, he would work hard for the company.

When I went back to the office after my leave had expired, the first person who expressed his sympathy was my boss the sales manager. ...After this, he expressed the hope that no matter what had happened, I would not forget that my life lay before me. Since the sales potential of the products I distributed for the company had been greatly increased by the announcement of the government's new import regulations he further hoped that I would make the fullest use of this opportunity; that I would devote greater attention and interest to my work...

(12)

The immersion of each person in his/her life to the exclusion of all others is seen when the protagonists' co-workers returned, "each to his own table, to think about their own families, their own lives....Each one had his own life to live. His wife, his children" (13).The same attitude is seen in 'Comala', when in the dhaba, people continue eating and merry-making, oblivious of the pathetic plight of the person standing next to them. The utter selfishness to which people can go is made evident when they turn a blind eye to the young man injured in the accident. Nobody bothers to take him to the hospital. He is left there to die, while they continue their eating and drinking. As Vishwan tries to take him to the hospital, a man comes and asks if he too can join them. The former, relieved that "in this 'Comala', at least a few people remained alive" is shocked when he learns that he had joined them just because his house was on the way to the hospital. Again, the driver talks in a casual way about the accident. He tells Vishwan: "there is no need to get so worked up. These things are common here" and says: "I'll bring my jeep to take him to the hospital. But have the cash ready. I don't want any bargaining later on" (28). The highway, the symbol of the metropolis, becomes a witness to the selfishness and brutal indifference of the people. In this context, what Engels said becomes relevant:

...They crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another...The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads...is here carried out to its utmost extremes.

(As quoted in Middleton, ed. 5)

This indifference and impersonality of the city man is further exemplified by what the protagonist says in *The Death Certificate*: "...caught as I was in the thick of the crowd, unable to move. I stood there, my head whirling. No one in that multitude seemed agitated or sorrowful at the calamity that was taking place there. Like the friends and relatives and the crematory workers, who stood before a raging pyre, they all stood with their hands folded and fingers on their lips. Only I felt giddy. No one understood my sorrow" (78). "Simmel observed that the city imposes a kind of sensory overload on the individual. Bombarded and buffeted by objects, people, sounds, sights, and smells, exposed to a vast range of new tastes, the city dweller responded defensively with an attitude of indifference"( Brooker et al 643)

The impersonality of the institutions of the modern city can be seen when the secretary of the bank replies to the question as to whether the bank would do something to save Vishwan's life. He says: "The bank does not have the responsibility to save human lives. Our job is to conduct financial transactions" (29).In both the stories, we see people gazing casually at and commenting unfeelingly on the misery of other people, doing nothing to help them...like dead people.

Identity or the lack of one also becomes a theme in the works under consideration. In *The Death Certificate*, as mentioned before, the names of people are not mentioned. Even the name of the deceased person is not given. The protagonist, after seeing the register of deaths in the crematory writes: "I read what was written there over and over again. Name- in capitals..."In 'Comala' too, the names of the people carry no import (except perhaps in the case of the panelists). Vishwan talks about the people he meets near the highway as 'Ayaal', the Malayalam word for "that man". "That man" does not have a name. He always remains a nameless entity. There is, what Lukacs would call, "a dissolution of personality" (Lodge ed. 480).

The isolation of the modern man and his existential angst are perhaps the most articulate themes in *The Death Certificate* and 'Comala'. In the former, the protagonist says quite often: "...I had only myself to fall back on. There was no one else" (28). Again, he is in a constant state of apprehension as to whether he will be left alone by his near ones. "I did not understand. It seemed we were drifting apart; as if an actor had suddenly left the stage to join the audience. ...Who knows, I might have lost him too, forever" (29). The modern man's loneliness and his despair and misery are depicted clearly in the novel:

Anyway, where was I going? Which way was forward, which backward? I walked on clearing the forest around me and as I walked on they closed in again behind me. I was always on an island, without a front or a rear, unable to look back, echoing my own voice, incapable of seeing anything but myself. Ultimately, this island would also sink, forests would grow over me and I'd caught in the noose that was myself....

(68)

In 'Comala', this shows when Vishwan talks about the way his friend trapped him in debt. His belief in the basic goodness of human beings is shattered when he realizes that his best friend cheated him. His decision to commit suicide reveals the extent to which despair can drive a human being. Again, he says: "In this world, all of us are isolated beings" (28). He, who had been ready to help his friend, risking everything, finally comes to the conclusion: "We should not help anybody without taking into consideration our own existence" (28). He too arrives at the ideology held up by the modern man. The protagonists in both the works are in a state of despair and hopelessness, plagued by doubt and a feeling of futility. The protagonist of Sachidanandan's *The Death Certificate* returns from the crematory clerk's office each time dejected and disappointed. Each time, he has to come back without obtaining the death certificate. "After all the efforts and gains the day had brought I returned home with a feeling of futility" (22). He says: "What is breaking me is mainly the fearful doubts, the awareness of futility that I have to face each time I return from the crematory. ...To walk and walk and reach nowhere. There appears no way to undo this tangle" (38). In 'Comala', Vishwan says: "My life is dry and insufferable like 'Comala'. ...Perhaps because I have decided to die, I began to get terribly bored. The coming seven days will be loaded with the boredom of seventy years. So, I decided to go on a journey...with the hope that I'll find Sudhakaran. There won't be disappointed even if I don't find him. After all, the world moves forward, clinging onto some hopes" (30). The futility of their attempts disheartens both Vishwan and the protagonist of *The Death Certificate*. Yet at some point or the other, both come upon the same philosophy, one that the Swedish author Par Lagerkvist wrote about in *The Dwarf*:

Everything is but an attempt at something which can never be realized. All human culture is but an attempt, something quite impracticable. Therefore everything is really quite futile....What would life be like if it were not futile? Futility is the foundation upon which it rests. On what other foundation could it have been based which would have held and never given way? ...futility is inaccessible, indestructible, immovable.

(57)

That is why the protagonist of *The Death Certificate* says:

Each time I return without the certificate. ...Later, travelling in the crowded train, ...I realize every day the ultimate futility of all efforts....I may have to give in more applications. Fill up more forms. One after another all evidence disappears in the world of hurried transfers....But what does all this matter to me? Let crematory clerks die or be transferred. Let files accumulate. Let white ants devour them....Let wars or revolutions go on. Nothing makes any difference. I do not feel angry with anyone. I am no longer concerned...Beaten by suffering, I walk alone, dragging my yoke. As I walk along, this very act of walking becomes the death certificate and this death certificate is also my certificate of life. I begin to realize this supreme truth.

(102-103)

The helplessness of the modern man gets reflected in the constantly failing attempts of the protagonist of *The Death Certificate* to get the certificate and Vishwan's inability to find Sudhakaran or to pay the loan. In the face of the cruel world, the individual being becomes helpless.

Another theme that dominates *The Death Certificate* and 'Comala' is 'the punishment for surviving death'. In the former, the protagonist is shouted at by the railway guard for having crossed the level crossing while the train was moving along the line. He says: "Actually, if I had been trapped under the train, would he or the driver of the train have been held responsible? No one in the world can be held responsible if one is crushed under a moving train. And yet the man shouted at me. If by chance or by design I had died, no one would have found fault with me. They would not have called me a madman or a drunkard. I was being held responsible only because I had not died"(48). In 'Comala' too, we see the advocate saying that Vishwan will be punished with up to ten years imprisonment and a fine, according to IPC 307, "if he fails in his suicide attempt". Existence itself becomes a questionable phenomenon here. We wonder whether the modern world prefers the individual to cease to exist at the

most opportune moment, rather than surviving. The notion that human life is disposable, that it is ultimately worthless, becomes reflected here.

The increasing bureaucratization that characterizes modern city life can also be seen. Proofs and evidence and written documents are needed for the world to realize the existence of a person. The essence of the individual gets reduced to what is recorded on paper. If the 'required papers' are not there, the person is as good as he never existed."Existence is always incumbent upon proof" (65).The entire plot of *The Death Certificate* revolves around a death certificate. In his attempt to obtain the death certificate of the deceased relative/ friend, the protagonist falls into an ever widening network of receipts and certificates and documents and registers. The firewood vendor's receipt, the receipt of having paid the cremation officer...all are necessary to prove that a man existed and is now dead. The absence of the birth certificate of the deceased raises several crucial questions in the protagonist's mind. "I did not have the birth certificate of the deceased with me. When he was born, no one had dreamt that it would be needed after his death. ...Now, it was no longer possible, no doctor would issue one. How could they be sure that he had been alive? That he had been born?"(31-32). When the clerk asks for the birth certificate as proof for the existence of the deceased, the protagonist says: "Proof? Did not all that take place before you? Did you not see everything with your own eyes?" (32).The necessity of a proof for everything, even the fact that one existed in the world, overtakes experience, emotions. The heart does not carry value, only the written document matters. And that is why Vishwan says: "One should keep an account of financial dealings, even if it is with one's mother....Just so that tomorrow, if we are cheated, we have proof to prove our innocence. ...And if you lend more than five thousand rupees to a person, make sure that you get a cheque at least as proof" (29). Vishwan's mistake was that he lent money to his friend on the basis of his trust. And that lead to his doom. Again, the municipal death office in *The Death Certificate* becomes the symbol of the bureaucracy that is a major feature of modern life. The incessant sound of typewriters, the never ending stacks of files and records, the officers oblivious to the misery of the common man ...characterize life there. The individuality and identity of a human being gets reduced to the files and records in the office. The register becomes the location for the recoding of 'truth'. "False evidence has to be produced even to prove the truth" (Sachidanandan 46). Again, the protagonist's attempt to trace the cremation clerk who had got transferred becomes an effort wasted. The records do not know about the man "with one slightly stunted ear, a wide mouth, a snub nose?"(Sachidanandan 74).

The histories of those who had been transferred and of those who had died lay in a chaotic disorder. Or else, those who had moved from the area of light into darkness had neither name nor individuality. They were simply known by the name of a general category: as those who had been transferred or those who had died. In this city where there are hundreds and thousands of people, it is difficult to find even those who stand in the light. Then what of those who have gone beyond recall, who are silent...?"(Sachidanandan 75).

The suggestion of the librarian to the protagonist to "make a record of his sufferings", "To write them down and to deposit them volume after volume in the library"(Sachidanandan 96), shows the extreme importance accorded to the written word, which will serve as essential proof in the bureaucratized modern world. Again, the rigid adherence to rules and regulations, a characteristic feature of the modern bureaucracy is seen when the bank secretary in 'Comala' says: We can act only as per the Acts of the Bank. It was Sudhakaran who took the loan. In a situation wherein he does not pay back the loan, the person who stood security has to pay a total of nine thousand three hundred forty five rupees" (27). This is seen in *The Death Certificate* when the Personnel Officer tells the protagonist that "if one person was good or even if everyone was good, there still were such things as rules and regulations. Consequently the individual is always helpless. 'Look there is a rule of action for everything. Your capacity to hope and search is not there because you wish for this capacity. So also, if the rules of the world are such that you will not find anything after your search then you can't do anything about it'" (Sachidanandan 87). In both these cases, what is seen is a basic indifference to the plight of the individual. It seems as though the individual is created for the laws and not vice versa.

The commercialization of human emotions becomes a theme in 'Comala', yet another feature that displays the wretchedness of the modern man. The news channels celebrate the misery of a man who is on the verge of death. They make profits out of it. It is interesting to note that while enough and more time is allotted to the panelists to "discuss the various aspects" of Vishwan's plight, the suffering man himself is not given time to speak. The newsreader tells him: "Vishwan, a very detailed discussion has taken place about your situation. Do you have anything *more* (italics mine) to tell about this issue?...You can tell it in a very precise manner" (Echchikkanam 31). He constantly reminds Vishwan that the time allotted to him is about to get over. The indifference with which the channels treat the issue can be seen when the newsreader, in order to conclude the programme says: "Ok Vishwan, you have learnt a great deal of good things because you stood as security for the loan. Thanks for maintaining the time allotted for 'News Time', exceeding the limit and at the same time not exceeding it" (31-32). And the question

for the SMS voting programme is interesting: "Is Vishwan Kundoor's suicide essential?" It seems that modern life has come to such an extent that the techno-savvy people have acquired the right to decide whether a fellow being should die or not. Also, the panelists use the occasion, not to help Vishwan, but to display their knowledge. The psychologist C.Nandakumar, on being asked as to whether Vishwan will commit suicide or not(!!!), gives a vague reply ( In fact, he says: "There is possibility that he may or may not commit suicide"!!!), launches into a rhetoric on the clinical aspects of suicide, digressing from the topic to showcase his knowledge of the subject. The officer from the National Crime Records Bureau also does the same thing, giving statistics and irrelevant details of surveys. About the amount of money that Vishwan managed to pay back, the secretary of the bank comments: "He has paid *just* (italics mine) seven thousand rupees. The capital and the interest together stand at nine thousand three hundred forty five now" (29). The struggles that Vishwan and his family had to undergo to pay that much money goes ignored. The only thing that matters is money. Human emotions are of no value to the modern world.

Time and memory also become themes. The protagonist of *The Death Certificate* constantly tackles the topic of memory- the disintegration of memory. "As we grow up, grow away, the man left on the way fades from our vision. Even if we are unwilling to forget, what value does memory have when we ourselves change from day to day, from minute to minute into different persons, into thirty, sixty-year-olds?"(Sachidanandan 18-19). He talks about "everything fading beyond recall, beyond memory" (75). The theme of time- the hours, minutes and seconds-, the temporality of experience, and the gradual metamorphosis of the present into the past can be seen in *The Death Certificate* and 'Comala'. In *The Death Certificate*, from the first chapter itself, there are references to time. The protagonist says:

It had been going on for days, this feeling of sitting before a clock whose springs were growing increasingly taut with movement. I had watched the days shrink into hours, the hours into minutes, the minutes into seconds. Till the springs snapped at last, and time slowly shrunk into a drop. ...I did not feel that it was death that had taken place. It was life that had ended. Time had moved to a different quadrant. (4)

Again, "It was ten days now since it happened. The sun had risen and set ten times. I and the clerk, and everyone else in the world had become ten days older" (17). In *The Death Certificate*, there are always fixed dates for visiting, in the beginning. Thus, the crematory clerk tells Vishwan to come after one week, the chemist promises to come on Sunday ....But later on in the novel, the concept of concrete time dissolves. The clerk does not tell him of any specific date to come to get the certificate, the chemist visits him at different times....Taking up the question of death and time, the author talks about the static nature of time:

...but he was still there. In the same condition that he was in ten days ago. Tens and hundreds of years would pass by but he would always be thirty-five years old. In the course of the voyage that time makes every human being is destined to remain a thirty-five years old or a sixty -year -old or a five -year-old at the point where a line and a column meet in the register of a crematory clerk (18).

Days and dates disintegrate to form a span of time. By the end of the novel, the protagonist does not go to the crematory on "any special day or date" (101). Thus, we see a gradual shift to 'inner/psychological time', from 'scientific time'. In 'Comala', Vishwan finally sees life in terms of a span of time. He gives water to the dying man. Then, leaving behind the episodic time in which he is trapped in debt, he takes his entire life as one span of time and says: "In reality, all of us are debted. These two drops of water were my debt. I have paid it back. Now why should I die? Why should I commit suicide?"(32).

What Virginia Woolf said in 'The Waves' sums up perfectly the elements of Modernism that one finds in *The Death Certificate* and 'Comala', two of the greatest Modernist works that Malayalam literature has produced:

The roar of the traffic, the passage of undifferentiated faces, this way and that way, drugs me into dreams; rubs the features from faces. People might walk through me. And what is this moment of time, this particular day in which I have found myself caught? The growl of traffic might be any uproar - forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled. I think also that our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence.

(96-7)

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